

Communicating Moral Concern

An Ethics of Critical
Responsiveness

Elise Springer

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Contents

Acknowledgments ix

1 Higher-Order Responsiveness: The Social Dimension of Moral Agency 1

- 1.1 Social Responsiveness and Moral Complexity 1
- 1.2 Moral Solipsism in Two Modern Flavors 11
- 1.3 Non-Ideal Theory and Social Complexity 18
- 1.4 Toward Virtue Ethics and Beyond 21
- 1.5 Concerns and Systematic Moral Theory 30
- 1.6 Glancing Ahead 35

2 Responsiveness Ain't in the Head: Recognizing Critical Gesture 39

- 2.1 Critical Responsiveness as a Frame of Understanding 43
- 2.2 When People Confound Expectations: Anomalous Conduct or Critical Gesture? 54
- 2.3 Critical Engagement in Observation and Representation 62
- 2.4 Some Suggestions about Relations between Moral Philosophy and Psychology 66

3 Communicating Moral Concern: The Point of Critical Engagement 71

- 3.1 Beyond Cool Judgment: The Practical Face of Moral Criticism 71
- 3.2 What Is the Practical Point of Moral Criticism? 74
- 3.3 Sketching a Third View: Communication of Moral Concern 82
- 3.4 Problems and the Transfer of Concern 85
- 3.5 Forward-Looking and Backward-Looking Concern 87
- 3.6 Moral Address as Communicative Gesture 89

4 Dynamics of Engagement: Time, Interaction, and Uptake 95

- 4.1 Metaphilosophical Aside 95
- 4.2 Temporal and Interpersonal Dimensions of Critical Agency 97

4.3 Inoculating Ourselves against Speech Act Theory	99
4.4 The Moral Mischief Wrought by Speech Act Theory	107
4.5 Getting Something Across: Communicative Transfer and Its Metaphorical Ground	111
4.6 Reframing Resentment and Guilt as Phases of Communication	115

Interlude: From a Modular to a Transformative Account 125

5 Unconventional Threads of Communication: The Social Elaboration of Inarticulate Concern 129

5.1 To Play the Moral Game or to Change It?	129
5.2 Inarticulate Competence: Not an Exclusively Individual Affair	135
5.3 Concern as the Social Life of Unresolved Attention	137
5.4 Clues, Claims, and Emergent Meanings	143
5.5 Three Ways of Listening to Moral Testimony	147
5.6 Continuity of Concern Despite Lack of Shared Claims	154
5.7 Mishandled Concerns	159

6 Contingency beyond Contagion: A Social Geography of Moral Concerns 163

6.1 Tracing Currents of Concern within a Social Field	163
6.2 Moral Geography: Moral Address within a Social Field	168
6.3 Dynamic Geography of Moral Concerns	171
6.4 Boundaries or Horizons? (Or, "You Can't Get There from Here")	175
6.5 Contagion Narratives in Constructivist Sociology	181
6.6 Connective Agency: An Example	188

7 The Transformation of Concerns: Economic and Ecological Models 193

7.1 The Economic Stance toward a Field of Concerns	196
7.2 Economy as Transformation, Transportation, and Exchange	197
7.3 Critical Mediation through an Economic Lens	200
7.4 Positional Evaluation of Our Moral Concerns	203
7.5 The Challenge of Ecology	205
7.6 Embodiment, Creativity, and Identity	207
7.7 Bodily Difference: Dangerously Essentialist or Simply Essential?	208
7.8 Continuity and Synthesis?	211

8 Critical Engagement with Virtue Ethics: An Unconventional Fit 215

8.1 Promising Aspects of Virtue Ethics	217
8.2 The Profile of Critical Engagement as a Virtue	222

8.3 Engaging Critically with Virtue Ethics	232
8.4 Conclusion: Communication and Continuity	256

Concluding Reflections 259

Notes	267
Bibliography	293
Index	307

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It is hard to know where to begin tracing the upstream tributaries of this book, for it is hard to know exactly when this particular book began. The ideas here have evolved continuously out of themes that took their first shape during my graduate career. Yet both the questions and my approach to them have changed their contours so completely, in the meantime, that only a few threads of thought remain continuous with the work of my dissertation. Nonetheless, my graduate mentors—Diana Meyers, Joel Kupperman, Ruth Millikan, and Garry Brodsky—were the first to express some confidence in my ability to wander off into the speculative fog and return with a worthwhile suggestion. Along with Terry Winant, who reluctantly ushered me into philosophy twenty years ago, these mentors shaped my career so deeply that I cannot imagine the directions my work might have taken without their attention.

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1 Higher-Order Responsiveness: The Social Dimension of Moral Agency

Our thoughts of our own actions are saturated with the ideas that others entertain about them, ideas which have been expressed not only in explicit instruction but still more effectively in reaction to our acts.

—John Dewey¹

1.1 Social Responsiveness and Moral Complexity

Moral questions arise only among social beings. Without social interaction, or at least its possibility, the notion of morality is empty. Moral theorizing, meanwhile, is a kind of *doubly* social work. To do moral theory is to devote careful reflection to an ongoing conversation about why and how our social interactions matter. Yet modern moral theories have crystallized around the logic or calculus of individual choices, abstracted from social and historical context. In an effort to systematize what it means to *treat* one another well, systematic moral philosophers have thus said little about how to notice and *engage* with one another's actions. Moral practice has been packaged as a closed domain over which theoretical reflection might hover, timelessly. Yet each moral theory, with its distinctive recommended patterns of moral reflection, can always be heard as a responsive intervention in the social world out of which it emerges.

Should we be actively concerned with what others are doing with *their* moral agency? A few have suggested that we should not, arguing that morality springs from an inscrutable source within each individual; thus each of us should mind our respective moral business of acting from proper principles. To most, the opposite answer seems obvious—*of course* moral life demands attention to others—not only to their dignity and to their needs, but also directly to what they do. Throughout this book, I will affirm that a person's participation in moral life is bound up with her social responsiveness to the activity around her.

Yet if we treat this positive answer as simply obvious, we have rushed past some difficult questions: How do we conceive the task of this engagement with others? Why does it matter? What hopes and expectations should we bring to it? How might we set our priorities about when to respond, and to whom? How should we understand the activity to which we respond? By what methods should we proceed? How should we orient ourselves so as to recognize and field others' responses to our own activity? Given multiple responsive engagements, both outgoing and incoming, how can we begin to integrate or navigate among them?

To notice and address what others are doing with their moral agency is to exercise what I will call *critical responsiveness*. The phenomenon itself—responding to what others do—is commonplace. But its point, and thereby our methods and priorities, can be conceived in various ways. Two relatively simple ways of conceiving its point have dominated the philosophical imagination, and perhaps the popular imagination as well. Given either of these two notions—an expressive conception or a regulative conception—it does not take long to see why philosophy has hardly attended to the details.

The expressive conception, on one hand, places reactive attitudes and judgments, such as resentment and blame, at the center of our moral responsiveness. Such responses carry moral value insofar as they demonstrate principled convictions and normative expectations. Hence this conception invites scant interest in forward-looking questions about how our responses make a practical difference within a social encounter. What's at issue, after all, is others' *agency*—and this is taken to be essentially independent of our own. This approach, we might say colloquially, is a “hands-off” one.

The regulative conception, on the other hand, grants moral value to social reactions insofar as they reduce harmful behaviors and promote beneficial ones. Hence it affirms the *practical* importance of responsive interventions, but at the cost of steering or sidelining the agency of those whose behavior we presume to correct. For such a “hands-on” stance toward others' conduct, a vast array of forward-looking details becomes relevant, no doubt. Yet there is not much of distinctive philosophical interest in figuring out how to get complex beings to move this way rather than that.

The challenge to which this book speaks is this: showing how critical responsiveness might function as a practical engagement between agents—that is, how it may reach further than expression yet not as far as control. Critical responsiveness, understood as moral agency that engages with the

moral agency around it, requires encountering another person neither as a loosely free "Thou"² nor as a clumsy vehicle of one's own benign management of the world's affairs. What we will need to enact in our practice, and recognize in our theory, is a social dance—or struggle, or conversation—of mutual transformation. As soon as we describe critical responsiveness in such a socially dynamic way, we can understand its point in a third way. Its point is neither moral self-expression, nor regulation of others' action, but rather the communication of moral concern.

A detailed account of what it means to communicate moral concern will prove both important and difficult. Some of the difficulties are theoretical; it is difficult to sustain a focus on critical engagement without retreating toward the simpler notions of expressive representation on one hand and causal control on the other. To train our attention on a communicative form of critical responsiveness, we must think across and through many of our most obvious philosophical distinctions, such as the active versus the passive, representation versus state of affairs represented. Several chapters of this book will be devoted to cultivating frames of thought within which we can unsettle those dichotomies without losing track of the real contrasts to which they point. While some of this philosophical reflection is abstract and metaethical in its themes, it is *normative* metaethical work. The best reason to speak differently about basic moral concepts, I presume, is to orient us better to moral practice.

A better orientation to the moral practice of responsive engagement is necessary precisely because the terrain of responsiveness is as precarious in practice as it is in theory. In ordinary nonphilosophical interactions, critical engagement can be turbulent and volatile; it is, after all, an interaction of agents who are not reading from the same moral script. Moreover (as I will argue in chapter 2), critical responses can—and always already do—take nuanced and unconscious forms in addition to the deliberate responses we might initiate with full awareness. There is no need to supplement our moral lives by stirring in a fresh practice of observing and responding to others. The moral work recommended in this book is to draw our existing cacophony of responsive habits into a more reflective critical practice—cultivating what we can call a virtue of critical engagement.

