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Moral Progress: Improvement of Moral Concepts, Refinements of Moral Motivation

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Abstract: In their recent book Buchanan and Powell claim that there is moral progress. Their analysis focuses on increasing inclusiveness, yet they also suggest other dimensions as possible indicators—improvements in the concept of morality and refinements in moral motivation. In the following I present empirical data on changes in moral understanding that occurred during the second half of the 20th century in Germany. These changes concern an increasing delimitation of the moral realm, the rise of an ethics of responsibility, the displacement of an orientation to super ego dictates by a more ego-syntonic type of moral motivation. This research largely follows the ‘cognitivist’ paradigm which I start off defending against Haidt’s counter proposal of moral intuitionism. Feasible explanatory factors for the changes documented are put forward—processes of secularization and changes in socialization styles—and their interpretation as indicators of moral progress is discussed. The paper ends with brief speculations concerning possible reasons for current moral regressions.

Keywords: intuitionism, moral motivation, universal morality, moral regression

The Evolution of Moral Progress by Buchanan and Powell (2018; 2019) is a fascinating, important and timely analysis. It is fascinating thanks to the lucidity of its argumentation, the diversity of issues discussed and the wealth of information provided. It is important and timely in as much as the authors hold on to the project of enlightenment despite wide spread signs of moral regressions. In the following I will try to contribute to their overall claim that there is moral progress. I will not address their core example. I fully agree that in the last centuries we have observed increasing inclusiveness. The expansion of voting rights provides a pertinent example: At first, only men owning property, then also men without property, then Jews, then women, and recently—at least at the local level—migrants without citizenship were granted voting rights and today we are witnessing discussions about conceding them to children. Instead—(1) after some preliminary

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remarks concerning the theoretical frame of reference—I will discuss empirical findings (which I have already presented elsewhere in greater detail) to demonstrate changes in other dimensions which Buchanan and Powell consider as possible indicators of moral progress, namely (2) improvements to moral concepts (including ‘proper demoralization’ and ‘moralization’), and (3) refinements in moral motivation with respect to motivating concerns and ways of anchoring moral commitment in the person (type and structure of moral motivation). Evidence of such changes attests to the presumed plasticity of human moral powers.

(4) Next, I will discuss feasible explanatory factors that might account for these changes. Buchanan and Powell attribute moral development to the interactive influences of biology and culture. I will neglect this debate about gene-culture coevolution. Instead, I will focus on cultural factors solely—on secularization and socialization styles—and will try to demonstrate that “moral progress [...] is at least partly driven by real gains in moral insight [...] not driven merely by environmental factors” (FitzPatrick 2019, 233). (5) A question, however, arises: Do the changes documented indicate moral progress? (6) I will conclude with some speculative ideas concerning likely reasons or causes for today’s moral regressions.

1 A Preliminary Remark: Cognitivist or Intuitionist Morality?

Today, Kohlberg’s long dominant theory of the development of moral consciousness is confronted with an alternative theoretical frame. Haidt (2001; 2012) seeks to replace Kohlberg’s cognitivist approach by moral intuitionism. In agreement with Hume he understands morality as a system of emotions. Moral judgements—as evidenced by their quick production—cannot be seen as resulting from a deliberate weighing of arguments; they merely express spontaneous intuitions. Rational arguments are but post facto rationalizations of initial beliefs. Moral thinking and acting are not oriented to truth but to reputation. Based on intercultural surveys Haidt (2012) differentiates 6 modular foundations for moral reasoning: care / harm-fairness / cheating-loyalty / betrayal-authority / subversion-sanctity / divinity. He claims that these correlate with political convictions: Liberals focus exclusively on care and fairness while conservatives are equally sensitive to all dimensions.

I have several objections. (1) On the one hand, swiftness of judgment does not preclude rational foundations. Research on expertise shows: adepts swiftly access implications of knowledge systems that they have acquired in long processes of training and exercise—their responses have become automatized (Gru-

ber/Ziegler 1996). (2) On the other hand, swiftness of reactions may result from being confronted with purity items arousing disgust (e.g. eating one's run over dog) that Haidt treats as moral issues. As he puts it: "Moral spirit is like a tongue with differentiated taste perception." (2013, transl. G. N.-W.) In fact, there is empirical evidence that affective reactions—like disgust—may be fairly independent of, and precede in time, perceptual and cognitive operations (Zajonc 1980).

