This is the transcript of a short talk given at ‘Foundations of Value and Values’ - an interdisciplinary workshop at the New Institute, Hamburg, 24 – 25 February 2020. The remarks were made in response to papers given by Corine Pelluchon and Markus Gabriel.

Summary

In this talk, Richard Bronk outlines the role played by moral sentiments and sympathetic imagination in guiding moral behaviour, and disputes the moral realist insistence that values must have objective and universal status if they are to be action-guiding. He examines how socially constructed moral dispositions can become the basis of contingent moral progress and even harden into neurologically normal responses. He also argues that we can have good reasons to privilege specific moral values and virtues without them being incontrovertible, universal, and objective truths. Finally, Richard examines the implications of values being incommensurable with one another – that is, impossible to reduce to a single scale of value without loss of ethical texture – in particular, what this means for the nature of the trade-offs between values where they conflict. His conclusion is that moral reasoning cannot finally determine our ethical choices.

“When all the expert analysis of implications and trade-offs is done, there remains a contingent and identity-defining choice about the weights to be given to different values, virtues, or rights. And for that choice, I would argue, we can have no other anchor than the outcomes of democratic deliberation and political choice.”

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How can we achieve moral progress?

Commenting on two such interesting but different talks is a challenge. But let me do so by coming from a set of perspectives – Romantic, constructivist, and yet with a dose of English scepticism – that may illuminate points of debate.

Listening to Corine Pelluchon, I was struck by how much Adam Smith might agree with her. In his Theory of Moral Sentiments, Smith saw moral sentiments or dispositions as crucial to moral outcomes. Often seen as the father of rationalist economics, Smith in fact posited a central role for emotions and sentiments in driving behaviour and especially moral behaviour. And key to his moral sentiments was a feature of cognition Corine fails to mention – the sympathetic imagination. For Smith, sympathy involves imagining ourselves in the shoes of others (including future generations) and then – having imagined how they feel – observing this from outside in order to make our moral judgments. The poet P. B Shelley also saw sympathetic imagination as ‘the great instrument of the moral good’ – capable, as M. H. Abrams (1953, 332) puts it, of bridging ‘the gap between atomistic individualism … and the possibility of altruism’. Imagination has the power to transform the pursuit of self-interest into something more comprehensive, forward-looking, and social – extending our concept of self forward into an imagined future and laterally to include those around us. Romantics like J. G. Herder and S. T. Coleridge also shared Corine’s organicist vision of individuals, society, and Nature as interconnected and mutually constituted. Indeed, some Romantics like Friedrich Schelling and William Wordsworth viewed imagination as the organ by which we grasp the ineffable Spirit underlying all things – something I was reminded of by Corine’s unusual use of the word ‘incommensurable’.

The problem, of course, with imagination, sentiments, and virtuous dispositions as the basis of moral behaviour is that there is no guarantee that good imaginaries and dispositions will predominate. Imagining ourselves into possible futures and the mindsets of others, and understanding our interdependence, may as often be the basis of exploitative as altruistic actions. Imagination like reason may be a necessary condition for moral behaviour but it is
certainly not sufficient. Which brings us to the frequent longing for a morally realist, objective, and universal anchor for our moral sentiments – and to Markus Gabriel’s talk.

From Markus’ moral realist perspective, I may be the worst possible discussant. Not only was I was trained in ethics at Oxford under the influence of John Mackie’s subjectivist rejection of objective moral values, but I recently spent a decade writing about the Romantic critique of Enlightenment rationalism. I’m steeped in a post-Kantian epistemology that, to quote M. H. Abrams (1953, 31), sees all facts – as the etymology from the Latin *facta* implies – as ‘things made as much as things found, and made in part by the analogies through which we look at the world as through a lens’. We never have some unmediated access to the world-as-it really-is. Rather, as the poet William Wordsworth put it, we ‘half-create’ the world-as-it-appears-to-us, which can be nothing other than a contested and contingent *interpretation* of underlying reality. In the case of ethics, though, the question is more profound than this general problem of epistemology: whereas it makes little sense to doubt that the world-as-it-really-is exists independently of our interpretations of it in the areas of physics, biology, and astronomy, it is far less clear that ethical values and moral facts are part of the world-as-it-really-is – independent of human thought and social constructions. And I want provocatively to suggest that in practice it does not hugely matter whether or not there are objective and universal moral facts.

In a nutshell, I argue that *socially constructed* and contingent values and virtues can still be action-guiding and the basis of moral evaluation and progress. What is more, even if values and virtues were objective, they would still conflict with one another and be to some extent incommensurable, so that there would not in any case be one rational right answer as to how we *ought* to behave. By ‘incommensurable’ here I mean something different from Corinnee – essentially ‘incapable of being reduced to a single scale of value without loss of ethical texture’. If values are incommensurable any measure of overall moral progress is based on contingent and contestable decisions about how to weight different values against one another.

Let me explain – by posing two questions relevant to this session’s focus on how to achieve moral progress, before outlining further what I mean by the *incommensurability* of values.
1. The first question is whether the virtues and moral dispositions that form the basis of moral progress should be seen as biologically innate or socially-constructed and learned?