Precisely because of the complexity of social responsiveness, this is a virtue that remains always unfinished and in need of reflection; it is not an individual good habit that might be stamped into young and impressionable moral characters. Nor, of course, it is a virtue we can rekindle from the embers of some tradition more coherent and self-contained than our

own. In addition to perceptiveness, emotional intelligence, self-awareness, and social competence, good critics must develop considerable resistance to the complacent ideal of imitation—and indeed to the goal of achieving anything like an unchangingly ideal individual character. More than any other, this virtue will require responding to social cues in potentially unfamiliar and unauthorized ways.

Counterbalancing the challenges, however, is the chance to understand and inhabit our moral agency differently. “Moral agency” will come to mean more than being agents in the service of morality; it will mean acting so as to *fashion* morality,³ gradually cultivating the skills of moral responsiveness and reshaping the terms with which to conceive moral agency.

First-Order Responsiveness

Moral responsiveness occurs in many forms and on multiple levels. Most moral theory has focused on what we may call first-order moral responses. “Treating one another well”—a phrase I used earlier—itself embraces a constellation of first-order responses: we must be responsive to distress and demand, status and expectation, interests and satisfactions. In acts of first-order responsiveness,⁴ we recognize others as focal points of value. In particular, at minimum, our encounters with what Regan calls “subjects of a life” must stand out and command our attention.⁵ And what matters about such beings must keep its vividness somehow, persisting as a consideration in our action even across gaps of time and space. Enduring responsiveness to the needs and vulnerabilities of subjects in this sense is the necessary ground level of moral agency.

First-order responsiveness might also plausibly be found in forms other than treating others well. Christine Swanton offers a relatively inclusive discussion of responsiveness:

Modes of moral responsiveness . . . include not only promoting or bringing about benefit or value, but also honouring value (roughly, not dirtying one’s hands with respect to a value, e.g. by not being unjust in promoting justice), honouring things such as (appropriate) rules, producing, appreciating, loving, respecting, creating, being receptive or open to, using or handling appropriate things in appropriate ways.⁶

While the modes described earlier are plural and wide ranging, Swanton’s list does not take us beyond first-order responses, that is, responses that might well proceed without attention to others’ activity as such. Its contrast between “promoting” and “honoring” value is a variation on the opposition between hands-on causal efforts and hands-off expression. It leaves little room for a kind of responsiveness that both pays attention to

("honors") another's distinctive way of acting and yet actively complicates it through contact, moving neither in respectful unison nor in pulley-tandem with the other.

All varieties of responsiveness occur, or fail to occur, within a social milieu of potentially responsive but *differently* oriented others. Hence some of our moral reflection must revolve around how we will handle signs—both more and less clear—of first-order responsiveness gone awry: mistreatment or neglect, corruption or vice, deception or coercion, and so on. Responding to these means more than responding to the interests and needs of everyone involved. To recognize the distinctiveness of critical responses, we must not confuse a response to activity as such with a response to the *impact* of what has been (or might yet be) done.

A criminal assault, for example, inflicts harm or distress and signals new dangers. Many important moral responses are simply *occasioned* by these facts. At this first level, responsiveness means alleviating victims' suffering and injuries, attending to their stories, following legitimate rules and policies about how to report the incident, alerting other individuals in harm's way, and vigilantly guarding against the threat of further offenses. The sphere of basic responsiveness may even extend to coping directly with coercive or violent behavior—predicting it, avoiding it, derailing it, eliminating it, or deterring it. Yet such responses, however vital and admirable, do not address an offender's agency as such. Responses in the form of assistance, sympathy, and causal intervention, after all, might be occasioned by a pattern of bad weather. Even the discourse of deterrence, which presupposes something like appetites and aversions in would-be offenders, attends to those premises only long enough and deep enough to ward off trouble. Like lightning rods installed with an eye to what lightning "likes to do," deterrence rhetoric requires only a strategic and shallow model of the force it seeks to thwart.

Sometimes such first-order responsiveness, and no more, is what we are in a position to offer, even when the "weather" in question is human action. In urgent conflict, for example, our finite responsiveness may be exhausted by the effort to ameliorate and deflect harms. To the agents of cruelty or disregard in such cases, we may merely *react*. Similarly, when we oppose political forces or corporate powers (perhaps in response to others' suffering), we may treat these as virtually impervious to responsive engagement, as mere engines of domination or destruction. Again, such a stance may be wise on occasion. Yet if we never were able to address our response to the distinct profile of moral agency that provokes us, moral interaction would amount to little more than a circling of the wagons.

around a shrinking circle of reliable cooperators. It is critical responsiveness that adds social texture to moral practice.

Higher-Order Moral Responsiveness

The icons of second-order moral responsiveness are praise and blame. Especially in blaming, our interest in others' agency takes a practical direction. For while praise is happy enough with the state of things it honors, blame would clearly have things be otherwise. Yet blame, like praise, is bound up with claims, and the content of those claims has attracted much more philosophical interest than has the practical activity in which blamers are engaged. My concern here, and throughout this book, is with what we *do* in the course of blame and related responses, and with the place of such doings in our own socially located moral lives. And insofar as we exercise not just judgment but also agency when we blame, it will turn out that we do that very kind of thing in a variety of ways that are less obvious, less articulate, and perhaps more ambivalent than blame. Even the most inward moral response involves some *doing*—some shaping of attention, some pigmentation of thought—that is easily obscured when we focus on the content of mental representations.

What we are doing, in higher-order responsiveness, is turning our agency toward what others are doing.⁷ Or more specifically, it is turning our agency toward agency—for critical responsiveness may be self-directed as well. In engaging with agency, we aim in a sense to *reshape* it—but here we must be careful. For “reshaping” may connote the imposition of a desired shape upon what is object-like and passive. Yet the possibility of directing agency toward agency must frustrate the recalcitrant opposition between agent and thing-acted-upon. Critical responsiveness requires expecting agency to take plural and mutually adjusting forms, never reducible to an encounter between the morally corrective agent and the morally defective patient. It requires finding moral significance in how we participate in our encounters with moral difference. These shifting differences are themselves a landscape of moral agency, not simply a transcript of disagreements about what morality requires “down on the ground” of ordinary conduct.

Multi-Level Theories in Moral Philosophy

Distinctions among orders or levels of morality have some precedent in moral theory. Jonathan Bennett and R. M. Hare have both given a prominent role to such a distinction. In their accounts, it is moral judgment that is taken to have levels or orders; here I shall emphasize aspects or dimen-

sions of agency instead. Nevertheless, my account overlaps with theirs in one respect—namely, that words like *critical* and *blameworthy* become prominent only at the second level.

Jonathan Bennett, for example, places judgments that are fit to deliberate by—that an act would be wrong, for example—at morality’s first level. Judgments of “blameworthiness” then mark the second level, the level typically invoked in attempts to hold people accountable.⁸ R. M. Hare’s account differs in its content, but takes a similar structure. Various intuitive or “*prima facie*” principles occupy the first level. As intuitions, these principles secure a grip on conscience and serve to guide ordinary deliberation. Hare’s second level is the “*critical*” one, wherein we are prompted by conflict to fine-tune our first-order principles in ways that better orient us to complexity.⁹ Both these multi-tiered accounts, I have noted, apply to static judgments rather than to the complexities of criticism as a social practice. These latter complexities deserve urgent attention, however, for three reasons I shall outline as follows.

First, the practical aspects of blame or criticism as such are obscured by judgment-oriented accounts. On Bennett’s variant, to begin with, any actual deliberation about how and whether to blame (or otherwise respond, we should add) might seem naturally guided by second-order judgments, just as deliberation about what to do is guided by first-order findings. Second-order judgments, for Bennett, reach beyond the moral status of action and capture the agent’s status with respect to it. It is important to keep the distinction in mind, on his view, so as to keep us from impugning a perfectly adequate moral theory just on the grounds that what it counts as wrong (say, causing unanticipated grave harm) does not always merit blame.

Certainly, much philosophical ink has been spilled (and now pixels are being carefully rearranged) in delimiting the criteria for blameworthiness. Yet even if we grant that such a status can be determined, blaming in practice must be informed by factors that diverge for different agents—all the relationships, motives, histories, skills, and risks that might bear on a particular encounter. By the time all these are taken into account, it seems that settling the question of blameworthiness will have been about as helpful as settling whether a person is “employment worthy” or “friend worthy”; whether to hire or whether to befriend is given only the most minimal guidance thereby.¹⁰ Even weighing someone’s “trustworthiness,” though the word seems sensible, misrepresents a relation as a property. For trust functions only as a certain relational dance,¹¹ and no person is uniformly related to all others. So it is, I will argue, with blame as well as other

moral responses. How to engage with whom over what—that is an urgent question internal to moral practice. Yet in answering that question, we need not decompose it (as Bennett’s model implicitly recommends) into one set of questions about the status of this or that agent and a further set of questions about whether and how, in practice, to represent such findings of moral status.