(3) Haidt pursues an empirical, not a normative project. True, at some times and places there may be obligatory rules regulating issues that from a WEIRD (Western educated, industrialized, democratic) perspective are considered questions of taste which—according to the principle 'preferences need no inferences'—individuals are free to deal with as they wish. However, the investigation of 'moral progress' inevitably involves normative aspects: Evaluative criteria have to be defined. Buchanan and Powell chose inclusion. Harm avoidance is one of the criteria on which my discussion will be based. Accordingly, questions of taste can only be considered moral questions if they are related to harm avoidance, e.g. by specific beliefs. To exemplify: Indian Hindus consider it a grave wrong should the oldest son eat chicken the day after his father deceased—this would prevent his father's soul from being redeemed. Now individuals socialized in this culture may well react with disgust to the very idea that a son might eat chicken under these circumstances. Yet it is not the affect that makes this response a moral one but the underlying (deeply internalized and incorporated) belief that this action will seriously hurt his father.

(4) Quick affective reactions cannot do justice to the complexity often involved in moral judgements. To exemplify: In cases grave impairments have been caused one has to consider whether consequences were intended or unpredictable, and whether incidental consequences were condoned justifiably or neglectfully (Young/Tsoi 2013). Also, in situations of conflicting norms alternative action choices need to be scrutinized with respect to two dimensions—the likelihood of various consequences (which involves unavoidably fallible empirical predictions), and the way these will be evaluated from potentially widely differing points of view of all concerned. (5) Haidt (2001) presumes that moral judgements and actions are oriented to reputation. Empirical studies show that for many people this is not true (see below).

My own research largely follows the cognitivist paradigm. It diverges, however, from Kohlberg's description of young children's moral understanding as purely instrumentalist and his core assumption of a cognitive-affective parallelism, i.e. the assumption that moral knowledge and moral motivation or action dispositions are a unity. Therefore, the empirical findings will be presented separately for the cognitive and the motivational dimension. I will report data from two studies: (1) A longitudinal study of the development of moral motivation investi-

gating children from ages 4 to 22 that started 1985 (LOGIC Nunner-Winkler 1998; 2000; 2008a). (2) A comparison of 100 participants of each of three generations (65–75-, 40–50-, 20–30-year olds, conducted in the late 1990ies in West Germany, i.e. comprising members of pre-68-, 68- and post 68 generations, Nunner-Winkler 2000; 2008b) analyzing judgments concerning rules of interpersonal morality and moral motivation.

2 Moral Understanding—The Cognitive Dimension

Concept of Morality

Interviews in the Generational Comparison started with an open-ended question: ‘How would you define morality? Can you give me an example for what you consider to be clearly immoral behavior?’ Almost one half of the oldest but less than one fifth of the youngest generation identified morality with regulating sexual behavior, whereby suppressing sexual needs was seen as intrinsically valuable and extra-marital acts were considered clearly wrong. This understanding also manifested itself in many examples older participants provided for immoral behavior (e.g. “sleeping with a different man every night”, “living together without being married”). Protesting against this traditional understanding many younger participants rejected the very term morality (e.g. “morality is old fashioned”, “is dictated by the church”). Such statements, however, do not imply a rejection of moral concerns. Asked to morally evaluate a protagonist who refuses to sort waste / who commits adultery most responded with utter indignation (e.g. “that’s got nothing to do with morality—it is irresponsible behavior towards future generations” / “that’s not a moral question, it’s a question of reliability or truthfulness”).

Content of Moral Rules

Participants were asked to pass moral judgments on 25 vignettes depicting protagonists who transgressed rules of family life and sexual behavior (e.g. working mothers, divorce, homosexuality), of the political and the religious system (e.g. conscientious objection, leaving the church), environmental behavior (e.g. sorting waste). In five vignettes the permissibility of exceptions from the rules was explored (‘Can you imagine a situation you might evaluate differently?’). There were large and highly significant differences between the generations in the assessment of 22 transgressions with younger participants holding more liberal views. 70% of the oldest generation strictly condemned, 90% of the youngest generation openly accepted behaviors such as homosexuality (e.g. “this is sinful”, “sickening”, “un-

natural” versus “where ever love strikes”, “that’s their own decision”), working mothers (80% of the oldest versus 40% of the youngest, e.g. “they fail to do their duty”, “this is egotistical pursuit of self-fulfillment” versus “that’s a question of good organization—the father, grandparents, a day nanny can take care of the kids—as long as they don’t suffer”), divorce (e.g. “a promise given at the altar must be kept—even if the husband beats his wife” versus “well, if they don’t get along any more”), idleness of a gifted student (e.g. “he is wasting the talents he has been entrusted with” versus “he’s got to decide that for himself”).

