




A genealogy of emancipatory values

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ABSTRACT



Analytic moral philosophers have generally failed to engage in any substantial way with the cultural history of morality. This is a shame, because a genealogy of morals can help us accomplish two important tasks. First, a genealogy can form the basis of an epistemological project, one that seeks to establish the epistemic status of our beliefs or values. Second, a genealogy can provide us with functional understanding, since a history of our beliefs, values or institutions can reveal some inherent dynamic or pattern which may be problematically obscured from our view. In this paper, I try to make good on these claims by offering a sketchy genealogy of *emancipatory values*, or values which call for the liberation of persons from systems of dominance and oppression. The real history of these values, I argue, is both epistemologically vindicatory and functionally enlightening.

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A genealogy, in the philosophical sense, is a social history of some human values, beliefs, concepts or institutions. What can a genealogy accomplish? In my view, the answer is twofold. First, a genealogy can form the basis of an *epistemological* project, one that seeks either to buttress or to undermine the epistemic justification for our beliefs or values. Second, a genealogy can provide us with *functional understanding*, since a history of our beliefs, values or institutions can reveal some crucial pattern or mechanism that is inherent to them and which is problematically obscured from our view.

In this paper, want to do two things. First, I will argue that moral philosophy has mainly failed to engage substantively with the social history of morality. As a result, we lack a historically sensitive and philosophically rigorous genealogy of contemporary values, and this is something we badly need. Second, I will try to show how useful and illuminating such

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an account can be by offering a sketchy, tentative and provisional genealogy of certain contemporary moral values.

The values which will concern me here I label *emancipatory values*, and I will be concerned with such values particularly as they have appeared in the hearts and minds of people living in 'Western' countries. I do not mean to suggest that such values are only particular to Western populations, and I will shortly caution us against any Western or Eurocentric triumphalism about such values. The decision here is largely personal: as a person inhabiting this particular evaluative profile, I want to know whether I and those around me can acquire epistemological justification for (and functional understanding of) *our* commitment to emancipatory values.

Now, as I conceive of them, these are values which call for the liberation of people from systems of dominance and tyranny. People who internalize such values are sensitive to the plight of individuals at the bottom of social hierarchies. In particular, they are sensitive to the ways in which individuals within their own social contexts are rendered vulnerable to exploitation and to domination. A classic articulation of emancipatory values can be found in Frederick Douglass' autobiographies, which combine powerful sympathy for the plight of African Americans with unflinching anger at their oppressors (Douglass 2007). Emancipatory values contrast with what I will call *natural order values*, whose adherents are largely indifferent to the existence of domination and vulnerability within hierarchies, mainly because they conceive of one's position at the bottom of a social hierarchy as determined by one's nature or essence as an intrinsically inferior being. Aristotle's defense of slavery is perhaps one of the best-known expressions of natural order values, since he invoked precisely this style of argument to justify the moral status quo.¹

An interesting question, which I will not explore here, is that of the relation between emancipatory and so-called 'liberal' values. From one perspective, it looks very much like the aggressive drive for human emancipation is at the foundation of liberal morality, since what the emancipatory moralist seeks is negative liberty, or freedom *from* oppression and domination. On the other hand, as its critics have long argued, liberal models of moral and political justification can appear problematically abstract or idealized (Mills 2005). That is, they remove the oppressed individual from the very social and relational context which gives calls for emancipation real meaning and force. I shall return to this paradox at

¹See in particular (Aristotle 1998, 1254b21–23).

the end of the paper, but for now, I only wish to be clear that this essay concerns emancipatory value, and not so-called 'liberal' morality.

This prelude aside, my hope is that once my speculative genealogy of emancipatory values is laid bare, we may become more confident that such values are the product of comparatively virtuous social-historical processes, or that they are to some extent *justified* in the epistemological sense. Moreover, at the functional level, we may acquire an important kind of understanding. Indeed, my suspicion is that we will learn that such values function in a deeply positional way, such that their actual operation involves some essential reference to some group or groups who are the potential or actual victims of domination. This functional understanding, in turn, can allow us to get clearer on just what is at stake in real social conflict and on where the resolution of such conflict might lie.

Before proceeding, I wish to acknowledge that these conclusions are tentative at best. My history of emancipatory values will certainly be incomplete and selective, and that some readers may find fault with it in many respects. However, my purpose in this paper is not to directly defend the accuracy of the account. Rather, it is to show *how* such an account can provide us with the kind of epistemological and functional understanding that we need.

Introduction: social epistemology

In the twentieth century, philosophers slowly became aware of the need for *social epistemology*. Against the older image of the isolated Cartesian knower, whose knowledge is grounded in purely personal acts of unconditioned intellect, we have rightly come to see that human beings are inevitably enmeshed in powerful and expansive webs of thought, feeling and convention. For most forms of knowledge, any model of knowing which requires us to transcend this pervasive influence seems hopelessly naïve.²

This observation produces new skeptical problems, and in the philosophy of science, the key challenge was quickly recognized. Contemporary scientific theories in physics, medicine, chemistry and biology, are plainly the product of extremely messy social-historical processes.³ Relativist

²For an introduction to this literature, see (Haddock, Millar, and Pritchard 2010; Fricker et al. 2019).

³Popper did his best to shunt these processes into one side of his famous distinction between the context of discovery and the context of justification, and advocates for the 'genetic fallacy' insisted that the logical justification of scientific belief was entirely independent of the social and psychological processes

skeptics quickly seized on this and insisted that the idea of *objective* scientific truth could not survive these observations. However, those skeptics were covertly employing the very Cartesian-rationalist ideal that needs to be rejected. Noticing that science doesn't live up to that standard, they suggested that scientific knowledge must be indexed to a particular social framework or paradigm. Thus, Thomas Kuhn famously described the adoption of a new scientific theory as something akin to a 'gestalt switch', something that just *happens* to a scientist rather than something that they actively decide to enact (Kuhn 1962).

However, the move from this descriptive claim to relativism rested on a mistake: once you notice that actual practice doesn't fit the Cartesian model of pure intellect operating in abstraction from empirical causes, you needn't abandon objective knowledge, rather, you may explore the possibility of our succeeding by the lights of some other, more defensible model of objective knowledge. In other words, there could well be some way in which some social-historical processes, while not under anyone's direct conscious control, are nonetheless *better* or more knowledge-conducive than others. An explosion of work followed, and social epistemologists quickly argued that scientific social networks look positively virtuous from an epistemological standpoint. A diffuse body of well-connected researchers regulated by a delicate balance of trust and skepticism seems very likely to discover truths about the world (Kitcher 1995; Frost-Arnold 2013; Wagenknecht 2016).