R. M. Hare’s distinction, meanwhile, contrasts the second level of “critical” judgments against “intuitive” first-level judgments. At the intuitive level, he notes, we are bound to experience conflicts among duties, and the intuitions themselves furnish no recipes for resolution. Nor, however, can we rest content with thinking of moral recommendations as doomed to contradiction. A second level of moral thinking, according to Hare, allows us to cope with conflicting intuitions by forging more nuanced and detailed principles. Such critical judgments may be too complex to be easily taught or internalized by habit. Still, they must manifest a formal universality and impartial consideration of interests. While the critical level cannot directly furnish substantive and manageable guidance for conduct, it is constituted by a reflective demand to make sense of our moral commitments in the face of complexity.

In this way, Hare invites moral theory to accommodate both the chaotic diversity of familiar intuitions, on one hand, and a reflective demand for coherent general formulations, on the other. Yet in portraying the “critical” level of morality as a feature of each individual’s thought, such an account again obscures the vital role, for critical ethics, of social encounters between moral agents. Hare’s very title—*Moral Thinking*—draws a narrow circle around an individual; neither dialogue nor confrontation falls within his intended scope. But such a focus on individual thought is precisely the habit I wish to question. In defining “critical morality” by reference to internal cognitive capacities, Hare’s celebrated work exemplifies moral philosophy’s indifference to the social face of critical practice. Should we not find it odd when a chapter on “Moral Conflict,” for example, focuses exclusively on mental clashes within one thinker’s set of intuitions? Clearly for Hare, as much as for Bennett, the social activities of responsive engagement fall out of view when morality’s “second level” or “second order” is just another tier of judgment.

The second reason to account for levels of practice rather than simply levels of judgment is that neither Bennett nor Hare give a satisfactory account of moral orders beyond the second. For Hare the third order leaves substantive ethics behind and becomes a practically disengaged metaethics. For Bennett a third order would logically entail an account of how to

judge the actions (and omissions) that answer to our encounters with blameworthiness. When I judge that a certain deed *X* was wrong, and the agent indeed blameworthy for it, I surely face the further question about whether my friend acted wrongly by failing to blame the blameworthy, and under what conditions people whose blame falls short are worthy of blame for that reason. I may then wonder whether I'd act wrongly in abstaining from such blame, and so on. To his credit, Bennett does not explicitly invite moral theorists to spell out the necessary and sufficient conditions of such higher-order judgments of status.

In higher-order *practical* engagement, however, multiple agents with nested patterns of responsiveness can easily instantiate several orders of complexity, since we *do* respond critically to one another's critical responses. For example, a person may anxiously confront her spouse over the apparent intrusiveness with which he advised the neighbors against the kind of strict discipline they had applied to their children's defiance. Three non-mysterious levels of critical engagement are easily made out here; there are four if we think—as chapter 2 will argue—that children's defiance might itself count as a gesture of critical response. The wisdom of such a spousal confrontation, in practice, is not so plausibly illuminated by a third- (or fourth-) order judgment about, say, the blameworthiness that attaches to a person *P* who knowingly fails to blame *Q* for the blameworthy wrong of blaming *R* who is, despite her wrong action, not blameworthy. What a reflective critic most urgently needs, in such cases, is not a judgment about a rarefied kind of moral status, but an appreciation of the social fabric of action within which she acts—an appreciation that requires taking stock of relationships, background expectations, and the ways in which her critical response would come across. These are complexities of practice that have no neat analog in an account that foregrounds moral judgment.

A third reason to focus on practice rather than judgment here is that dimensions of critical practice, unlike levels of moral judgment, resist Bennett's common-sense affirmation that "first-order morality really does come first." By this Bennett means that each second-order judgment implies a first-order judgment in its background. In a sense, one of my earlier claims may seem analogous: a capacity for first-order responsiveness seems to be a precondition for exhibiting higher-order responsiveness. Yet one certainly can respond to what someone else has done without having resolved first-person questions about what to do in similar situations. It is a good thing if a child can respond indignantly to the corporal punishment of her friend despite not yet having any clue about how she would handle occasions for discipline herself, for example. More important, we can

respond critically to another's agency without our stance being as clear as either "support" or "opposition." Practical moral engagement, unlike the higher-order judgments Hare and Bennett have in mind, plays a vital role in moral activity even—or especially—when it remains fraught with indeterminacy and ambivalence. In this connection, chapter 5 will consider how close friends, for example, might gradually reshape each other's moral responsiveness even in the absence of moral judgment. Moral responses may take far more nuanced forms than the expression of a moral judgment.

Morally complex beings respond to one another *as* responders, turning social attention to the patterns of response already playing out around us and within us. It may be right to say that agency necessarily points beyond itself in every case; yet that does not imply that agency must always be directed toward something other than agency. For our agency *here* may be animated by a concern about the workings of agency *over there*. And in taking up others' activity as the call for our own, we reflexively allow that our own agency will become the focal point of others' responsive concern. To engage others is also to be engaged by them. If we are socially responsive beings, then all the activity we call our own turns out to bear the trace of others' engagement with us. And so long as our activity is open to the responsiveness of others, the moral significance of what we do is only as determinate as an unfinished sentence.

The Importance of Higher-Order Responsiveness

In what follows, I will treat higher-order responsiveness as a vital dimension of morality. This is not because there is anything illogical about defining morality such that deliberately cooperative or altruistic action suffices. Defining morality in this way may be strategically important for those who wish to show, rightly, that many nonhuman animals are not only subjects of a life, but also exhibit responsiveness to their fellow creatures. Such responsiveness often extends past the plausible reach of instinct: it may be individually distinctive, creative and compassionate.¹² Indeed some members of other species may prove "more moral" than many human beings if "moral" designates conduct that is responsive to certain first-order variables.

In this book, however, the adjective "moral" is not used in that most commendatory way; it tracks evaluatively salient aspects of our activity, as in "moral dilemma" or "moral theory"—not "the moral thing to do." To say human beings tend to exhibit morality in a particularly developed way, then, is not to say that we are better. Nor is it to suggest that human beings

have a monopoly on complex responses; other primates, in particular, pay careful attention to their social milieu, acknowledging cause for gratitude and protesting the violation of norms.¹³ It is only to say that our lives typically involve us in moral complexity in an especially thoroughgoing way.

It is of course a matter of mere stipulation whether first-order responsiveness should define morality. In arguing that responsive complexity matters, I am making a suggestion similar to a claim frequently defended by linguists: Paradigmatic human languages are distinctive in their generative complexity—the powerful syntax by which a finite vocabulary may combine into infinite possible meanings. Our social responsiveness makes for a similar complexity; actions, like words, can refer our attention back and forth, gaining their significance from juxtaposition. Such moral complexity need not be neatly and exclusively human; nor of course are human beings manifestly responsive at every turn. Yet higher-order responsiveness is the emergent complexity that we cannot afford to ignore once we see it. Nothing bars us from framing our practical life as a chronicle of individual actions, each with a stand-alone moral status; but it is as insightful as conceiving dialogue as a chronicle of individually chosen words.

1.2 Moral Solipsism in Two Modern Flavors

To deny that critical engagement is vital to one's morality—to frame morality as a matter of how we “behave” or *treat* one another—is to settle for a stance I will describe as moral solipsism. Given the basic ways in which our theories have conceived morality, however, this kind of stance turns out to be surprisingly difficult to avoid.

Only a handful of philosophers defend a view they call “moral egoism,” namely, that each person should attend to her welfare and interests, and should find value *only* in those. I am among the many who find this doctrine incoherent. Moral reflection begins by leaving solipsism behind; but so-called moral egoism is only solipsism applied to practical deliberation. In taking morality seriously, we open our actions to considerations beyond what we already identify with—beyond the set of experiences and wants that exhaust the solipsist’s world. Yet my worry is that moral philosophy harbors a cousin of this repugnant doctrine. The stance of moral solipsism happily countenances a world of moral *patients*¹⁴ with various interests and claims that bear on my action, yet it cannot make room for any significant way in which my actions answer or speak to theirs. Instead of the crudely indulgent view—“As far as I’m concerned, in all the world there’s only

me!”—this subtle one isolates each conscience: “There is no other *moral agent* here as far as I am concerned.”¹⁵

“Solipsism” is a colorful name for a doctrine whose true adherents, if there are any, tend not to show their faces. So the charge of moral solipsism may seem like a cheap bit of rhetoric, a red flag pinned to a straw man.¹⁶ Probably no philosopher imagines that the number of moral agents is exactly one, and that he or she is that one. Yet modern models of agency draw a bubble around each moral subject; when I act, the script is a monologue. Other persons may stand in the wings of the stage: they will be sufferers, beneficiaries, or accessories of my deed, and I distinguish their fates from my own. I may invoke them, represent them, or act on their behalf; to anticipate the ultimate effects of my action I must predict how others will act in the wake of my choice. But all such considerations liken other agents to the props and occasions for what I do—not as ongoing participants whose action may be unsettled, questioned, amplified, or challenged in this encounter between us.

The task of this section is to show how moral solipsism lurks in the margins of both major schools of modern ethics, and to discern the roots of this tendency in some widely shared habits of thought—one about the domain of ethics, and another about how to conceive action itself. I turn first to tracing the morally solipsistic undercurrent in celebrated moral theories. A pivotal question for later chapters in this book will be whether we can escape this undercurrent by *adding* to existing systematic moral theories, or whether these theories unwittingly invite moral solipsism as soon as they frame their subject matter—conduct—as a fundamentally different kind of thing from the business of commenting upon it.