- I agree with Corine that there is no evidence that our innate dispositions are more moral than in the past: the genocides of twentieth-century Europe and Rwanda and twenty-first century Syria are as bad as anything seen in antiquity. Nor do these episodes suggest clear adaptation or survival benefits to virtues on the timescale of biological evolution.

- But it is also clear that societies can ‘evolve’ – in an analogous sense of the word – to have certain contingent social practices, recognised virtues, and moral languages that structure behaviour and moral thought in more socially beneficial ways; and societies may succeed in passing on via education and social norms this beneficial moral inheritance (e.g., in trustworthiness or promise-keeping).

- Crucially, these useful conceptual structures and normative dispositions may – once embedded in social practice and internalised in our minds by education – harden into neurologically normal responses thanks to brain plasticity. In this contingent and reversible sense, we can be programmed by learning and social pressures to think in ways that society classes as more or less moral.

2. The second question is how much the ontological status of values matters to the possibility of moral progress in everyday life?

- Do values have to be objective to be action-guiding and a sound basis for ethical behaviour? Or do we merely need to act as if values are objectively true for them to have the necessary action-guiding force? If so, how is this convenient fiction maintained?
• If values do need to be objective, should they be seen as metaphysically strange non-natural qualities accessible only by reason or divine revelation as philosophers as various as Plato, St Augustine, and G.E. Moore have supposed?

• Or can the tangible existence of contingent social or ‘intersubjective’ norms provide a sufficient basis for moral action and measuring moral progress? After all, many socially enforced norms provide us with strong internalised reasons for action – such as driving on the left in the UK or the right on the Continent. And contingent politically adopted metrics (such as the UN Human Development Index) often provide the basis for objective measures of progress against these metrics?

• The heated debates on these questions revolve – as Markus’ work suggests – around the fear of moral relativism and being unable to prove definitively through rational argument how we ought to behave. If what one society judges to be morally right, or the basis of moral progress, is seen by another as evil or the basis of moral decline, do ethical claims dissolve into nothing more than sets of cultural preferences?

• Such a fear is based, I would argue, on a mistaken understanding of the role of moral reasoning and moral learning. Reason is not, pace Plato, used to intuit some mystical objective Form of the Good. And reason cannot prove as a matter of universal logic the essence of right and wrong. Instead, the role of reason is to deliberate about reasons for adopting certain values or privileging certain virtues; and to analyse how best to further socially agreed ethical goals. Most moral reasoning, that is, takes the form of either debating the social desirability or efficacy of different moral codes or, more often, analysing how best to achieve an agreed goal.

• We can then have sound reasons to privilege an ethical value or virtue without those reasons being incontrovertible truths. And the practicalities of meeting an accepted moral goal such as reducing inequality of opportunity, or protecting the environment for future generations, require detailed rational analysis of how the world works and the implications of different courses of action. Positive analysis of how best to meet
certain goals is as important to ethical decisions as normative deliberation about which goal to pursue in the first place.

Let me finish by developing an idea central to ambiguities in the concept of moral progress. Like Isaiah Berlin and John Gray, I argue that – whatever their ontological status or their evolutionary origin and adaptive benefits – moral values and virtues are quintessentially plural, incommensurable, and they frequently conflict with one another.

- Take, for example, the values of freedom and equality, or freedom and security: not only do they frequently conflict with one another; there is also no single scale of value to which they relate and no one right answer as to the trade-offs between them. To see one of these pairs of values as derived from the other, or both as instrumental contributors to some third intrinsic value is to sidestep the very real moral dilemmas we face. If we seek to reduce judgments about which course of action is morally imperative or constitutes progress to reading off a single and uncontested scale of value – such as utility – ‘we drain significance from some of the deepest conflicts that ethical life contains’ (Gray, 2000, 45). As individuals and societies, we face agonising choices about how to balance conflicting and incommensurable values. Far from one set of trade-offs being uniquely rational, the choices we make are contingent expressions of our moral and social identities. France is the country it is partly because it privileges equality over freedom more than does, say, the USA: neither way of life is more moral: they are just different.

- Seeing values as incommensurable in this way emphatically does not mean that we cannot have good reasons for choosing specific trade-offs between them. These reasons can work at two levels: they can articulate the implications of value choices for the moral nature of the ethical framework by which we live; and they can reflect analysis of the practical implications of the various choices we make. Very often positive analysis of a practical dilemma may reveal ways in which the apparent tragic moral choices we face need not be so tragic: there may be clever ways to avoid or finesse the worst dilemmas. Alternatively, faced with analysis of the actual real-life consequences of a morally absolutist view we may revisit our moral values and
adjust them. Rational analysis can inform our moral values as well as our practical decisions of how best to act in accordance with each value.

- Such moral reasoning cannot, however, finally determine our ethical choices. When all the expert analysis of implications and trade-offs is done, there remains a contingent and identity-defining choice about the weights to be given to different values, virtues, or rights. And for that choice, I would argue, we can have no other anchor than the outcomes of democratic deliberation and political choice. If we are not to be eco-fascists, for example, we must appeal to the imaginations, understanding, and character of voters with inclusive and environmentally sustainable narratives.

**Bibliography**


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