Moral philosophy has mainly failed to undergo this crucial transition. It is particularly rare for analytic philosophers to actually engage with the work of cultural historians, in spite of the fact that any defensible model of morality must portray it as deeply mediated by contingent cultural forces.⁴ Instead, the two dominant research paradigms investigate the ways in which certain moral dispositions might have been selected-for in deep evolutionary history (Hauser 2006; Wright 2010; Kitcher 2011) and how they might have developed in fictional, idealized, game-theoretical scenarios that do not resemble any actual human society (Williams 2002; Pettit 2018). But these approaches cannot even constitute the beginning of an answer to the skeptical problem. After all, no-one thinks that the relativist challenge in science could have been met by

which produce it (Popper 1959; Cohen and Nagel 1934). Most epistemologists now reject this, since such processes can plainly ground *higher-order evidence* about the reliability or justification of all kinds of belief (Christensen 2010; Schoenfield 2018).

⁴Exceptions here are Jesse Prinz, Elizabeth Anderson and Shaun Nichols; see (Nichols 2002; Brady and Fricker 2016; Prinz 2007). And of these three, only Anderson has wrestled with the specifically *epistemological* questions which are rather plainly raised by the cultural history of modern values.

the claim that some fictional, heavily idealized population *might* have developed the theory of Special Relativity. Nor would it be answered by the claim that humans *evolved* generally reliable inductive capacities. That might be why it's fine to believe in the trivial causal associations that feature in ordinary experience. But Kuhn wasn't worried about such trivial ideas. He was worried about such propositions as: 'disease is the product of organisms which are invisible to the naked eye and which attack our cellular structure', or 'time slows down as you approach the speed of light'. These culturally local, historically novel beliefs fly in the face of evolved common sense and emerged very late in human history. How, Kuhn wondered, can we retain our belief that they are objectively true, in light of their *actual* messy, contingent social history?

A great deal of contemporary moral belief, I wish to stress, is precisely the same in all of these respects: it is as culturally local and historically novel as human beliefs come. This is easy to see when we return to emancipatory values, the primary target of this paper. Consider the following claim:

Human beings ought to be free from exploitation and domination, and particularly vulnerable populations ought to be protected from the worst dangers associated with their vulnerability.

Large numbers of people not only affirm propositions like this, they regulate their moral activity in accordance with them. Disagreements abound over just what *counts* as domination or vulnerability, and I shall return to this important fact at the end of this paper. In addition, there are important disagreements over the *scope* of emancipatory values – roughly, over how enmeshed in a hierarchy one needs to be before one must show concern for those at the bottom of it. But at a very basic level, the emancipatory idea is more common than we often realize. Yet, from a historical perspective, the idea is about as novel or bizarre as Einstein's propositions about the relativity of time. The history of humanity is, in large part, characterized by what I have called *natural order values*, violently inegalitarian moral systems which rarely display much concern at all for those at the bottom of a hierarchy. Yet, many people in Western countries (and, indeed, outside of such countries), are profoundly opposed to natural order values. This historical contrast is stark, and neither Darwinian theory nor heavily idealized game theory can tell us anything at all about it.

Now, recent political events may lead some to wonder just how common emancipatory values could actually be in the West. Doubtless,

the resurgence of xenophobic nationalism and racist sentiment should give us pause, and I don't wish to suggest that all or even most Westerners genuinely accept the proposition above. I leave the current prevalence of such values as an open empirical question; though, of course, any reader with this worry will probably be an adherent, and should therefore be interested in acquiring the kind of functional and epistemological understanding that I seek in this paper.

All of this being said, it is worth noting that members of these nascent xenophobic or putatively regressive movements often defend their positions by *citing* emancipatory values. We might think that such references are mistaken or confused, but we should not ignore the difference between someone who believes:

We ought to keep migrants out of our country because they are intrinsically inferior beings

And someone who believes

We ought to keep migrants out of our country because they are taking away resources and employment opportunities from our poorest citizens.

Doubtless, this second claim may be unjustified and false in a number of ways, but the point is that unlike the first claim, it directly invokes concern for the worst-off in a given social context. It is therefore an expression of emancipatory values, and under the assumption that it is sincere (and not a mere post-hoc rationalization of a more explicitly racist attitude), it betrays common moral ground with many who wish to relax border policies. That common ground is a shared sensitivity to domination and vulnerability, common ground which is decidedly absent in the case of the natural order ethos expressed by the first claim above.

This underlying agreement is also evident in political philosophy. This might not seem obvious, but consider the work of three thinkers who, in contemporary political philosophy, are often taken to be at total odds with one another: John Rawls, Iris Young, and Robert Nozick. Rawls believed that a just, rational society is one in which the worst-off are better-off, comparatively speaking, than they would be under any alternative social arrangement. Young argued that justice requires increased attention to structural forms of domination and inequality which tend to reinforce racial, sexual and gender-based hierarchies. And Nozick famously believed that most forms of taxation constituted a kind of enslavement, since a powerful entity with a monopoly on the use of force (the state)

was permitted to appropriate the labor of ordinary citizens without their consent (Rawls 1971; Nozick 1974; Young 2011b).

The consistent thread here which unites these disparate thinkers, liberal-contractarian, progressive-socialist, and libertarian, is that each shows a fundamental concern for those who are at the bottom of a social hierarchy.⁵ Their conceptions of domination and oppression vary, as do their senses of who the crucial dominators are, but they are united, as are so many of us, in thinking that our fundamental moral task is to ensure that all human beings can live productive and happy lives free of domination. And this ethos, from the historical perspective, is an extraordinary deviation from the human norm.

Now, this is not Western triumphalism or anything of the kind. First, as Elizabeth Anderson rightly points out, emancipatory values were not just the product of Western cultures, indeed, they emerged partly as a *global* response to the horrors of Western imperialism (Brady and Fricker 2016). Moreover, I should clarify the *explanandum* here: the widespread adoption of these values might be said to have occurred in 1948 at the absolute earliest, and even that is a stretch. It is common to think in terms of Enlightenment philosophers ‘inventing’ this ethos in the eighteenth century, but that could only be the very beginning of what needs to be explained.

Moreover, even if people in European countries *were* among the first to adhere to the emerging values, my point here is precisely that they have not earned the right to any such triumphalism. Unlike philosophers of science, we have yet to honestly confront the messy social history of emancipatory values in a way which *vindicates* those values. The initial emergence, spread and persistence of the ethos is increasingly well-understood by social historians, but references to hypotheses entertained by these historians are not to be found in much of the moral-philosophical literature on this topic.⁶ Nietzsche once complained of the moral historian’s lack of ‘historical sense’, and he also poked fun at theorists who

⁵Where Rawls went wrong, in my view, is in portraying this concern as the result of pure decision-theory, as a regulatory principle that would be necessarily chosen by any rational agent from behind the veil of ignorance. It was, I believe, no such thing: his careful construction of the Original Position, along with the imposition of the so-called ‘maximin’ rule for decision-making, is designed precisely to accommodate an emotionally laden intuition he shared with most of us, a deep, prioritarian concern for the worst-off in any given society.