Standing for Any and Every One: Stoic Moral Solipsism

Several ancient thinkers did espouse a doctrine quite close to moral egoism: there is no difference between the path of right action and the path that leads to happiness. The Stoic tradition, in particular, aligned all legitimate duties with the quest for *ataraxia*, or subjective freedom from distress. This in turn meant letting go of whatever one could not control. To live rightly was to live well, sustained contentment being a decent sign of moral mastery.

Moral criticism is generally suspect within Stoic lines of thought. Its indictment seems to follow from Epictetus’s “Stoic fork”:¹⁷ “Of things some are in our power and others not.”¹⁸ Since other people’s actions are not our own, they fall into the latter category. Hence we must regard them as

matters of no real concern. At each juncture we assess our circumstances of action and proceed to choose “in accord with nature.” Thus Epictetus warns explicitly against the distraction of “accusing” others: “If you think that only which is your own to be your own, and if you think that what is another’s, as it really is, belongs to another, no man will ever compel you, no man will hinder you, you will never blame any man, you will accuse no man, you will do nothing involuntarily (against your will), no man will harm you, you will have no enemy, for you will not suffer any harm.”¹⁹

Just as I am responsible to myself for all my action, every other person counts as responsible only for their own actions. Even in a shared world of experience, we are each responsible only for the choices we bring to bear upon it. Accusation, on the Stoic view, amounts to minding “someone else’s business.” And by hypothesis, whatever counts as someone else’s business cannot count as one’s own, for it is not under the control of one’s own faculty of choice.

We will later ask whether “accusation” serves well as a metonym for criticism as such. Among the classic Stoics themselves, we know there was lively critical exchange in the context of voluntary dialogue. Such chosen encounters and teachings aside, though, there is nothing like an acknowledged place for critical responses in the practical flow of Stoic life; on the contrary, such responses can figure only as tangential detours from their overriding quest for equanimity.

Lest this Stoic ideal seem entirely obsolete, we should notice its echo in popular books that offer the same advice. Epictetus’s advice is paraphrased, if not plagiarized, in one vein of popular spiritual psychology. Byron Katie, for example, urges readers to apply the Stoic fork with discipline, and to recognize it as the double-key to uprightness and tranquility: “Much of our stress comes from mentally living out of our own business. . . . To think that I know what’s best for anyone else is to be out of my business. Even in the name of love, it is pure arrogance, and the result is tension, anxiety and fear. Do I know what’s right for me? That is my only business.”²⁰ Such a retreat from critical engagement, I fear, is bound to have some appeal wherever critical attention is all lumped together without any account of what distinguishes critical practice at its best.

Kant’s Stoic Legacy

Moral philosophers no longer countenance the Stoic assumption that normative questions about practical life boil down to the quest for subjective well-being. Kant, in particular, suggests that we should be alarmed at

any suggestion that the moral life and the happy life are corollaries. Yet other strands of Stoic thought weave their way through Kant's philosophy, particularly in his focus on the inner nature of moral choice. Moral law, on Kant's account, is the sublime internal counterpart to the starry heavens above.²¹ Like the Stoics, Kant draws a clear line: on one side is the province of our self-disciplined will, on the other all the intractable things for which we are not to answer. This line is observed with rigor: our practical will must bind itself by perfect duties (never to lie, never to opt out of life) even when a more strategic choice seems sure to bring a better outcome to everyone.

Kant's rigorism has prompted indictments of moral selfishness. He seems to endorse a troublesome meta-maxim: "Let me value clean hands and duty above all else—consequences be damned."²² Yet this troubling stance, by itself, need not involve any kind of solipsism. After all, Kant's disregard for consequences applies to the self as much as to others.²³ For both self and others, it would seem, what matters morally is how agency is exercised. But the particular conception of agency at issue—in both Kant and the Stoics before him—does effectively insulate each person's agency from others'. For counting as an agent means counting as an ultimate determining *source* of maxims or conditional intentions. To recognize another agent is to recognize a parallel sovereign power, a power whose practical dominion is neatly distinct from one's own.²⁴ Thus the demands of agency cannot be answered, even in part, by shaping or responding to agency in others; their deeds are at most the occasions for our own. And if willing rightly is the only proper concern of morality, our morality cannot be the practical concern of others. This self who simply *is* a will is a self whose moral value can be neither ruined nor saved by others. Doubtless, there is moral failure wherever suffering is intentionally inflicted or others' vital projects are attacked. But the failure lies in the agent's corruption, not in the actual damage done to another. The moral status of each deed unfolds from within.

Kant's rigorism is the focal point of another related set of complaints—complaints to the effect that Kant would have us remain obviously indifferent to the social context of our actions. In particular, his rigorism insists that our reverence for moral rules not be tempered in the face of others' corruption. No doubt this Kantian doctrine has laudable implications. A firm adherence to individual responsibility can galvanize people against conformist cowardice, grounding a reliable moral integrity in the face of social penalties. Nevertheless, a troubling seed of moral solipsism lies here, too. Casting oneself at the center of such an upstanding narrative—sur-

rounded by others about whom we can say only that they are corrupt—means fancying oneself a self-made hero, both impervious and beyond any need for guidance. Among those who believe in “doing the right thing even when everyone else is corrupt” we may find admirably virtuous people, to be sure. But we also find stubborn champions of prejudice who fancy that such a moral “backbone” is exactly what morality requires of them. To say that such individuals have the right firmness about the wrong principles is too easy. The right kind of openness to criticism, as well as a capacity to initiate effective criticism, is essential to morality. To say so is not to deny that there are deeds of more and less integrity. Any trenchant appeal to such integrity, however, is a renunciation of the best reality check available to finite minds—dialogue with those whose voices have the power to unsettle us.

Of course Kant is a famous champion of respect for other persons; the dignity of each moral agent makes a categorical claim upon our regard, trumping any other interest. Further, Kant takes morality to be neatly bound up with the demand to check whether we could will the maxims behind our actions as universal law. Do these not express the very opposite of solipsism? Like many others, I am troubled by the ways in which this view marginalizes the interests and sufferings of cognitively limited human and nonhuman beings. My worry here, however, is not the same as this narrowing of focus.

Even within the circle of rational agents, Kantian respect is a kind of distance. This kind of respect for other beings serves as a quarantine on moral agency: my choice hangs free from others; their choice hangs free from me. The flipside of heralding our core moral faculty as invulnerable to social corruption is that we can have no power to reach into another’s insulating bubble of moral autonomy. Each person engages in moral “legislation,” but the structure of lawfulness is grasped *a priori* and enforcement is only (at best) “in house.” A political model of moral agency might bring concrete social encounters to mind, but the details of Kant’s political model render it socially sterile. Forceful interference is required, Kant admits, to execute civil law; and in that domain strict liability and social enforcement has its place. Yet morally we each remain existentially alone. Since actual maxims of choice are nearly inscrutable, any judgments we pass on particular actions—both our own and others’—are little more than speculation. We’re bowling parallel games in an alley that yields no confirmation of anyone’s good aim. To kibitz on our neighbor’s efforts is thus both presumptuous and idle. Only God—we can’t help but hope—is keeping score.²⁵

Kant clearly would have me recognize moral agents *numerically* distinct from myself, but morality itself must be conceived in exactly one qualitative flavor. Morality is a kind of projected consistency across one's own and others' action; hence from the moral point of view we must conceive all agents as candidates for facing the same situations we do, wielding the same concepts with which to make sense of them. As Kant's religious writings suggest, there is a sense in which every human action illustrates and represents a single shared moral nature. My weakness for sinning is betrayed even in the sins of others, while the purity of even one person must count as some redemption for us all. As much as such moral solidarity has its charms, the requirement to see morality as either present or absent (each will being forced to choose either uprightness or corruptness) does not orient us well to the ways in which *differently* imperfect agents may make a moral difference to one another.

Agency as Engineering: Empiricist Moral Solipsism

What of utilitarianism and other varieties of consequentialism? The charge of moral self-indulgence hardly haunts the literature on this alternate tradition. Utilitarians find nothing more outrageous than Kant's explicit indifference to consequences. A good utilitarian is urgently anxious to understand the extended impact of what she does, both for better and for worse; and she does not suppose that interpersonal criticism is generally presumptuous or idle. Experience suggests that others can be moved, to good effect, through words of exhortation or blame. Hence such speech is integral to the exercise of moral agency except where some better choice is available. We should denounce and blame, exhort and persuade, if good outcomes hang in the balance.

A form of moral solipsism may encroach here as well, though. It is not that utilitarians keep too much distance from others' agency; they risk quite the opposite effect of eclipsing or swallowing it whole. This risk is most dramatic in the case of act-utilitarianism, or any straightforward act-consequentialist theory.²⁶ If my moral agency revolves directly around what I cause to happen, then my moral agency is enlarged whenever I mobilize others effectively: my causal reach is extended through them. Hence it is difficult to make room for one person to treat another person as a *different* moral agent—unless that person stands beyond the reach of one's influence, becoming practically irrelevant anyway. My own moral agency, by act-consequentialist lights, apparently entails micromanaging yours to the extent I am able (without dropping the reins on more important matters, of course). But this would mean—at the moment of action—

arrogating moral agency to myself as much as I can. This, too, is a troubling sign of moral solipsism.