These differences evidence a limitation of the moral realm with its obligatory rules, and a complementary expansion of the personal domain granting tolerance for individual decisions on questions of the good life. Gradually, a ‘universal minimal morality’ emerges. The label ‘universal’ reflects the fact that—as evidenced by children’s moral understanding in WEIRD countries—participants hold the obligatory rules of this delimited morality to enjoy unalterable, intrinsic, universal validity (Turiel 1983; Nucci/Turiel 1993). Besides, it implies—as indicated by the worldwide (formal) adoption of the UN Declaration of Human Rights—that this understanding is generalizable and potentially suited to regulate relations between all human societies. The claim of its actual global prevalence, however, is not included.

Strictness of Validity

Clear differences between the generations also show up in how rigidly norms are presumed to hold. Most of the older participants repudiated, most of the younger ones allowed exceptions to rules (e.g. omission of sorting waste: “order must be”; “I don’t know whether they use the waste, but if the containers are there I’ll sort it” versus “if someone is old and sick”, “if the containers are so far away that the gas used causes more pollution than is saved by sorting”). This difference also appeared in the examples provided for immoral behavior. Most of the older participants simply listed rule transgressions whereas most younger ones embedded them in concrete contexts (e.g. “stealing”, “defrauding your partner” versus “taking something from someone who’s got very little himself”, “defrauding one’s wife while telling her that one loves her”). Spelling out aggravating conditions implies that one can imagine situations in which one would allow exceptions (e.g. theft of food in need, mutual agreement on an open relationship).

Proper (De-)moralization

Harm avoidance is seen as one of the core functions of morality across all epochs and cultures (e.g. the Golden Rule, Höffe 2011). The rejection of taboos which bitterly curtail individuals freedom to engage in harmless behavior (e.g. sex between consenting gay adults, working mothers—as long as children are cared

for well) can be taken as proper demoralization. The contrasting case—proper moralization—is exemplified by evaluations assigned to a protagonist who joined the NSDAP in the early days. Many of the older participants—primarily those who had passed their adolescent years during 3rd Reich - justified or excused this decision while the younger ones—who had grown into the years of the 68 era—tended to condemn it (e.g. “it was a choice in view of his career, not a moral question”, “he was afraid of losing his job” versus “even at the time one could know that the NS committed murder and persecuted Jews”).

3 Refinements of Moral Motivation

3.1 Measuring Moral Motivation

Moral motivation is defined as the willingness to do what is understood to be right even under personal costs. It was measured by emotion ascriptions to hypothetical wrongdoers (for children) or to self in the role of a perpetrator (for adolescents and adults). This operationalization is derived from a cognitivist understanding of emotions according to which emotions are albeit quick and global yet substantive judgements about the subjective importance accorded to objective facts (Solomon 1976; Montada 1993). The emotions ascribed indicate which of the two facts simultaneously true of the wrongdoer participants accord higher importance—the fact that s/he transgressed a norm or that s/he satisfied a desire (Nunner-Winkler/Sodian 1988). Meanwhile there is empirical evidence that this procedure does indeed tap action dispositions. Amoral emotion ascriptions correlate with deviant behavior. Thus, children and adolescents who expect wrongdoers to feel good are more likely to cheat, to ruthlessly assert own interests, to behave aggressively, to mob others (Asendorpf/Nunner-Winkler 1992; Arsenio et al. 2004; Krettenauer et al. 2008; Malti/Krettenauer 2013).

There are different concerns that may motivate conforming to norms: fear of external sanctions (penalties, social rejection, and loss of reputation), fear of internal sanctions (feelings of shame or guilt). Compliance may also be caused by pre-reflectively formed need dispositions (Parsons 1964) or be motivated by a willingly affirmed commitment to follow norms understood to be justifiable. These motives reflect different substantive concerns (type of moral motivation) and a change in the way morality is anchored in the person (structure of moral motivation). Across generations there has been a change in both respects.

I will substantiate this claim on the basis of both studies introduced above. (1) In LOGIC, children were presented vignettes depicting a protagonist in a sit-

uation of temptation (e.g. to take another child's sweets). First, children's moral knowledge was explored ("May protagonist take the sweets or not? Why / why not?"), Next, the protagonist was shown to transgress (e.g. s/he took the sweets). The test question for moral motivation was: "How does protagonist feel? Why does s/he feel that way?" (2) The 300 participants of the Generational Comparison plus an additional sample of 100 17-year olds taken from LOGIC were presented a grave transgression (cheating on one's father's last will for the three older generations, not returning money to a very poor old woman for the 17 year olds, Nunner-Winkler 2008a). First, they were asked how they would feel had they committed the act described. Then they were given cards with 36 emotional reactions and asked to equally distribute them on a 6 point scale ranging from "I would feel exactly that way" to "I could not feel that way at all" (Q-Sort, Block 1961).