⁶A recent exchange in *Philosophical Studies* neatly embodies this problem. Michael Huemer argues that the emergence of liberal-egalitarian values supports moral realism. Against this, Jeroen Hopster insists that various anti-realist models can explain the data just as neatly. While their shared *explanandum* is liberal-egalitarianism, neither makes any reference to explanatory hypotheses advocated by the social historians who have written most extensively on this topic; such as Lynn Hunt, Christian Welzel, Micheline Ishay, Samuel Moyn or Peter Stearns. Why, then, are they so confident that they know what ‘the data’ is or what its best explanation consists in? See (Huemer 2016; Hopster 2019).

think that Darwinian evolution can tell us much about contemporary morality.⁷ It's hard to imagine that he'd have much difficulty registering these same complaints today.

What is needed, then, is a mode of moral thinking which looks honestly at its own *social* history and which can find, in that history, the hallmarks of knowledge or progress. What would such a project look like?

Five constraints on a genealogy

First, a proper genealogy of emancipatory values would mostly avoid what has been called the 'history of ideas'. While we should of course acknowledge the social power of newly articulated ideas, in my view, our best social-psychology tells us that such ideas will normally acquire currency only because they express some widely shared emotional response or pattern which already exists in a group. So, to study the articulation and transmission of ideas between privileged cultural elites is often, at best, to scratch the surface of a phenomenon such as the development under study here (Fairburn 1999). At worst, it merely recapitulates the errors in self-understanding created and promulgated by that social elite.

For example, it is common for histories of torture to cite the writings of the aristocrat Cesare Beccaria as a major influence on the abolition of torture. But as historian Hans Joas points out, Beccaria's work itself

refers to the abolition of torture in Sweden in 1734 and in Prussia by Frederick II in 1740, decades before Beccaria's book was first published in 1764. In France the so-called *parlements* (courts of appeal) had progressively restricted torture since the middle of the eighteenth century. (Joas 2013, 42–44)

Beccaria's book, Joas writes, was 'the expression of a much more profound transformational process'. (44) In it, Beccaria provides a broadly utilitarian defense of the abolition of torture, but the actual emerging practice was more deontological in character, involving a historically novel sense that certain moral barriers surround each human being, and that the state's extraordinary power over convicted criminals was something that needed to be restrained. This is one way in which the privileging of this text encourages a misunderstanding of the underlying social transformation.

⁷From *On the Genealogy of Morals* I:7: 'in [these] hypotheses, and after a fashion that is at least entertaining, the Darwinian beast and the ultramodern unassuming moral milksop who 'no longer bites' politely link hands ...' (Nietzsche 1885/1989)

Second, a proper genealogy of emancipatory values should focus primarily on social forces. This does not mean we need to follow some radical social epistemologists in thinking that knowledge itself is a property of groups and not individuals; we may still retain the idea that it is individuals, and not groups, who can be properly said to know things (Lackey 2014). We can and should speak of groups ‘coming to know’ something, but this can just be a convenient way of saying that a large majority of the individuals in that group have acquired some knowledge. So, the positive task here will be to maintain our focus on social *influence*, on the ways in which collections of individual knowers are affected by processes that lie outside their direct control and that are in some way bound up with broadly social phenomena (Brady and Fricker 2016).

My reason for insisting on this second requirement draws on the earlier discussion of social epistemology. While it is logically possible that moral belief is best explained by reference to individual factors that lie largely within the conscious control of subjects, there is simply no good evidence that this is normally so. As is the case with scientific beliefs, our best models of individual moral beliefs portray them as the result of social and historical processes which were set in motion long before individual believers were even alive. For example, the notion that any of us believes in the wrongness of slavery or in gender equality primarily because we, individually, have found such ideas reasonable after conscious reflection strains credulity.⁸ We are the inheritors of a vast, sprawling social tradition which exercises enormous influence over each of us, and just as philosophers of science refused to vindicate scientific belief by retreating to individualist, Cartesian intellectualism, moral philosophers should avoid the same mistake.

Third, and relatedly, a genealogy of emancipatory values should accommodate the central role played by the emotions and reactive attitudes in the formation and spread of moral ideals. I lack the space to say much about this requirement, except to say that, on my view, any model that leaves out or downplays the emotions can only do so by ignoring a mountain of accumulated evidence from psychology, history, neuroscience, and indeed from common observation.⁹ Anyone, even a cognitivist who believes that moral judgments themselves *are* only cognitions, ought to at least accept that moral values are rather plainly intertwined with and influenced by our emotional responses.

⁸I defend this anti-intellectualist claim in (Smyth 2017, 2019).

⁹For overviews of the scientific literature on morality and the emotions, see (Avramova and Inbar 2013) and (Huebner, Dwyer, and Hauser 2009).

Fourth, a genealogy of values should obey an epistemological requirement that is both intuitive and notoriously troublesome. When it comes time to survey the causal-explanatory story for signs of progress, we must avoid a certain form of circularity. That is, we must avoid saying that the explanation displays signs of progress merely in virtue of the fact that it has led us to the truth – to the adoption of emancipatory value.¹⁰

I lack the space to fully defend this requirement here. All I can say is that this maneuver is not necessary in the scientific case, and that it would therefore be very suspicious if it were necessary in the moral case. One does not have to accept modern medical theory in order to see that the history of medicine shows clear, relatively theory-neutral signs of progress (people generally live longer and are no longer as ravaged by disease as they once were). Similarly, it should be possible to say where, in the long history of emancipatory value, a person who is not committed to that particular moral outlook might reasonably recognize marks of progress. This is not, I should hasten to add, the more severe (and far less plausible) demand that *anyone* should recognize these marks: a moral skeptic, by definition, won't recognize signs of progress, just as someone who is a skeptic about the existence of disease won't recognize medical progress. The point, rather, is that moralizers who are not committed to emancipatory values should, at least in principle, be able to reasonably recognize our genealogy as vindictory.¹¹

Thus, in what follows I will try to avoid what few writers on moral progress have ever been able to avoid, that is, the purely self-congratulatory exercise of assuming that my (contested, historically unusual) moral beliefs are true and merely describing the process by which those beliefs arose.¹² After all, a slave-owner could run a precisely symmetrical argument in support of their pro-slavery beliefs, and surely we should aim for a higher standard if it is attainable.