In practice, utilitarians do not deserve to have an epithet like “moral solipsist” hurled their way. For that matter, neither do the actual people who endorse the Kantian standard. Still, neither moral *theory* fully illuminates the interaction of moral agents as such. If someone like John Stuart Mill strikes us as a model of open-minded dialogue about what matters and why, this cannot be in virtue of his utilitarianism; such nonstrategic receptivity is a retreat from utilitarian action, if not an outright departure from it. As a general account of moral agency, utilitarianism seems to strain against our finitude. Jeremy Bentham’s model of a “panopticon” prison architecture²⁷—a ring-shaped array of cells that a single guard might survey from one point of watch—betrays a wish to transcend this finitude. If only we could construct an optimal vantage point and leverage point—directing practical life from the cockpit of a panopticon writ large—that would perfect the reach of our moral agency. The self-consciously utilitarian hero is someone who wields effective yet benign control, someone who hails from the ranks of managers and engineers, enfranchised experts and respected legislators. Indeed, as Robert E. Goodin argues, utilitarianism is at its best when it is applied to the rather specific moral predicament of policymakers in a modern state.²⁸ It makes less sense as a reflective approach to the problems of ordinary interaction.

Within these two systematic schools of moral theory, then, it is unclear how we are to engage with one another as beings whose agency is not only both finite and imperfect, but also *differently* finite and imperfect. An adequate moral philosophy must demand responsiveness to others—not just to the sufferings or satisfactions that may be at stake for them, but to how their moral agency unfolds in dialogue with our own, as well. Insofar as utilitarians seek social influence in the name of better outcomes, it matters tremendously what others may do; the domino effects of an action ripple quickly through a social field. Yet when my social interventions are undertaken in a directly consequentialist spirit, I cannot engage another’s agency at all—for his capacity to act is effectively recruited as a conduit or extension of my own.

Again, it is fair to grant that the flesh-and-blood proponents of each moral theory act (and sometimes write) with a sophistication that their systematic theory does not license. They do moral theory *because* they are already responsive agents; we should expect that their responsiveness in practice—like anyone’s—outruns their articulate grasp of it.

1.3 Non-Ideal Theory and Social Complexity

In finding some variety of moral solipsism in each of both major modern moral theories, I might seem to be charging them with failure to do moral theory well. And yet the problem is not simply in the way they answer moral questions, but in the very question they seek to answer. For a certain way of summarizing the task of moral theory—as a question to articulate *ideals* of action—ineliminately marginalizes the role of critical responsiveness in moral practice, thereby courting moral solipsism.

Accounts of ideal action, in order to clarify their vision, have helped themselves to the following projection. Supposing there is such a thing as ideal action, and supposing more pervasive realization of an ideal is always better than less, then the moral ideal for a social being is most manifest in a whole ideal society. Ideal action must take its clearest form within a structurally supportive social order. An ideal society, meanwhile, would seem to be one in which each action is free from the distorting influence of others' ignorance, indifference, or corruption. Surely, we must not settle for a moral theory that bakes corrupt or compromised conditions into our conception of what is best. So we are tempted to conclude that a morally ideal action is one whose value would be confirmed by being writ large in the social world, coordinated into a seamlessly ideal public order. From there, it is a short step to the Kantian ideal: act as you could will that action be willed by all; act so that you might live in concert with a million moral clones, as it were.

How well does such an ideal model of action illuminate what we ought to do in *non-ideal* conditions? While the term “non-ideal theory” is of recent vintage, tracing to Rawls's *Theory of Justice*,²⁹ the method of articulating ideals first is not new. Most of the controversy within non-ideal theory is over just how much our moral obligations should be adjusted in light of actual non-ideal predicaments. Few hold Kant's view that we must always act on a standard that is fit for a “kingdom of ends,” an ideal society of mutually respecting and perfectly principled agents. Yet many hold that securing an account of ideal action is the necessary first step for moral reflection within an imperfect social world, precisely because we need to survey the extenuating circumstances under which people make compromised choices.

Yet non-ideal theories can be pursued in two different ways. The standard way involves *derivative* non-ideal theorizing. It begins by establishing the nature of our first-order responsibilities in an ideally responsive moral environment. As a second step it asks how—if at all—those responsibilities

should be shifted or reconfigured given others' moral failures. An alternative way of developing non-ideal moral theory asks how we ought to address or engage with the imperfection of agency as such, including our actual imperfection at recognizing imperfection. The latter, which I will call *critical* non-ideal theory, marks a significant departure from moral theory in its two systematic modern forms.

Derivative Non-Ideal Theory

Liam Murphy has approached non-ideal moral theory in the first way, asking it to specify "what a given person is required to do in circumstances where at least some others are not doing what they are required to do."³⁰ On the assumption that "what others are required to do" is clear enough, the question is how *demanding* morality should be for someone surrounded by such non-ideal action. Each person's moral obligations with respect to alleviating famine, for example, might be relatively modest under conditions of full compliance with humanitarian moral duties. If everyone who could afford it gave one percent of their available resources to famine relief, presumably very few would feel a great strain while many would escape suffering. When others do not do their fair share, however, we face a different predicament. To what degree does morality demand that we compensate for the flawed or missing responsiveness of others?

This is a theoretical question worth addressing. Yet when ideal theory is framed this way, as Murphy frames it, it is still unlikely to illuminate the importance of criticism. Imagine for example how Norman, who opposes abortion, might pursue the kind of non-ideal reflection illustrated by Murphy: "What am *I* required to do, with respect to treatment of fetuses, when at least some others are *not* doing what morality requires?" Like Murphy, he begins with a determination of the morally correct response as an ideal. Yet his question about the treatment of fetuses must take a radically different turn from Murphy's question about famine response: relief funds are fungible, wombs are not. If Norman's moral ideal requires that fetuses be carried and birthed, and yet he cannot simply step up to meet that requirement directly, then his responsiveness in a non-ideal world must somehow address what abortion seekers themselves are doing.

As Annette Baier explains, however, an ideal theory is in a poor position to illuminate our dealings with noncompliance itself; by hypothesis, an ideal world involves no such encounters.³¹ Nor could such an ideal, if it were somehow formulated, resolve much about how best to respond to others' failure to respond well to noncompliance, and so on. Matters are

different with a legal system, which can be structured to support a set of clear tiers for enforcement and appeal. But such a system translates poorly into the moral domain; our roles are deeply entangled, while the grounds for charges of noncompliance are essentially contested.

Unfortunately, even among moral philosophers who consider non-ideal circumstances in practice, most continue to work with this derivative model, invoking ideal theory as a reference point relative to which the usual moral burdens might be rearranged. As soon as moral agency is framed in terms of ideal theory, however, the paradigmatic moral task is understood as one that might be performed *within* a community of morally ideal agents. The central question for non-ideal theory, then, is simply how to distribute or recalibrate these moral expectations in light of others' failure. What falls out of view is any *kind* of moral task that has no place in an ideal world—efforts that must be made only because we live among imperfect agents. Critical engagement is precisely such a task.

Hence when Christine Korsgaard builds a non-ideal theory upon Kantian foundations, her question is whether and how non-ideal circumstances might suspend or weaken some aspect of our ideal moral duties. What is open to adjustment, here, is not the distribution of an obligation to help (as in non-ideal utilitarian theory) but the distribution of our respect. In the face of evil, she argues, we cannot shrink away from Kant's formal demand for universalizable maxims of action. Yet we need not meet a nefarious liar or bully with the substantial respect due to full members of a Kingdom of Ends—lest our good will thereby become a tool of evil.³² Since those who deceive or coerce implicitly presume that their targets are naïve or weak, there is no contradiction, Korsgaard argues, in our willing that such strategies be deflected wherever possible by cleverness or force. Her recommendation for non-ideal moral predicaments, however, is still a form of coping with bad action by derailing it or thwarting its effects. Protecting others and ourselves from the execution of evil intentions, just like protecting ourselves from natural hazards, requires nothing like engagement with another's agency as such.

Critical Non-Ideal Theory

In contrast to the derivative forms of “non-ideal theory” that must be tethered to moral ideals in the way Murphy and Korsgaard suggest, Marxist and feminist strands of non-ideal theory have tended to take a direct interest in critical processes. The very invocation of an ideal starting point carries ideological baggage and politically obfuscating implications, according to Charles Mills.³³ In *critically* non-ideal work, we can recognize that

reality is *not* ideal even in the absence of any positive conception of the ideal. Indeed we should suspect, according to Baier, Tessman, and other feminist moral philosophers,³⁴ that our non-ideal social reality will have conditioned our hopes, expectations, and concepts in accord with it, thereby contaminating our notion of what would be morally ideal. Hence, the best we can imagine is a process by which we can take steps away from what is most clearly *not* ideal: oppression, suffering, disrespect, exploitation, and so on. With each step, we may gain a bit more trust in our ideals, trust that they are not oases projected by the problems themselves. Yet we need not presume that we will arrive at some enlightened threshold beyond which we can trust our notion of the ideal more than we can trust our sensitivity to actual signs of moral trouble.

The kinds of questions that motivate non-ideal theory in its derivative forms remain pressing questions within a critically non-ideal account, yet these questions are reframed. Rather than asking how much I ought to either lower my standards or raise them to compensate for others' non-conformity, we must ask what distinct *kinds* of responsiveness are called for by the moral crises and provocations we face. The scope of our questions will expand from a one-dimensional "How much?" to a spacious "How?" Furthermore, as I will argue at length in chapter 7, reflective refinement of our moral responsiveness must draw on a great deal of situated self-understanding—in particular, on understanding of one's embodied and socially placed sensitivities, of one's actual and likely relations with others, and of one's capacity to call on others' attention and understanding. No single profile of critical response can be distilled into a stable moral ideal.