This procedure forces participants to carefully compare each reaction with all others. Thus, all differences (even in the middle range) can be interpreted. It also counteracts social desirability concerns, because the total range has to be used. 6 emotional reactions were presented for each of 6 different concerns: fear of religious sanctions (e.g. "God might punish me"); fear of forensic sanctions (e.g. "I'd be afraid to be put into prison"); fear of social disdain (e.g. "I'd be afraid my friends would turn away from me"); fear of superego sanctions (e.g. "I'd forever be conscience stricken"); a deeply ingrained pre-reflective need-disposition for conformity (e.g. "this is unnatural"); ego-syntonic moral concerns (e.g. "I'd feel very sorry", "I would consider making up for it"); openly amoral thoughts (e.g. "I can imagine I'd feel quite ok about it").

3.2 Type of Moral Motivation—Motivating Concerns

(1) The LOGIC study showed: Practically all 4-year olds knew the moral norms presented and understood that they enjoy intrinsic validity—sanctions were rarely mentioned (e.g. "one may not take the sweets—that is wrong / this is theft / s/he is a thief"). This agrees with findings in the domain theory (Turiel 1983; Nucci/Turiel 1993; Killen/Smetana 2006) and contradicts Kohlberg as well as Haidt. Yet most of the younger children expected the wrongdoer to feel good after having transgressed (e.g. "The sweets taste great, you know"). Moral motivation, so the upshot, is only built up in a delayed and differential learning process. The percentage of morally disinterested children decreased from 70 at age 4 and 35 at age 8 to under 20 at age 22.

(2) In the Generational Comparison study a factor analysis of the emotions ascribed yielded 5 factors (for details cf. Nunner-Winkler 2008b). The oldest generation scored highest on the factors representing fear of religious sanctions and

a pre-reflective conformity disposition. Both middle cohorts displayed a higher affinity to the superego language with the 20-30 year olds explicitly distancing themselves from items expressing pre-reflective dispositions. The 17-year olds decidedly rejected items referring to religious sanctions and superego controls; instead they most clearly affirmed (openly amoral as well as moral) ego-syntonic reactions. This fits with previous findings in LOGIC reported above: Already at ages 6 and 8 those who cared about morality expected to experience regret after having transgressed rather than fear of sanctions or feelings of guilt and shame. All in all, ego-alien reactions gradually wane across generations: The pre-reflective conformity disposition of the oldest generation gives way to a conscious awareness of superego dictates in the middle cohorts and comes to be replaced by (moral and amoral) ego-syntonic responses in the younger generations.

Spontaneous responses to the open-ended question may illustrate the change. In the following quote—typical for older participants—the transgression is condemned in view of anticipated vindictive superego reactions:

“I would never have done something like that. If, however, I had [...] I’d feel very miserable [...], horrible, guilty, in any case, and shame and fear to live on [...] I think it’s absolutely terrible and I don’t know whether I could ever laugh again or be happy.”

In contrast, the younger participants tend to explicitly discuss the wrongness of the act. They do not mention any negative consequences ensuing to the wrongdoer. Instead they imply repairing the wrong committed. The following response is typical for the 20-30 year old participants:

“As far as I’m concerned—normally I could not muster the ability, I would not have the will power to do something like that, for to me that is a double breach of confidence [...] I can’t really picture myself doing something like that. I can imagine that had I done it, well, I think I would not feel good at all and sooner or later I’d probably [...]”

3.3 Structure of Moral Motivation—Anchorage in the Person

These quotes reflect changes in the way morality is anchored in those persons who care to follow norms. In the traditional model the very thought of transgressing is banned from consciousness or else the superego strictly controls conformity to preordained norms by setting up strict taboos and in case of violation threatens with life-long retributions. In contrast, in the ego-syntonic model the individual identifies with norms he or she understands to be justified and in case of transgression expects to feel regret and a desire for repair. This indicates that the lapse is experienced as a betrayal of self-chosen and willingly affirmed aspi-

rations. Down to the wording chosen (“I could not muster the ability; I would not have the will power to do something like that”) the statement resembles Frankfurt’s (1988) explication of ‘volitional necessity’. This self-imposed constraint is affirmed inasmuch as the underlying reasons are held to be valid (“for me this is a double breach of confidence”, i.e. cheating on the father’s last will and on the deceived relatives).