Fifth, and finally, it is important to bear in mind that a genealogy cannot possibly show that our beliefs or values are justified in some absolute sense. Genealogies portray *transitions*, movements from one social configuration to another. They can do admirable work in showing that this transition has resulted in a comparatively virtuous or justified state

¹⁰This requirement is very close to the idea that David Christensen labels *independence*. See (Christensen 2009).

¹¹I defend this epistemological position in (Smyth 2017).

¹²For recent authors who engage in this form of circularity, see (Summers 2017; Hermann 2019). A philosopher who denies that circular vindications of this sort are problematic is Kieran Setiya; see (Setiya 2012).

of affairs. This is good, because in both science and ethics, we must think of our knowledge as being grounded in a series of progressive transitions. But a genealogy cannot aid us in fulfilling the distinct, much more ambitious requirement, that we show that our beliefs or values are justified in some non-comparative sense.¹³ So, a genealogist should avoid thinking that, in telling their historical story, they will be able to show that our beliefs or values meet some absolute standard. The most we can hope for is to show that they constitute *progress* (Kitcher 2011).

These preliminaries aside, I'll now proceed to my extremely (one might say hopelessly) ambitious task, that of sketching a realistic, noncircular and progressive genealogy of emancipatory values. In doing so, I'll try to draw on a broad range of historians who have written on this topic, synthesizing material from both Marxist and rational-choice historians as well as from those who don't cleave to any particular model of historical explanation. Any such selection is going to be idiosyncratic, and I hope to pursue this sort of explanation (and to properly defend my omissions) in a much more detailed and exhaustive fashion in future work.¹⁴ If the reader doesn't find this historical analysis satisfactory, my hope is that they will nonetheless, by the end of the paper, be convinced that we need something *like* it.

A (sketchy) genealogy of emancipatory values

There are, in any broadly causal explanation, two kinds of variables, proximal *triggers* and background *enabling conditions*. In the standard example, the striking of the match is the triggering cause of the flame, while the presence of oxygen is an enabling condition. Any good explanation for some new social phenomenon ought to be able to say what both kinds of

¹³This requirement is extremely (indeed, suspiciously) strong, and is not one we should impose upon ourselves without very good reason. To illustrate by returning to the social epistemology of science: it is important to show that modern disease theory is the product of comparatively virtuous processes, that is, by comparison with older miasmatic or humoral theories. If we fail to do so, surely we have lost some justification for our confidence in disease theory. So, for example, we ought to be able to say that general acceptance of this theory leads to far *fewer* deaths in the population than acceptance of other theories. But it is not at all clear that disease theory needs to meet some absolute or non-comparative standard. Is there really some absolute reduction in the number of deaths that must be reached for the theory to count as a success? This is not at all clear.

¹⁴For example, careful readers will notice that I do not follow some philosophers and historians in discussing the idea that modern egalitarianism is particularly influenced by the Christian view that all souls are equal before God (Witte 2002). The reality is that this doctrine, which derives from *Galatians 3:28* and from a certain reading of Martin Luther, happily coexisted alongside some of the worst forms of institutionalized oppression ever devised for well over a thousand years. It may have acquired some rhetorical importance for late liberation movements, but in my view it simply cannot count as a major part of the causal story. Moreover, I also do not discuss Athenian democracy as a historical tributary to modern emancipation. This influence, I believe, is too distant to trace responsibly, and would involve a level of detail that is impossible in a paper of this size.

conditions were. Thus, while the French Revolution may have been triggered by a sharp rise in the price of bread, it could not have happened without the slow decline of the Church and the monarchy in the eyes of ordinary French people, a loss of respect that had been centuries in the making.

In what follows, I'll mention historical forces and events which begin roughly in the sixteenth century. Any history must begin somewhere, and I choose this moment only because it is when the first faltering articulations of emancipatory value started to appear *en masse* in the tradition I am focusing on. Bearing in mind that there is no magic 'moment' at which such values came to hold sway in certain parts of the world, here, then, is a story about how some people came to believe in emancipatory values. I'll begin with three enabling conditions: the emergence of phenomenological *inwardness*, an increase in material and social resources, and the growth of social connectedness. I'll then emphasize authoritarian terror as a key triggering condition before moving to the philosophical implications of this overall explanation.

Enabling condition 1: inwardness

First, there was a historical development that is both well-studied and puzzling. This is the emergence and increased prominence of *inwardness*, or what Charles Taylor calls 'radical reflexivity' (Taylor 1989). Quite simply, by the early 1700s, people were beginning to express themselves in terms which strongly suggest an increased awareness of (and attention to) their own feelings, thoughts, or subjective states.¹⁵

It is a fascinating fact that until Augustine, the collective writings of the human race contained little extended, first-personal, reflective-autobiographical material. Read any ancient text you like, and you will almost certainly never find the author telling you in their own voice about *their* inner life or subjective experience. Even when writers tell the story of their own lives, they regularly do so in what appears (to us) to be an oddly detached style. And spiritual and meditative texts from every tradition – Indian, Greek, Chinese or Stoic – virtually never reveal the *voice* of the author. The author themselves is completely transparent: one almost never hears them speak directly of their own emotions, perceptions or subjectivity.

Taylor traces the critical shift to Luther's famous insistence, in the sixteenth century, that each person must discover their own personal relation

¹⁵ I couldn't begin to do justice to the large literature on this topic here. For discussions that I have found useful, see (Fried 2005; Bos 1998; Cary 2000; Remes 2008; Carrithers, Collins, and Lukes 1985).

with God through the holy sacraments and not through the mediating influence of the church. And historian Lynn Hunt argues that this development was radically accelerated by the emergence of the novel, which, by comparison with most ancient texts, was positively orgiastic in its descriptions of inner experience. The reaction to such descriptions was enthusiastic in the old sense of that word; literate persons all over Europe found themselves emotionally transfixed by them, moved to tears and yet unable to tear themselves away. Such was the reaction that church authorities predictably began to ban or discourage the reading of novels such as Rousseau's *Julie* and Richardson's *Clarissa*. An upper-class military gentleman wrote to Rousseau:

You have driven me crazy about [Julie]. Imagine then the tears that her death must have wrung from me ... Never have I wept such delicious tears. That reading created such a powerful effect on me that I believe I would have gladly died during that supreme moment. (quoted in Hunt 2007)

The effect of these novels on their first readers is not easy to understand. 'The novel', writes Hunt, 'works its effect through the process of involvement in the narrative, not through explicit moralizing' (Hunt 2007, 56). This seems plausible, but Hunt goes on to claim, echoing an extremely popular interpretation, that these 'involved' readers were undergoing an expansion of empathetic response which led them to sympathize more readily with the sufferings of others.¹⁶ But I think that this must be mistaken. I want to argue that this was not a mere 'widening' of empathetic concern for previously ignored others. After all, most of the lead characters in these early novels were women, yet women were the last traditionally oppressed group to receive full rights and participatory citizenship in European nations. In the case of our upper-class gentleman, this excessive outpouring of sympathy towards a young, female character – on the part of a French general who was probably as devoted to patriarchal norms as any man of his station at the time – suggests that something more than ordinary enlargement of empathy is going on, here. He is not really expanding his circle of care, as philosophers like to say, since it is unlikely that this outpouring (experienced by so many others) had any real effect on his treatment of women.