If we are to do non-ideal moral theory well, we must take a fallibilist and tentative stance toward both outcomes and intentions as the canonical platforms for moral value. We will need to find new ways to speak of handling things well, addressing non-ideal realities without having any fixed measure of their deviance. Nor can we expect that this process of moral responsiveness is a single neat ideal that emerges all at once through reflection. A process, however, unlike an intention or a result, may evolve through its cumulative and reflexive application. An account of critical responsiveness embeds a call for critical responsiveness in turn; hence we can hope to embrace it as a gradually self-sharpening practice.

1.4 Toward Virtue Ethics and Beyond

We cannot address ourselves against all human errors at once—nor would it be wise to try. Yet a world without moral criticism would be

unrecognizable and morally flat. An ideal world of constant benevolent, virtuous, and principled interactions—not even tweaked at its margins by timely critical communications—would arguably fail to be *morally ideal* at all. For a vital moral skill would go unrepresented there. At any rate, we experience the actual world as morally imperfect, and we should grant that more even grievous failures are continually curbed by responsive efforts. To put the point in Kantian terms: on the one hand, I cannot will that the world be devoid of a readiness to engage in moral criticism; hence such readiness is some kind of duty. Nor, on the other hand, can anyone rise to every single opportunity to criticize (much as this description may serve as the caricature of a nag).

The demands of moral criticism highlight our finitude in at least three ways. The epistemic position of being aware of a moral problem depends upon our opportunities to recognize it in some experiential way, and our experience is limited. Moreover, critical interventions require devoting time and energy to securing others' attention and understanding. We are obviously not endowed with unlimited time and energy, so we can attempt critical engagement with respect to only a portion of the problems we encounter. Last, insofar as others' agency brings unknown contingencies into the process of critical engagement, no level of diligence or skill can ensure that our efforts will go well—however “going well” is conceived.

To cover demands that cannot be met in a thoroughgoing and consummate way, but that nevertheless call for conscientious efforts, Kant appropriated and rearticulated the idea of an imperfect duty. To Kant's famous examples of imperfect duties—being charitable and cultivating one's talents—we can add a duty to engage in moral criticism. Despite the fact that Kant himself seemed to take a more Stoic line on moral criticism, two Kantian arguments stand in favor of such a duty.

First, criticism of others is a duty we owe to the moral community as a whole. While we could conceive of a world in which each person has been allowed to remain complacently ignorant of her moral blunders, we cannot will that the world be such. For this state of affairs would hamper nearly all of the projects to which we might turn our will. While it may be inconvenient to expend effort on moral criticism in any particular case—as compared to simply steering clear of troublesome people once we recognize them—there is hypocrisy in such narrow prudence.³⁵ For I would still wish to benefit from the fruits of critical efforts among others even while I contribute nothing to this social good myself.

Second, we should recognize critical engagement as an imperfect duty toward the specific people we criticize. Even Kant, who took it that the

moral law is engraved a priori in our hearts, recognizes the difficulty of discerning our own compliance with it. Research on implicit attitudes suggests that people may be unaware not only of the motives behind particular actions, but of some of their own deep evaluative attitudes as well.³⁶ Moral criticism serves not so much to convey moral information as to help refine moral perception (what Kant would call judgment in the broad sense of discernment) by holding social mirrors up to one another, calling special attention to the troublesome aspects of existing patterns of action. Each of us recognizes how our moral development has benefited from moral criticism; it follows that respecting the moral dimension of someone's agency entails expecting that individual to remain potentially receptive to moral criticism.

Yet the rhetoric of "duty"—even imperfect duty—fixes attention on a formal description of *what* must be done, along with a call for good judgment concerning *when* a given duty applies. It is more thorough to emphasize, as virtue ethicists do, not only the *what* and the *when* of practical wisdom, but also its *skillful manner*. Matters of habit, sensitivity, practice, and perceptual orientation—all important to critical responsiveness—figure at the core of virtue ethics, rather than as an afterthought about implementation. Hence even while virtue may arguably represent the same domain as Kantian imperfect duties, the concept of virtue serves somewhat better to turn our attention to the intricacies of critical engagement.

Philosophical Support for Recognizing Critical Engagement

The suggestion that moral philosophy takes three shapes—consequentialist, deontological, and virtue ethical—has been fairly common since the reemergence of virtue ethics in the latter half of the twentieth century. I too will be suggesting a third moral touchstone is needed, beyond effecting the good and expressing the right, if we are to understand critical engagement. Ultimately, critical engagement may even be understood as a kind of virtue, and the last chapter carefully affirms why and how this is so.

Nevertheless, I do not lean on virtue ethics for the bulk of discussion ahead. If our task is to understand critical responsiveness, then the further dimension of moral thought we require is not the same as virtue ethics—at least not virtue ethics in its familiar available forms. The difficulty is not simply that virtue ethics has tended to emphasize social hierarchy, "manly" and individual character, cultural conservatism, and education as emulation. Though all this is true, virtue ethics has recently taken new socially critical forms, animated by various progressive social movements.³⁷ These newer virtue ethics no longer idealize a single template of life (human,

adult, male, self-possessed, and culturally privileged) as the norm and exemplar for all. Indeed, some of this work questions whether virtue must be located within individuals as such, arguing that relations of care are themselves the subject of moral development.³⁸

Meanwhile, a direct interest in responsiveness, situated attention, and “meeting the other morally”³⁹ is salient in some philosophical articulations of care ethics. Although it has not tended to emphasize our responsibility to respond *critically* to one another, care ethics clears some room for critical practice by focusing on responsive relationships, dynamic interactions, and appreciation of embodied difference. These themes will shape discussion in chapter 7. Although it would be misleading to subsume all criticism under “care,” it is clear that both criticism and care constitute patterns of responsiveness.

The central reason to set virtue ethics—as well as care ethics—to one side, at least for now, is that it does not bring with it a larger philosophical framework to set in contrast alongside the empiricist and rationalist systems of thought; and it is these systems that drive moral discussion toward ultimate allegiance with either the right or the good. While philosophers who develop virtue ethics and care ethics may speak eloquently about fluency, responsiveness, and relationality, such an ethics currently lacks traction when it is cross-examined in light of this canonical dichotomy. Without a diagnosis and treatment for the appeal of that dichotomy, virtue (or care) is easily pulled into one or the other familiar corner. Furthermore, the tension between invocations of the right and of the good has its roots in philosophical and ordinary dichotomies that extend far beyond ethics. Hence we are unlikely to get far in our reflections on criticism as a virtue until we wrestle with those dichotomies: representation vs. the world represented, subject vs. object, private vs. public, internal vs. external, act vs. consequence, intentional vs. natural, and so on.

There is nothing very new in casting doubt on these dichotomies; they have been openly doubted in many quarters within and beyond philosophy. What I aim to do this book is to make vivid how deeply and tenaciously they affect—and often deflect—our reflections on moral criticism. To build any positive account of critical engagement, we will need concepts and rhetorical tools that help us show how critical practice might be attuned to something other than the right or the good.

For a systematic framework of thought to set in contrast to these two modern ones, I suggest we turn to a cluster of American philosophers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Those philosophers, among whom Peirce, Dewey, Mead, and Niebuhr figure centrally here, are

associated with the pragmatist school of philosophy. Yet pragmatism is not itself a neat contrary to its modern alternatives. For pragmatism offers an ecumenical stance within which both experience and reason have a fair place—albeit an ungrounded, and ungrudging, place. Nor have these pragmatist thinkers simply muddled along with a vague compromise or admixture of reason and experience. They have tended to think systematically in three evaluatively rich dimensions, emphasizing the complexity that emerges through contingent encounters, social responsiveness, and dialogical gesture; and *these* are precisely the kinds of concepts we shall need. Hence this tradition can provide something like an intellectual keel in the effort to think clearly about socially responsive critical engagement.

First, Second, Third

The first philosophical exposition of this three-fold pattern of thought comes from the logician and semiotician Charles S. Peirce, whose work was pervasively structured by such trichotomies. His own life was reclusive and enigmatic, his writing often obscure and pedantic. When he touched on moral themes directly, he was perhaps at his least insightful. Yet his template for discerning three possibilities lived on in the work of John Dewey, George Herbert Mead, and H. Richard Niebuhr. In their more worldly writings, the word “three” is not so devoutly sprinkled throughout. Yet there is a three-fold habit of thought shared continuously through them, and a few words about Peirce’s view, here at the beginning, may serve to highlight how the various philosophical interventions of this book hang together.

Among Peirce’s briefer explanations of his three categories is the following: “First is the conception of being or existing independent of anything else. Second is the conception of being relative to, the conception of reaction with, something else. Third is the conception of mediation, whereby a first and second are brought into relation.”⁴⁰

For example, firstness covers a possibility or a quality, as it has its nature self-sufficiently. Secondness covers a happening, an impression, or an effort—all of which we imagine with reference to some kind of contact or encounter. Thirdness covers representation, thought, synthesis, and the consolidation of habit.⁴¹ By way of illustration: we can conceive a moving object with regard to position (first), velocity (second), and acceleration (third); psychology conceives its subject in terms of conscious feeling (first), active will (second), and cognition (third). The triad as applied to philosophical inquiry yields phenomenology (first), normative philosophy (second), and metaphysics (third). In a characteristic recursive application,

Peirce takes the normative limb of philosophy to unfold into three branches: aesthetics as normative inquiry into firstness (quality), ethics as normative inquiry into secondness (action), and logic as normative inquiry into thirdness (representation).⁴²

With this Peircean contrast of categories in mind, we can proceed to contrast three approaches to ethics itself—though I am unaware of any text in which Peirce himself does so.⁴³ Empiricist ethics places normative emphasis on action's effective relation to the good, which is to say, on the *quality* of what gets experienced at the end of the day, the sum of values felt in the resulting state of affairs. Deontological ethics begins with the right, construed as the legitimacy of timeless principles, taking an individual's action as *representative* of the universal. Thus modern ethics, despite focusing on the value *of* action (a concept that leans on secondness), has assumed this value must succumb to the gravitational pull either of firstness (the good as quality, subject to aesthetic appreciation) or of thirdness (the right as representation, subject to logical appreciation).