To conclude: Contrary to Haidt’s claim about the moral relevance of reputation social sanctions play a negligible role in moral judgements and motives. Neither do emotions govern moral behavior. In theoretical discussions the moral relevance attributed to emotions differs. Some authors (e.g. Hume; Tugendhat 2006) see moral emotions as constitutive of morality, as foundation of concepts like the moral ought. Others—following Freud—hold a functionalist interpretation, i.e. they see conformity motivated by fear of super-ego retaliation. For example in discussing Buchanan and Powell’s analysis Hitlin (2019)—referring to Haidt—demands a deeper analysis of the “moral functioning” via “imagined shame or guilt” in view of “how non-cognitive people truly are” (279). In the research reported above emotions are assigned an indicative function: Emotions show the subjective importance persons impute to values, (e.g. hedonistic satisfactions, wealth, fame, integrity). Expected or experienced negative emotions about transgressing indicate moral motivation. The moral motivation of many of the older participants matches a functionalist interpretation of emotions—anticipating feelings of guilt or shame helps resisting temptations. The younger participants’ expectation of regret or sorrow indicates an ego-syntonic commitment to moral values—a willingness to do what is right that is guided by insight. For some individuals this commitment becomes a core aspect of their identity. This is true of the ‘moral exemplars’—persons who despite grave costs (e.g. loss of their career) did not betray their moral beliefs (Colby/Damon 1992). These persons exemplify Buchanan and Powell’s proposition about “the crucial role of moral identity as a potent motivational factor” (2019, 299).

4 Explanatory Factors for Moral Change

In discussing ‘biocultural’ conditions conducive to moral progress Buchanan and Powell point to ‘causal’ factors such as “physical security, low rates of infectious diseases, high rates of production and minimal interethnic conflict” (2019, 194) and characterize their explanation as ‘naturalistic’. FitzPatrick (2019, 233ff.) addresses this issue. Though Buchanan and Powell—so his comment—do “recognize that part of the explanation of moral progress will properly appeal to people’s

gaining moral insight” they do not really do justice to the fact that it is “driven by real gains in moral insight and knowledge through sound moral reasoning”. In fact, their “purely explanatory ambitions [...] will turn out not to be purely naturalistic at all” (235). I should like to contribute to this debate by forwarding a non-naturalistic line of accounting for the changes observed.

4.1 Cognitive Dimension—Secularization

The rise of the described minimal morality—so my claim—can be ascribed to secularization which I define in narrow terms (thus avoiding the controversial debate about the ‘return of religions’ or the dawning of a ‘post-secular age’). I merely assume a severance of morality and the church or even religion with the effect that norms are no longer seen as imposed by higher authorities but as agreed upon by all concerned.

Content of Moral Rules

65–75 year olds tend to base morality on religion. This becomes manifest in several aspects: In justifying their moral judgements they often refer to religious commands. This explains their considering many behaviors as moral which younger generations assign to the personal domain (e.g. homosexuality, premarital sex, divorce, working mothers, leaving the church). From the younger participants’ point of view the moral domain is confined to rules that forbid directly harming others, i.e. to rules that can be justified in mundane terms. In particular, they do not include Kant’s duties against-the-self (e.g. taking drugs, committing suicide, wasting one’s talents): Life and talents are no longer seen as gifts awarded by God entailing gratitude and accountability. Instead, the individual is ascribed extended rights to self-determination.

Already at the beginning of the 20th century Durkheim noted a connection between the rise of a ‘universal morality’ and the decline “of the vernacular idea that ethical commands are based on a divine law” (1999, 28). Due to increasing functional differentiation—so his explanation—the moral ideal “detaches itself from local and ethnic features [...] rises above all particularities and aspires to universality” (106). In fact, “members of the society have become diversified to such an extent that they were left with only one single common feature—their personhood. No wonder that this personhood has become the dominant object of collective sentiment” (159, all quotes transl. by G. N.-W.).

The assumed correlation between the delimitation of morality and its severance from religion is backed by representative surveys. Between 1991–1998 residents of 26 European countries were asked to morally evaluate issues pertaining

to sexual behavior (homosexuality, premarital and extramarital sex) and tax matters (tax evasion, economic subsidy fraud). Premarital sex is accepted in countries with few church attendees, and—like homosexuality—rejected in countries with large catholic populations. Extramarital sex and tax fraud are rejected in practically all countries (Pickel 2001). Comparable results were found in a study requesting moral evaluations of abortion, divorce, tax evasion and bribery in 73 countries that integrated data from the European Value Survey and the World Value Survey (Dülmer 2009). Countries differed in evaluating abortion and divorce, yet clearly agreed in condemning tax evasion and bribery. Thus, across (European and non-European) countries, norms forbidding harming others (partners, the state) by fraud enjoy virtually universal validity. There are, however, differences in norms regulating sexual behavior or family relations that depend on culturally varying religious beliefs or institutional arrangements.

Strictness of Validity

Secularization also underlies the observed displacement of an ethics of conviction by an ethics of responsibility (Weber 1956). Older participants trust that in the long run God will make everything turn out best for believers. This conviction has eroded. Its mundane proxy—the belief in fate—has vanished as well (Marquard 1981). In consequence man has come to feel responsible not only for committing right acts but also for their foreseeable consequences. Thus, exceptions from rules will come to be seen as permissible if this way harm may be reduced.