¹⁶This hypothesis dates back to the first philosophical reflections on the novel itself. See, for example, (Diderot 1762/1966). And though its scientific credentials are questionable (Panero et al. 2016), it remains extremely popular amongst philosophers and literary theorists; for various discussions see (Keen 2007; Hammond and Kim 2014).

On the contrary, immersing oneself in the inner lives of fictional characters seems to have awoken a powerful set of repressed desires and experiences in the readers *themselves*. Such readers did not rush to acts of charity and social improvement, as might be expected of people who have simply learned to better empathize with the sufferings of others. Rather, their overwhelming urge seems to have been to write down their own inner response to the novels, to participate in the free expression of subjective experience. Something in these people is learning to *enjoy itself*, and that something, I suggest, is a set of responses and inner experiences which are suppressed or rendered mute by prior social life.

Agents who have undergone this transition are, I claim, much more likely to value and protect this inner existence. That inner life became something to nourish, cherish, and express. In other words, European culture was now prepared to receive and appreciate the well-known moral argument that Kant gives in the *Groundwork*:

Rational nature exists as an end in itself. *In this way man necessarily thinks of his own existence*; thus far is it a subjective principle of human actions. But in this way also does *every other rational being think of his existence* on the same rational ground that holds also for me; hence it is at the same time an objective principle ... The practical imperative will therefore be the following: Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of another, always at the same time as an end and never simply as a means. (Kant 1785/2002, s.429)

Now, I am not here violating my earlier requirement and retreating to the history of ideas, since Kant didn't invent this basic moral admonition. As Nietzsche correctly argued, he was just systematizing an attitude that was already in full force in the culture, an attitude that had been gaining prominence as various people began to chafe against the bonds imposed by the old European nobility.¹⁷

Notice too that Kant speaks primarily of what we must judge about value, subjectively speaking, and not about what *is* valuable, in some subject-transcending sense. This sort of argument, I claim, will only resonate in a culture which has begun to prioritize inner experience as a source of moral value.

Similarly, it is only within such a culture that the infliction of *suffering* can come to be seen as a fundamental evil, since the source of moral value is relocated from the external to the internal, from social roles and

¹⁷Kant wanted to prove, in a way that would dumbfound the whole world, that the whole world was right ... He wrote against the scholars in favor of popular prejudice, but for scholars and not for the people' (Nietzsche 1887/1974, 193).

or cosmic orders to subjective feelings and experiences. This is what Allen Buchanan calls 'subject-centered' ethics, and it is a vital precondition for the emergence of emancipatory values (Buchanan and Powell 2018, 296–298). As Hunt puts it, only this kind of society can believe that 'the inner nature of humans provides a grounding for social and political authority' (Hunt 2007, 58).

Enabling condition 2: action resources

Next, no history of emancipatory values could ignore the general increase in what political historian Christian Welzel calls 'action resources' (Welzel 2013). Action resources are the social and material resources that allow agents to more effectively pursue their individual and collective goals. Moreover, such resources dramatically widen the set of possibilities that are salient to individuals, expanding their horizons and making new life-paths salient.

For example, there are what Welzel calls *intellectual* resources. By the 1500s, the conditions were ripe for a rapid increase in the development and promulgation of knowledge, skills, and information. The printing press made these resources more durable, for example, and increased literacy ensured that this would be no temporary development. In addition, there are *material* resources such as tools and income, which proliferate as markets begin to incentivize production and investment.

Now, I do not think it possible to reasonably deny, from a historical perspective, that capitalist modes of production were partly responsible for a dramatic increase in available action resources. Critics of capitalism are right to point to its extraordinary capacity for producing inequality and to the hidden ways in which it restricts the autonomy of individuals (Anderson 2017; Fraser and Jaeggi 2018). The point here is not that we should cheerfully accept whatever realities this mode of production produces. Indeed, capitalism itself did not begin to produce general prosperity until its oligarchical tendencies were restrained by the regulatory welfare state in the twentieth century (as nascent emancipatory movements began to resist the evils of a completely unfettered market). Until then, it remained, in the words of one of its most vocal critics, 'an industrial feudalism in which the worker became anew "the serf of the workshop"' (Blanqui 1885). This is why Welzel is careful to note that his history of human emancipation 'provides no justification for pure market liberalism' (Welzel 2013, 45).

But from the point of view of action resources themselves, properly regulated capitalism is a profound historical success story, even if those

resources are normally distributed in an unequal way. Food, shelter, clothing and tools are precisely the sorts of things that people need if they are to create and sustain emancipatory values, and in the developed world the average working-class person now has access to far more action resources than their pre-capitalist ancestors, by a factor of at least 20.¹⁸

Why does this matter for morality? Action resources enable the development and spread of emancipatory values because they ensure that freedom and social dignity are *worth* much more to an agent. Persons are simply less vulnerable to disease, to starvation and (especially) to authoritarian terror, and this means that they can do more with the freedoms they have. Moreover, in a purely causal sense, they provide new moral ideas with a certain intergenerational durability and stability: when populations can begin to enjoy long-term prosperity, connectedness and a growing knowledge-base, new moral ideals are less likely to be ruthlessly stamped out or eliminated by war, oppression or misfortune.

For example, of an estimated 300,000 German peasants who joined the Great Peasants' Revolt in 1524–25, 100,000 were killed by the aristocratic authorities. But, as Friedrich Engels himself pointed out, participants in the German and Austrian revolutions of 1848 suffered no such fate; they were far too materially secure to be threatened in this way, and in fact the worst that most of them suffered was exile. (Engels 1850) Student and peasant workers formed organized, armed insurrections, a pattern which was to repeat itself in the Russian revolutions of 1917. Moreover, unlike the uprisings three centuries earlier, the 1848 revolutions led to real, permanent change in various social and political structures, most notably the Frankfurt Constitution, which very nearly resulted in the establishment of parliamentary democracy, and which led to the permanent institutionalization of public trials conducted by a jury. None of this *could* have happened in the sixteenth century, simply because people lacked the action resources necessary to produce this kind of effective and permanent revolutionary movement.