In this standoff between invocations of the right and of the good, the value proper to one Peircean category remains unnamed, apparently—the value we should attach to secondness as such.⁴⁴ Concepts of secondness furnish us with our grasp of encounters, confrontations, provocations, and the like. This is of course exactly what is at issue in the social world of critical responsiveness.⁴⁵ The value, in action, of what Peirce calls secondness is thus the landmark I seek to bring into focus. Until we can sustain attention to the distinctive value that emerges through responsiveness as such, we will be tempted to approach virtue, care, and any other ethical alternatives by falling back into discussion of the goods and the rights at stake therein.

Valuing in Connection with Secondness

To highlight the responsive dimension of activity without collapsing into the right or the good, we must be able to frame a distinctive kind of evaluative question. What does it mean to respond well? To respond is to meet this with that, to engage and connect, to be provoked; it is to turn toward, to take up and answer. The “answering” here is open-ended and active; one responds (as in “call and response”) without making a claim to closure, to settling a question “for the record.” Could we tune our moral reflection to the values of secondness as such? And how would that go? If the *good* is the flag-bearing concept of value when we attend to immediate firstness, and the *right* governs our thinking when we step back to the stance of

thirdness, what concept plays the analogous positive role in our encounters with secondness?⁴⁶

Specifically with an eye to ethics, the pragmatist theologian H. Richard Niebuhr frames *responsibility* as the third concept worthy of systematic contrast to the ideals of teleological ethics and the principles of law like standards of morality. Taking responsibility to be a relatively new figuration of moral agency that should not be assimilated to virtue, Niebuhr suggests that “What is implicit in the idea of responsibility is the image of man-the-answerer, man engaged in dialogue, man acting in response to action upon him.”⁴⁷ In embracing this metaphor of responsibility, “we try to think of all our actions as having this character of being responses, answers, to actions upon us.” Spelling out his claim that this metaphor is a new development, Niebuhr writes:

The use of this image in the field of ethics is not yet considerable. When the word, responsibility, is used of the self as agent, as doer, it is usually translated with the aid of the older images as meaning direction toward goals or as ability to be moved by respect for law. Yet the understanding of ourselves as responsive beings, who in all our actions answer to action upon us in accordance with our interpretation of such action, is a fruitful conception, which brings into view aspects of our self-defining conduct that are obscured when the older images are exclusively employed.⁴⁸

Niebuhr’s hope for the rhetoric of “responsibility,” articulated half a century ago, speaks to our question here. Alas, the use of the word “responsibility” in ethics has since gained prominence largely by becoming further entangled with debates about the deontological status of individuals. In precisely the concretely social and situated sense Niebuhr would intend, the reflections of this book concern *responsibility*; yet to put this word at the center of my account would mean waging a battle against the grain of current usage. Further, the concept of responsibility is specific to ethics; just as beneficent action promotes the good, and principled action manifests the right, responsible action moves in accord with some value that applies beyond ethics. What is it?

Another suggestion comes from feminist critic Nancy J. Holland, who defends “appropriateness” as a neglected third locus of ethical understanding. She argues “for a critical use of the concept of what is appropriate,” where what is appropriate *answers to* a tradition or context, but in a creative way that is “invisible in our everyday acts of moral judgment.”⁴⁹ In the sense that she intends, our inquiry concerns the *appropriateness* of action insofar as it speaks in a context of further actions. And yet “the appropriate” by itself invites association with ownership, appropriation, propriety,

and conformity. If appropriateness is to serve as its central concept, Holland's account requires a vigilant resistance to these connotations. In acting responsively, we often risk the charge of acting "inappropriately" in the popular sense.

Alas, no single word stands out as the perfect candidate, perhaps in part because we have not so often invoked this precise conceptual space. Thus far, the word "responsive" has carried significant weight in this chapter, and it will continue to do so. We should register how this concept of "responsiveness" compares, for example, to the "reactive," which connotes a knee-jerk or oppositional echo—a response reduced to a mere effect. To illuminate the positive connotations of responsiveness—to highlight what we value in responsiveness as such—we can invoke the apt, the engaged, the attentive, the fitting, the appropriate, the adept, the effective, the fluent, the constructive, and the ready, for example. Doubtless many of the preceding positive adjectives, in isolation, can be pressed to align with either the good or the right. Yet as a constellation, they hover over the field of secondness, invoking the presence of some prompt or provocation but without invoking any representative or once-and-for-all flavor of legitimacy, accuracy, or correctness.

One older turn of phrase strikes the tone of secondness perfectly: a response that rises well to the occasion would once have been hailed as one that is *meet*. Among words that sound more current, the clearest candidate is "apt," nearly matched in resonance with "fitting" (despite the post-Darwinian baggage that has clustered around "fitness"). As with what is good or what is right, we can speak of what is apt in many domains other than ethics, and that fact ought to help us think broadly. Hence, I will use the word "apt" as a carefully chosen marker of the positive value that animates responsiveness and serves to tune our critical engagement with others.

To summarize the three dimensions of value, then: good qualities matter; right reasons matter; and—without being reducible to either of the preceding—apt responsiveness matters as well. To be clear, the relations among the three categories, on a pragmatist approach, are not competitive in any ontological or final sense. In calling his categories "Kantian," Peirce clarifies that these are ways of conceiving—"predicates of predicates"—rather than taxonomic cubbyholes. For moral philosophers to recognize and evaluate a social response in action, then, is not to deny that in that very same action we can recognize the promotion of interests and goods, nor to deny that such action can be held to the demands of principle. It is, however, to highlight the importance of a temporal and concrete inter-

action, and to emphasize the possibility of understanding and shaping one's activity by the values of apt social engagement.

Toward a Dynamic Conception of Social Activity

Recent analytic philosophy has been largely insensitive to the dynamics of social encounter. In many contemporary English-language journals, action is social insofar as it is performed "collectively" or through coordination of our shared purposes. Consider, for example, how sociality is glossed in terms of "plural subject theory" or "the shared point of view."⁵⁰ These are worthwhile themes, no doubt, but they figure a social body, in effect, as a composite individual. Meanwhile, our notion of an individual as a subject, with purposes and a point of view, is leveraged as a straightforward paradigm. In other words, we are expected to know perfectly well what it is for one person to act, or to believe—or to be responsible; hence the inquiry concerns whether and when a collection of people might also act as a "virtual individual." In the lifting of a piano, for example, individuals may coordinate in doing, as a compound subject, something that they could not do separately; and if a collective can act in such a way, it may also carry the status of "moral responsibility" in such cases.

When we speak of the social interactions of moral criticism, however, our sociality must mean more than the possibility of gathering ourselves into composite or collective agents. For criticism presupposes nonidentity and qualitative difference; critical exchange is not launched with a shared and transparent (or even subconscious) joint intention, nor do we helpfully explain how you and I engage *together* in a critical encounter by reference to how some one agent might accomplish the same thing alone. The difference and nonidentity at issue in criticism is not simply the multiplication of physical bodies, each associated with a subset of relevant capacities and interests (as it may seem with piano lifting, or even team sports). Sociality, in the more radical form we require here, concerns encounters in which difference or nonidentity is the reason for and theme of interaction. To embrace the social most fully, we figure this difference and nonidentity not simply as something to tackle and overcome—as when debate or negotiation is expected to shepherd participants toward a single understanding or shared purpose. To confirm our sociality is to affirm both our mutual influence and our ongoing differentiation.

It is through a careful emphasis on the significance of the *social* that Peirce's abstract categories have been most broadly taken up in the pragmatist current of thought. For Dewey, Mead, and Niebuhr, the social pervades not just ethics but also experience, knowledge, and action, reliably

defusing the contrasts that drive debates between rationalist and empiricist frames of mind. Our understanding of the social is informed neither by the causal third-person stance of scientific observation nor by the reflective first-person stance of free and reasoned deliberation. In attending to our sociality, we experience such Kantian dichotomies as particularly hollow. Our sociality must be conceived not only in terms of bonds but also in terms of waves, not just as the possibility of shared alliance but also as the complexity of overlap, contagion, and upheaval.

Beyond the dichotomy between maximizing the satisfaction of private interests (goods) and expressing the demand for public respect for fair laws (rights), then, my recommendation is that we recognize one another as engaged in aptly responsive social encounters. What is at issue in such encounters—what is communicated more or less well thereby—I will call moral concerns. Moral concerns will turn out to be a socially emergent phenomenon, neither a possession of individuals nor a publicly shared convention or norm. Through that lens, critical practice may come fully into view.