4.2 Motivational Dimension—Change in Educational Practices

A minimal morality that limits the number of obligatory rules and ascribes them a prima facie validity only corresponds to the ego-syntonic motive structure described above. Deciding about the justifiability of exceptions requires a flexibility that is incompatible with both—an early internalization of strict rules and a pre-reflectively generated disposition to follow them. This new flexibility results from changes in socialization styles. According to Freud the disposition to follow norms is established by two ways—by ‘identification with the aggressor’ (i.e. with an authoritarian father) which will produce a rigid superego censorship, or by ‘anaclitic identification’ (with an (over)protective mother) which will generate a pre-reflective habit of self-constraint experienced as a native feature.

Since Freud’s time, however, family life and educational styles have changed (Reuband 1997; Pfeiffer 2012). Increasingly, former educational goals like order, cleanliness, and obedience have been replaced by autonomy and independence. Children more and more take part in family decision-making and recently have

even been granted legal rights against their parents. To the extent that children are considered equals rules can no longer authoritatively be set and enforced. Instead, parents need to justify moral norms and to negotiate intra-familial regulations. Thus, children today grow up in a much more democratic atmosphere in which early conditioning and power threats give way to bargaining and reasoning, to inductive socialization practices (Hoffmann 2000).

This parenting style is facilitated by the fact that morality has been reduced to a smaller set of rules which educators can justify by referring to the Golden Rule (e.g. “you, too, would not want that someone hits you/takes your stuff away from you”). This way children can and in fact do (see above 3.1) develop a genuine understanding of the intrinsic and universal validity of moral rules. At the same time these educational practices are conducive to the development of an ego-syntonic motive structure: Children may come to want to live in a well-ordered community. In fact many do develop a willingly affirmed readiness to follow reasonable norms (Nunner-Winkler 1998).

5 Moral Progress?

There are three moral principles which—like the examples forwarded by Buchanan and Powell—I take to be “uncontroversial and accessible from a wide range of particular moralities” (2019, 185): equality, nonviolent conflict resolution, minimization of harm.

Equality

The principle of equality is understood in terms of equal respect, not of equal income (Gosepath 2004). It can be seen as resulting from the erosion of traditional justifications of unequal treatment. In earlier times, kings were held to have been awarded their prerogatives by supernatural powers. Also, the assumed superiority of men over women was derived from religious authorities. When religious beliefs were fading away substitute legitimations for unequal treatment were looked for in the natural sciences. Throughout the 19th century many physicians documented the inferiority of women by referring to their “slimy, narrow, and dark genitals” which so unfavorably compared to the “upright openness of the male genital” (Honnegger 1989). And throughout the 20th century psychologists searched for differences in the natural endowments of black and white Americans. Over time these naturalistic justifications for ascribing an inferior status to women and to black people that had replaced the previous religious justifications (Alder 1992;

Meuschel 1991) lost their persuasive power, too. Equality may be seen as the default assumption—once unequal treatment can no longer be justified.

Nonviolent Conflict Regulation

Solving conflicts not by violence but by compromises or even agreements requires some minimal consent on basic guidelines. Consent may be difficult to reach if commands are issued by divine powers whose wisdom is accessible only to the few elect. It can more easily be achieved if norms are justified in mundane terms, e.g. by referring to universal features of the human existence that are intelligible across cultures and times: (Other than angels) man is vulnerable, (other than saints) ready to harm others for own interests, (other than instinct-driven animals) able to control such desires and is interested in not being harmed or having loved ones harmed. In consequence, a (hypothetical) consensus among all concerned may be reached: Men will accept rules that safeguard their interests and abide by them if impending sanctions will warrant that others will also conform.

On this understanding negative duties constitute the core of morality (Gert 1998). Given that they demand omissions only they enjoy universal validity (e. g. all can refrain from directly hurting anyone at all times and places). There is only one positive duty: ‘Do your duty!’ Just like the command to keep one’s promises it states a universal obligation only on the meta-level. The concrete duties to be fulfilled can be specified differently by different cultures—as long as harm to others is avoided. This minimal morality which postulates universal rules prohibiting harm and demanding tolerance with respect to institutional definitions of positive duties can be agreed upon by all. It grants leeway to cultures for organizing social life in view of “the common faithfulness to and concern for specific historical institutions” (Taylor 1995, 111). Thus, the opposition between liberals and communitarians is attenuated—sensitivity to loyalty and authority, Haidt’s modules for conservative moral reasoning, find room. And the concerns forwarded by critics of the 1948 Declaration of Human Rights can be met: Lifestyles like nomadism or practices like the children’s collective education by the village defying universal regulations are seen as questions of social organization and left up to parties concerned.