Finally, it is worth noting that the occasional resurgence of natural order value systems in the twentieth century was almost always preceded by a dramatic decline in action resources amongst ordinary people. It is almost universally accepted amongst historians that the emergence of fascism and totalitarian communism was enabled by severe economic depressions which led to widespread starvation,

¹⁸For a useful online summary of this pattern, see <https://ourworldindata.org/economic-growth>. For a book-length treatment of global economic growth from a historical perspective, see (Persson and Sharp 2015).

poverty and need.¹⁹ People who are rendered vulnerable in this way are much more susceptible to hateful, Manichean ideologies which displace responsibility for their suffering onto a real or imagined Other, and they take real psychological comfort in the sense of *order* provided by totalitarian mythology. These recent cases only underscore the importance of action resources for the development and consolidation of human emancipation.

Enabling condition 3: mobility and social connectedness

When late-nineteenth century working class women in northern Britain first encountered the revolutionary feminist ideals emanating from London, they might have simply ignored them. After all, even though their society possessed the intellectual resources necessary to transmit those ideals, these women were relatively poor, isolated, and miles away from the rebellious activity. For most of human history, this might have been sufficient to motivate dismissive ignorance.

But many of them did not ignore these ideas. Instead, many had a thought which their grandmothers could not have had: *I'll take the train to London and join this movement*. The sense of freedom and possibility produced in these women was captured at the time by Rebecca West in her short story *Adela*:

For the rest of her life her beauty and her intelligence would be prisoned blackly in Saltgreave. The years would subdue her to the meanness and ugliness of Saltgreave, and when she came to die she would see the chimney stacks of Saltgreave's soul against the sky ...

And as she looked wildly over the fields, she saw that a road crossed the plains to the little town. Somehow, this road fascinated her. It seemed the most desirable thing in the world to walk along by the bent alders in the lively winds: to become for a time a part of the joyful traffic of the plains ... For the first time in her life she felt fully the desire for the open road. Her cheeks flamed. Overcome by a passion quite as sharp and fiery as any lust, she turned swiftly to make her way out of the station on to that road.²⁰

It is common to speak of 'technology' as an enabling cause for various forms of social progress, but we should remember that this term is merely a shorthand for some artifice that either enables human beings to *do* something they already want to do or that provides them with

¹⁹For an excellent social history of this dynamic, see (Pelz 2016, 127–141).

²⁰West 1914, quoted in (Liddington 2006).

the means to form and pursue entirely novel goals. A complete historical explanation that cites a technological advance must therefore specify the practical aims that are enabled or produced by this advance. In the case of technology which aided the development of emancipatory values, the primary human aim is connectedness or group action. And mass transportation technologies were crucial in the forging of social connections across extraordinary distances. There is simply no chance that the international women's suffrage movement would have been so effective had ordinary women not had the means to travel across long distances.

Increased urbanization was also a factor in promoting connectedness: while the cloistering together of the working class in large cities created the conditions for new forms of oppression, it also strongly promoted group action. The cumulative result is that co-ordinated responses to tyrannical social elites were now possible on a scale never before seen, and this, I contend, was a vital precondition for the emergence of emancipatory values.

These, then, are the three enabling conditions I wish to focus on: a dramatic increase in mobility and connectedness, the creation of vast new stores of action resources, and the culturally unique, emotionally intense focus on subjective experience or the 'inner life'. Having described the kindling, I'll now discuss what I take to be the most important spark.

Trigger: severe oppression

The enabling conditions listed above created a social context capable of supporting new ideals of equality and mutual tolerance. But these values were not guaranteed to arise. Rather, large-scale acts of extreme oppression were critical triggering causes, and, somewhat paradoxically, technology and action resources actually *incentivized* some of these tyrannical acts and policies. These acts, I claim, provoked an emancipatory ethos that was largely *defensive* in character.²¹ It was this fundamentally defensive, reactive character of the modern moral sense that was memorably summarized by Douglass:

Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will. Find out just what any people will quietly submit to and you have found out the exact measure of injustice and wrong which will be imposed upon them, and these

²¹For a similar argument concerning the sources of liberalism, see (Young 2004).

will continue till they are resisted with either words or blows, or with both. (Douglass 1857)

Before there were rarefied philosophical treatises defending human equality or the 'rights of man', before Locke or Kant could provide broadly metaphysical defenses of autonomy or universal rights, there were terrified, angry populations trying to make sense of their own suffering and to establish their own sovereignty or freedom from domination.

To put the point another way, consider the *Star Wars* films, among the most popular in Western cinematic history. Notice that they portray a moral axis which instantly resonates with modern viewers. A powerful nobility deploys its military might in order to engage in brutal acts of repression and authoritarian terror, and this nobility is opposed by a plucky band of rebels whose righteous anger drives them to risk their very existence for a slim chance at revenge and sovereignty. It is no exaggeration to say that Douglass' words quoted above would not sound out of place in the mouths of the rebels of *Star Wars*.

In other words, I am confirming one of Nietzsche's basic hypotheses: that contemporary morality is in part a defensive reaction against severe oppression by an elite aristocratic class. Nietzsche was right to perceive fear and resentment at the heart of our moral outlook, and he was right to think we commonly forget, obscure or cover over this fact. But he was wrong to think that this necessarily invalidates or undermines that outlook. Perhaps if we cling to old Cartesian or Platonic ideals, we must necessarily be disappointed to learn that our values are not the product of dispassionate reflection (Craig 2007). But, as with the philosophy of science, we needn't cling to such ideals.

I'll now provide some key examples of severe oppression from various points in recent world history. Most historians would, I gather, begin by citing the religious wars and peasant revolts characteristic of the European Reformation. The Catholic church, as was its custom, reacted with extreme violence towards the emergence of a competitor, and massacre followed counter-massacre as whole nations were torn apart by competing visions of orthodoxy. Inspired by a new, more individualistic form of religion, Protestantism, economically oppressed peasants all over Europe began to demand agrarian reform, and were brutally suppressed by authorities. The German Peasant Revolts mentioned earlier are just one of numerous examples.

Next, of course, we cannot ignore chattel slavery, an institution marked by unprecedented levels of cruelty and malice. The exploitation of African,

Caribbean and South American populations produced intense resistance, which flared up most notably in Haiti and Jamaica. When reading the missives sent by the leaders of rebel fighters during this time, it is impossible to miss the defensive character of the newly emerging moral framework:

For too long, Gentlemen, by way of abuses which one can never too strongly accuse to have taken place because our lack of understanding and our ignorance—for a very long time, I say, we have been victims of your greed and your avarice. Under the blows of your barbarous whip we have accumulated for you the treasures you enjoy in this colony; the human race has suffered to see with what barbarity you have treated men like yourself ... over whom you have no other right except that you are stronger and more barbaric than we ...²²

Finally, there was a development which was to prove positively catastrophic for working-class populations around the world, the emergence of total war (Bell 2014). For example, while it is not common to speak of the combatants who died in the World Wars as victims of *oppression*, this is surely true in some sense. During the First World War, millions were doomed to suffer the machine gun, poison gas and concussive shell fire, commanded by a bumbling aristocracy which saw its ancient claim to intrinsic social authority promptly disintegrate upon the cessation of hostilities (Kinross 1933, 72–74; Maier 2015). It is difficult to find a case in which what I have called *natural order* values were undermined more decisively. And the Second World War, of course, was sparked by murderous fascist regimes who convinced huge segments of the population to face death in combat in order that those regimes might continue to murder and repress other huge segments of the population. In both cases, the recruitment and targeting of the ordinary working class reached unprecedented levels, and tens of millions died for the authoritarian utopias or political alliances in the minds of a few dozen men.

My hypothesis is that such intense, large-scale oppression leads human beings to search for a defensive weapon, and the ideal of human emancipation is the most effective weapon of this sort that has ever been designed. Once it is institutionalized and backed by the coercive power of the state, it offers ordinary people protections and privileges that their ancestors could scarcely dream of. This slow institutionalization, while still an ongoing project fraught with its own dangers, is only possible in a culture which has learned to prioritize subjective experience as a primary source of moral value, which has developed the level of social

²²Letter from Jean-Francois Biassou, quoted in (Louverture 1953, 62–64).

connectedness within which the demands of the oppressed can become properly contagious, and which provides ordinary persons with the action resources necessary to make rebellion both feasible and permanent.

Bearing all of this in mind, it's now time to return to the philosophical arena and ask: what normative lessons can we draw from this genealogical sketch? I'll start with epistemology, and I'll conclude this paper with some thoughts on the function of emancipatory morality.

The social epistemology of emancipatory values

At the outset, there are several negative lessons that we must draw in the field of moral epistemology. The first is that purely rationalist explanations for the emergence of modern morality look hopeless. This is a process that is essentially infused with all sorts of powerful emotion, and it is simply wishful thinking to believe that this moral system could have emerged as the result of such things as dispassionate reflection and interpersonal testimony. The second lesson is that we must reject related claims, made by several writers, that such things as 'self-interest' or 'class interest' are *distorting* factors on moral belief (Boyd 1988; Enoch 2009). Our history has shown that these claims are by no means obvious or defensible, since protective, self-interested or class-interested anger is a key motivator of resistance and revolution.

But what of positive lessons? Is ours a history which shows definite signs of progress? I wish to remind the reader that my question here is only comparative or contrastive. So, the inquiry here concerns *relative* justification that is embedded in the notion of progress, and not the kind of absolute justification that comes along with thinking of knowledge in some non-contextual or pure sense.

I have claimed that emancipatory values emerged when people began to reject natural order values. Recall that I gave the label *natural order* to a moral system which remains largely indifferent to domination or vulnerability, mainly because it conceives of one's position at the bottom of a hierarchy as the result of one's natural inferiority. Well, the emerging picture suggests that natural order values, which are historically dominant, will generally flourish only in a society which has the following features.

First, the society must repress the inner life of individuals. It must encourage or produce a mode of existence which might be described as *lonely*. Ordinary individuals in such societies will of course experience the normal range of emotions and thoughts, but there will not exist a social feedback mechanism which encourages them to reflect on those inner states or to

share and express them in the ways with which we are now familiar. Their moral sources will thus remain external, located in a cosmic order or a set of pre-determined social roles.

Second, a society dominated by the natural order conception must remain poor and intellectually stagnant. It must lack the kinds of action resources that enable coordinated action and the spread of new moral ideals. Most of the population must remain profoundly *vulnerable* to the power of social elites; their economic desperation, hunger and their susceptibility to disease and blight will mean that social autonomy is simply not a particularly valuable or desirable thing.

Third, its population must remain relatively immobile and unconnected. This is not to say that it cannot engage in group action, but rather that such action is far more difficult because the society lacks the kind of social and technological developments which produce connectedness.

Now, in the transition from natural order to a more emancipatory ethos, can we ascertain theory-neutral signs of progress? That is, can we reasonably portray ours as a society which has created the social conditions for *moral* knowledge-acquisition, as it clearly did for scientific knowledge-acquisition?

The answer, I believe, is a cautious 'yes'. The common thread that runs through all of these enabling conditions can be stated rather simply: natural order values flourish when most human beings in a society cannot fully exercise their social, intellectual and emotional capacities, when, comparatively speaking, conditions are such that they cannot feel, think, or interact in the ways that we know they can. All human beings possess an inner emotional life, yet in societies dominated by natural order values, that life remains comparatively hidden, both to society in general and to the individual themselves. All human beings think and reason, transmitting new ideas along social networks, yet in this society, their ability to do so is radically limited by the absence of technology and resources. Hunger alone is a powerful limiting force here, as is the lack of connective technology and the scarcity of action resources. Virtually all human beings seek to interact and to forge social networks in order to engage in coordinated action. Indeed, morality itself is largely a process by which such networks are formed and maintained. Yet, strangely, a certain set of historically dominant values seems to *require* the suppression of our ability to do just that.

Our epistemological question, then, to anyone who adheres to more ancient, inegalitarian values must be: why does widespread belief in your value system seem to result from the relentless suppression of

ordinary human capacities in social groups? Surely, any valid or correct set of ideas or principles ought to be able to flourish where human beings are able to exercise their capacities to think, feel and interact. This observation applies in any domain: it would be very strange for a set of justified beliefs to be (a) objectively true, and yet to (b) *require* the suppression of ordinary human capacities in most knowers. There is no other domain of putatively objective knowledge where this is so. We do not find that mathematical knowledge increases under these conditions, nor do we find that widespread poverty, hunger, psychological repression and comparative social isolation lead to any other useful advance in understanding. So why should such suppression be necessary, here? What sense is there in objective knowledge which only flourishes in a population that is suppressed in this fashion?

This, then, can be a powerful source of confidence in emancipatory values: a genealogy which shows that they, by comparison with their historical rivals, flourish under conditions which almost anyone can see are epistemically virtuous. With this epistemological analysis out of the way, I'll conclude by examining what sort of functional conclusions we might draw from this genealogy.

Functional misunderstanding

The social function of any set of practices, values or ideas can, in principle, be revealed in the way that functions in other domains are revealed. Sometimes, the best explanation for an entity's emergence and persistence will be that it is disposed to produce some effect. When we have a reasonably complete and informative explanation of this sort, it seems reasonable to conclude that the entity's function is to produce those effects, on the assumption that the original enabling conditions haven't changed too much (Millikan 1984; Smyth 2016).