It has to be noted, however, that this theoretical justification of moral norms does not preclude actual social conflicts. Conflicts arise when specific groups fight for extended interpretations of equality (e.g. for equal rights for women, homosexuals, migrants, black people, handicapped people) or for the validity of specific values they see endangered (e.g. social order, traditions). Suitable institutions (e.g. rule of law, state monopoly of violence) are required to control the use of force in such conflicts.

Harm Minimization

This pivotal principle is met much better by an ethics of responsibility than by a religiously based ethics of conviction. Exceptions from rules are seen to be justifiable if—impartially evaluated—the costs incurred by observing the rule outweigh the costs arising from transgressing it. To illustrate: In considering assassinating Hitler Graf von Stauffenberg was troubled by qualms about breaking the religiously affirmed oath by which he had pledged loyalty. This concern would be deemed less fatal in an ethics of responsibility. The prospect of saving hundreds of thousands of lives (of Jews murdered in the concentration camps, of soldiers fighting in an already lost war, of civilians in bombed cities) would clearly be seen as outweighing a perjury. However, even if exceptions are seen as justifiable in principle, consensus in concrete dilemmas cannot necessarily be expected: Empirical predictions about likely consequences are fallible and individuals and (especially pluralistic) cultures differ in how they rank various goods (e.g. honor versus life). Thus, unavoidably there will be a grey zone of legitimate dissent.

There is one more feature standing out in a universal morality: It facilitates global exchanges of goods inasmuch as people can trust contracts entered with strangers. This advances an international division of labor, furthers higher productivity and increases wealth. To count as moral progress the increased revenues would, however, need to be shared justly. The meaning of ‘just sharing’ depends on the relative weighting of relevant justice criteria (input criteria, e.g. talent, effort, output criteria, e.g. yield achieved) and the consideration of needs. This not uncontroversial debate, however, is beyond the present account (for a detailed normative analysis of experimental studies on distributive justice cf. Leist 2020).

To sum up: A morality that is not derived from God’s word but from universally shared human interests can be agreed upon by men of different historical and religious traditions. Better than (rigid) traditional moralities it fulfills the core functions of nonviolent conflict regulation and harm minimization. It grants equal respect to all and preserves individual as well as cultural autonomy. In addition it facilitates the establishment of profitable cooperative relations. For these reasons, the emergence of a secular moral understanding and the development of concomitant individual competences can count as moral progress.

6 Moral Regressions

Presently, a remarkable decline of universal moral premises and a complementary rise in nationalistic, ethnocentric, anti-Semitic, racist attitudes are observable. Clearly, one of the causes that can account for this creeping demoraliza-

tion is the fading of social conditions Buchanan and Powell marked as favorable for moral progress. Adherents of right wing parties or movements feel threatened by (risks of) unemployment, high rental fees, by the devaluation of their competences (due to rapid digitalization) and of their local social capital (due to advancing globalization Kraemer 2018). I want to suggest an additional factor—a “non-naturalistic” leverage based on “moral facts and people’s grasping of them” (FitzPatrick 2019, 235). This proposal, however, is speculative and relies on a conclusion by analogy—on a transfer of ontogenetic learning processes to the macro level of collective learning processes.

Socio-cognitive Development

Piaget’s description of children’s cognitive development has been refined and corrected. Nevertheless, the basic assumption remains: The complexity of thinking structures increases. Up to about 6–7 years children are trapped by their sensory perceptions and unable to simultaneously handle several dimensions (pre-operational stage). Gradually they begin to grasp complementary relationships and the concept of reversibility (concrete operational stage). Around 12 years reasoning becomes reflexive (formal operational stage): Thoughts focus not only on objects but on thinking. Adolescents draw conclusions not from preexisting data alone, but look systematically for missing data. This way they come to comprehend given facts as random actualizations from a more comprehensive realm of possibilities (Inhelder/Piaget 1958).

This formal improvement impacts the development of role-taking abilities (Selman 1984). Young children take their own perceptions as true copies of the objective state of the world. Later they see that—due to differing standpoints—views will differ. There is an interesting advance in epistemic understanding when children—around 7–8 years—come to develop an ‘interpretative theory of mind’ (Chandler 1990): They realize that views may differ not only because they rely on differing information but also because they are based on differing interpretations. Chandler uses an example to illustrate: Two friends go to the cinema. In the middle of the film one leaves to buy popcorn and misses a crucial scene. Clearly, their interpretations will differ. An ‘interpretative theory of mind’, however, implies an awareness that their interpretations might differ even though both have seen the entire film. It implies appreciating the fact that the construction of reality inevitably includes subjective aspects. This disturbing new insight can be eased for some time by introducing a split between facts and opinions: Disagreements can then be discarded as mere matters of taste and stark realism retained.

However, as contradictions keep coming up and formal-operational thinking is setting in epistemic skepticism begins to generalize. Doubting all thinking creates what Chandler calls ‘Cartesian anxiety’. He describes two strategies for relief:

dogmatism (in form of either religious fundamentalism or blind faith in science) or total relativism. Further socio-cognitive development is required for grasping the more complex position of ‘post-skeptical rationalism’: Accordingly, absolute truth cannot be attained yet it can be approximated and better or worse arguments can be distinguished (Chandler/Birch 2010). In fact, most adults still hold relativistic persuasions (Kuhn 2006).

Public Debates

During the last decades radical constructivist interpretations have won prominence in the social sciences (e.g. in accounting for gender differences). They acknowledge the subjective share in scientific findings (e.g. through ways of operationalizing terms, interpreting data etc.), but overgeneralize it. Such overgeneralizations of newly won insights are typical concomitants of individual development (Elkind 1977) and are augmented in the scientific rat race in order to attract attention. This excessive epistemic reflexivity undermines previously dominant beliefs in the objectivity of science and such doubts are beginning to shake confidence in the trustworthiness even of findings in the natural sciences. Reports of contradictory results (e.g. with respect to climate change) are taken to indicate the total incredibility of science.

Clearly, many members of the public do not (yet) adequately grasp the core features of science (refutability) and of scientific endeavors (approaching though not reaching truth). In addition distrust is enhanced by investigative reports on interested parties financing research. Additionally—maybe mainly—ordinary suspiciousness is multiplied by the fragmentation of the public: Shared communication channels (newspapers, TV, radio) that typically check information before spreading it loose followers. With the rise of the social media everybody can ‘become an author’ (Habermas 2020) and publicize his personal opinions; many stay in their specific communication bubbles which often diffuse partial views and conspiracy theories. For consumers verifying messages is hardly feasible.

Individuals’ lack of cognitive complexity, the overabundance of available—yet hardly verifiable—information and the mass of unreliable communications characterize discourses on moral issues, too. The dispute on migration is a case in point. Nationalists call for a rigid close-down of borders, multiculturalists for an open welcome of refugees. Intermediate positions are more complicated. Nationalists need to recognize the distinction between asylum seekers who (according to the Geneva Convention) are granted a legal status and economic migrants whose applications can be negotiated pragmatically. Multiculturalists need to modify their overall rejection of particularistic arguments: Favoring participants of cooperative arrangements which one is part of (e.g. family, school, firm, and state) is a universal positive duty. In line with the organizational division of labor, tasks are

assigned to specific roles and each agent is required to fulfill his/her obligations to specified role partners: the mother to her children, the teacher to his students, the state to its citizens (Goodin 1988). This agrees with Buchanan and Powell (2019) who state: “Reasonable partiality toward one’s co-nationals or family or ethnic group does not require denying the equal basic moral status of all others.” (292)

There are additional factors that might undermine moral convictions. Just as the disclosure of economic interests saps the confidence in scientific endeavors, the strategic use of moral appeals saps the belief in the intrinsic value of morality. Examples are the shaming of individuals for ordinary behavior (e.g. using cars or airplanes) while failing to warrant (e.g. by general rules or increased prices) that individual abstinence will be effective (Olson 1971), manifold tactics of green washing in commercial advertisements and the glaring acquiescence of large parts of the public in the face of frank lies in political declarations.

7 Concluding Remark

Historical evolution cannot be portrayed by a straight upward line denoting linear progress. Yet—there is progress. Violence (if measured in proportion to size of population) has considerably been reduced (Pinker 2011), the same is true of infant deaths, of illiteracy etc. Nevertheless, there always have been regressions, too. The giant number of murder in the 20th century committed by a nation that had promoted enlightenment is just one case in point. The Catholic Church burning witches and heretics in medieval times is another one. Progress seems to fluctuate above and under a line that—globally—does seem to be directed upward.

With respect to morality enlightenment and concomitant processes of mundane justifications of moral rules combined with the growth of international trade relations have contributed to changes in moral understanding: Inclusiveness, individual autonomy and protection from harm have increased considerably; predominantly, norms are seen as justifiable by reason; their observance can be motivated by insight rather than by fear of (external or internal) sanctions. Such changes participants—and most notably victims of more exclusive moralities—cannot help but understand as progress. If the suggested analogy between societal change and ontogenetic development does stand the test one might hope that today’s moral regressions can—at least partly—be understood as a concomitant of a transitional stage that may be overcome in the course of further collective moral learning processes.

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