If the explanation above is basically right, then we have good reason to think that the social function of much contemporary morality is to effectively put a stop to tyrannical domination. The reason that emancipatory values emerge and persist is precisely that they provide the basis for such a response. This in and of itself should not be surprising, but it can serve as a useful reminder. Such values are intrinsically *positional*, requiring some reference to actual or hypothetical oppressors, who themselves do *not* receive any determinate moral status. The social function of emancipatory morality is thus not to produce anything like 'mutually beneficial cooperation', as evolutionary genealogies often declare, but it is rather

to *protect the vulnerable* from oppressor classes in a way that is decidedly non-mutual.²³ These values only function if our moral attention is firmly fixed on such phenomena as vulnerability and oppression, and they will fail to function if our attention remains elsewhere.

Now, it might be thought that I am making the following argument: since protection of the vulnerable is *good*, the discovery of this function thereby vindicates a great deal of contemporary morality. It is crucial to see that I cannot make this sort of argument, which enjoys great popularity amongst those who wish to vindicate moral ideas by uncovering their function(s).²⁴ The argument, as it stands, plainly violates the anti-circularity requirement named above, since it simply *assumes*, without argument, that emancipatory values are essentially correct, that protection of the vulnerable is in fact good. This maneuver, I believe, accomplishes nothing of any value. Notice that one of the primary functions of a contrary, natural order value system is probably the maintenance of social dominance, but the fact that this would have pleased adherents to that system is of no normative interest whatsoever. Our vindication cannot be as empty as this.

My point in this section is more subtle: I am claiming that functional understanding can help us to correct mistaken conceptions of our values. This, in turn, can allow us to better understand what is at stake in real social conflict. Many of us who embody emancipatory values often speak of ourselves as being committed to *equality*, for example, and some of us see this commitment as grounded in a kind of social contract or tacit agreement. But these, I will argue, are distortions.

I can illustrate this point by returning to pop culture. Would we really have understood a *Star Wars* (or a *Lord of the Rings*, a *Harry Potter* series, a *Wonder Woman* or a *Black Panther*) which concluded in a mutually beneficial peace treaty between the dominating armies of darkness and the populations they've terrorized, tortured and murdered? These stories can only end in the total annihilation of evil because the moral schema of the viewers demands it, because the social function at the core of that schema is protective rather than conciliatory, agonistic rather than mutualistic.

But this fact is routinely obscured by the language we use to describe our moral values. We speak, in non-positional and highly abstract terms, of inalienable *human* rights. We sometimes assume, in turn, that efforts at

²³For a broadly evolutionary perspective that actually dovetails nicely with mine, see (Boehm 2009)

²⁴See, for example, (Kitcher 2011). I criticize Kitcher in (Smyth 2016).

liberation or emancipation must be aimed at restoring some ideal cosmic balance represented by the propositions of egalitarian human rights theory. Yet, many of the core concepts which actually drive our moral system are those of vulnerability, domination and disproportionate suffering.

This misunderstanding has been strongly encouraged by the rationalist tradition, which has routinely portrayed moral progress as an 'expanding circle' of moral concern driven by the cognitive recognition of non-positional *sameness* (Singer 2011; Campbell and Kumar 2012). These theorists see us as being driven by the purely logical demand to 'treat like cases alike', and to therefore reject such things as gender, ethnicity, race and class as bases for differential treatment. This story, I claim, encourages functional misunderstanding. By refusing to even acknowledge the centrality of power-struggle to the development of contemporary morality, this narrative simply leaves out too much of the relevant history. Most importantly, it encourages us to focus on the wrong place: what is morally salient, from the point of view of emancipatory value, is not sameness. It is social difference, positional facts about persons and the hierarchies they inhabit.

Note too that this rationalist conception goes hand in hand with the false reading of the character-driven novel mentioned earlier, whereby we see such works as triggering the expansion of the so-called 'circle of care' by revealing something *shared* between reader and fictional character. The real history of our values, which is still, in many ways, being written, reveals that this moral stance is always positional, involving an implicit reference to *difference* – to those who are vulnerable to dominators and to the dominators themselves.

And while I am not the first to make this charge, the *social contract* tradition must also be charged with obscuring the real social function of our moral and political values. By portraying them, even metaphorically, as a kind of peace-treaty between equals, that tradition strongly encourages us to think in purely legalistic terms about the content of that hypothetical contract, and not about real power relations.²⁵ But a huge array of our values will only *work* if they are responsive, in a decidedly non-reciprocal manner, to social inequality.

Once we understand that our history reveals a deep social function at the heart of much contemporary morality, we can see that this process

²⁵See, for example, David Gauthier's extraordinary claim that 'our thoughts and activities, insofar as they concern ourselves and our relationships, are best understood by supposing that we treat all of these relationships as if they were contractual.' (Gauthier 1977).

of forgetting about power can easily lead to real-world dysfunction. For example, as anthropologist Lori Allen has shown, the institutionalization of 'Human Rights' doctrine in Palestine has been strikingly ineffective, and she argues that this failure can be largely traced to the ways in which that doctrine has become unresponsive to the power structures which permeate the lives of all citizens. This should not be surprising, since, as historian Samuel Moyn has shown, virtually none of the anticolonial movements of the twentieth century deployed or relied on any universalist notion of 'human rights' or 'basic equality' (Moyn 2012). The people who collectively enacted the greatest liberation movement in world history simply fought for *their* positional sovereignty in the face of domination. Any moral regime which emphasizes universalism and human sameness, even with the best of intentions, will likely produce moral dysfunction.

Finally, in acquiring this functional understanding, both philosophers and social activists can better appreciate the dynamics of contemporary political clashes. We can begin to see that the perspectives represented by Rawls, Young and Nozick are each, in their own way, grounded in the concern that social institutions can become deeply dysfunctional by failing to protect the people they are designed to protect. Much political debate, I have already suggested, is implicitly over who ought to be protected from whom. This shared ground should lead us to ask one final question, which greatly occupied Young in particular: what *is* social domination (Young 2011a)?²⁶ The genealogy provided cannot give us an answer to this question, but it certainly indicates the need for one.

These, then, are the sorts of conclusions that we can draw from a responsible, historically accurate genealogy of our values. First, we can draw conclusions about the epistemic status of those values, and second, we can develop a better understanding of how the values actually function. A reader might find fault with the history given here – indeed, given its necessarily sketchy and selective character, they probably should! But I hope, at least, they can now see why moral philosophy should no longer avoid the social history of morality. That history, like the social history of science, can be a source of much-needed confidence and understanding.

²⁶See also (Pettit 1997; McCammon 2015; Lovett 2010; Wartenberg 1990).

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