1.5 Concerns and Systematic Moral Theory

I have emphasized that our responsive engagement with one another's activity is a different matter from the direct promotion of goods. When our aim is to make a certain causal difference, we respond to what others do only in the oblique way that we "respond" to events in general; actions help set the stage or provide clues about what can and cannot be brought about, and how. Yet responsive engagement is also distinct from reaching moral judgments about one another's actions or character. The account we seek must be compatible with remaining agnostic, even skeptical, about most first-order moral claims.

Might we still suspect, however, that concerns amount to tentative beliefs about what is wrong and right—where those tentative beliefs depend, at least implicitly, on some systematic account of moral ideals and the demands they generate? Mustn't concerns resolve either into private interests or nascent public claims about what is right?

Cognitivist and noncognitivist accounts of moral phenomena represent, on my account, yet another dichotomy that distracts us from recognizing a third dimension of thought. Cognitivism has insisted on the need to ground moral judgment on objective justifications; noncognitivism, in denying that need, has been linked with subjectivism, emotivism, and cultural relativity. The fallout of this debate in metaethics may have helped

lead some to associate moral rigor directly with the search for moral conviction in the form of judgments. Agnosticism about moral verdicts has thus been cast either as a sign of epistemic weakness to be overcome as much as possible, or as a sign of motivational disengagement and refusal to take moral life seriously.

Moral concerns come better into view if we challenge the assumption that cognition—especially moral cognition—is primarily an affair of beliefs, convictions, and inference. We should also not reduce moral cognition to synthesizing and systematizing desires. On the view presented here, the rigor of moral inquiry, for critics, demands certain active patterns of attention and communication. Skills of attention presuppose an ongoing relational situation beyond the self, drawing on intertwined cognitive and affective responses to it. Attentive response is reducible neither to states of *belief* nor to states of *desire*. (Nor does it suffice to hybridize these with the neologism “besire”; this synthesis still suggests that cognition focuses on the propositional content of inner mental states, so that the value of these lies in whether there is or should be a correspondence between a picture within and the world beyond the mind.) By saying that good critics *attend* to provocations and concerns in certain ways—and bring their hearers so to attend as well—we can develop a demanding account of morally apt response without hankering for some validating set of judgments about the domains of activity to which critics respond.

None of this precludes the *possibility* of true moral verdicts, of course—or even their importance in specific contexts. Yet it does imply a certain independence of critical practice. To be responsive moral critics, we need not await verdicts or place advance bets on them. Meanwhile, even when we do have defensible verdicts, the skills of attending well to the concerns they reflect—and of bringing others to take them up as well—are distinct from the skills of marshaling cognitive justifications for them.

I have chosen “concerns” as a concept that allows for a great deal of flexibility in discussing the focal point of our responsive engagement with one another. For *concern* is attention that can range along the spectrum that approaches cognitive judgment at one extreme and mere feeling, construed as abjectly noncognitive, at the other.

The considerations that sit at the core of systematic moral theories might be called their typical concerns; each theory forges its favored concerns into a single account of moral reasoning, leaving other concerns to the side. Meanwhile, even an agnostic or inarticulate critic might take up the language of this and that moral theory so as to try it on for size. The same problem may often be framed in terms of suffering and harm from

one perspective, and in terms of disregard or vice from another. “Moral concern” is a particularly flexible characterization of the terrain that moral theorists have ambitiously sought to survey and taxonomize.

Rather than argue directly against the attempt to systematize moral concerns, however, I offer the first half of this book as a potential supplement to existing moral theories, expecting that some proponents of those theories will reflect not only on their typical first-order concerns, but also on the kinds of social engagement they experience with respect to these. Utilitarians, Kantians, and virtue ethicists can certainly take an interest in responding reflectively to others’ patterns of responsiveness—to the demands of goodness, rightness, or virtue, respectively. Yet my account will go on to argue that our handling of concerns is the ongoing means by which we gradually cultivate and shape moral norms and theoretical concepts themselves. On this view, theories develop in response to our concerns just as much as our concerns follow logically from them. Moral theories may be destined to remain always partial and unfinished, and yet that fact does not render moral theorizing idle or vain.

The moral challenges that engage our attention—the ways in which human choices need improvement—resist final summary. Utilitarian theory profiles one broad class of concerns—matters of suffering and well-being or satisfaction—and construe these as the primary considerations to which conduct must answer. Deontological systems of rights and duties take another family of concerns—the demand for respect and regard—and show how consideration of these requires rule-oriented thinking, generalized interpretation, and reasoned justifications. Each of these two systems does vital work not only for philosophers but also for the social communities in which practically reflective readers live. Systematic moral theories have helped us to anticipate, articulate, and address a variety of concerns with greater power. Any moral-theoretical overview becomes dangerous, however, if we adopt it with such confidence as to claim that its catalogue of moral concerns is final and comprehensive.

For example, two kinds of concern that are poorly embraced by either modern moral system are the endangerment of a human way of life and the endangerment of a biological species through an interruption of its reproductive cycles. Utilitarians can describe such endangerment either as a kind of suffering in itself (a suffering that somehow transcends specific individuals), or as a kind of suffering for particular individuals who depend on the continued existence of a particular culture or biological species. Failure to protect diversity may also be interpreted as a sign of disrespect for the inherent value of nature—an essentially deontological concern. Yet

when systematic moral theorists cite such considerations in their alarm over immanent extinctions, it is not the theory that leads them to notice these concerns. Rather, it is a kind of perceptive, imaginative and receptive sensitivity that they have cultivated in tandem with others who may place no stock in a single theory of moral conduct.

Concerns and Moral Permissions

There is one very important likely objection to such an open-ended account of moral concerns. Grand systematizations of moral concerns—moral theories—enable a clear line of defense against unreasonable criticism and persecution. For they classify some moral complaints as inherently baseless or out of bounds. Let us consider this worry.

Targets of prejudice have been able to respond by challenging their accusers: “Who is harmed by my (our) way of going about things? Whose rights am I violating?” Today this line of defense holds promise for many members of the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgendered (GLBT) community. In earlier decades, it served as a strong platform for those accused of “miscegenation”—a thickly evaluative term that has quite appropriately dropped out of circulation. Those who oppose gay sex and interracial marriage have been hard pressed to illustrate the harm or infringement at stake in allowing for sex or marriage beyond the confines of heterosexual same-race pairs. Taking the union of these two central moral theories as exhaustive of the moral domain can thus help ground a dismissal of complaints over GLBT and interracial relations. To parry the reactionary complaint, “It’s just *wrong*,” it is helpful to press for some basis in a reasonable and systematic moral theory. Hence an anti-foundationalist attitude toward the array of human concerns may seem to reopen the door to ad hoc or “unprincipled” moral anxieties. Is it not then quite dangerous to deny that moral criticism must rest on well-grounded and systematic criteria?

There is considerable appeal in the idea of a sphere of “moral permissions”—activities that should be considered beyond reproach because they do not cause significant pain or suffering to others, and violate no moral rights. Arguments for the moral permissibility of abortion, for example, might proceed by addressing utilitarian and deontological types of objection, and then answering them. If in fact moral criticism can proceed without first securing a warrant of one or the other kind, then there will be no template for arguing that some course of action falls clearly and simply into the category of moral permission.

It does follow from an open-textured account of moral concerns, of the kind I will develop, that definitive arguments for moral permission

are suspect. There are some welcome implications: Building in ways that destroy the breeding grounds of an endangered species, for example—even if one harms no particular animal and violates no familiar duties in the process—turns out not to be a matter settled quickly by appeal to moral permissions. Yet neither would gay sex or emergency contraception be simply exempted by a doctrine of moral liberty. Will we find ourselves sliding down a slippery slope toward embracing any and all absurd forms of moral concern?

We need to keep three matters in perspective to address this worry: First, the concept of clear permissions remains central to law and other public institutions, where it is especially vital that norms be manageable and predictable, and that these evolve according to relatively manageable and predictable expectations. Doctrines of liberty remain central in protecting citizens from the coercive enforcement of arbitrary taboos and stigmatizations. We can deny a clear role for well-defined *moral* permissions even while we insist on clear limits to legal and institutional scrutiny.

Second, the wider field of concerns, beyond those that revolve around welfare or right principles, includes more than reactionary or rigidly conservative intuitions. Fresh and progressive concerns may equally fail to fit neatly within consequentialist and deontological frames. The endangerment of tradition itself cuts both ways as a concern. The destruction of indigenous languages, for example, takes such a form, as does the conservation of a habitat. Furthermore, progressive concerns may problematize activities that most conservatives would defend as relatively harmless entitlements, such as procreation within heteronormative marriage, or the pursuit of profit through capitalist investment.

Third, all moral concerns are still open to dialogue, interrogation, and translation. Though they need not be systematically reduced to some favored foundational concepts, they need to be made intelligible. So certain hypothetical claims of moral concern might meet with practically no social traction. It would be hard to know how to make sense of someone whose concern amounts, say, to finding the activity of gardening to be inherently repugnant, and who had no further reflections to offer. But worries about absurd moral concerns are better addressed by attending to actual cases, rather than to such imaginary and counterfactual challenges.

Complaints about activities such as homosexual contact, after all, are not quite on a par with an idiosyncratic repugnance at gardening, or with insisting that virtue requires clasping one's hands three times an hour.⁵¹ While some social conservatives may seem to cling to parochial premises about divine revelation, their friends are often adept at translating their

concerns by appealing to the integrity of traditions, or to a sort of experienced coherence among custom and habits related to kinship, sexual forbearance, and social predictability.

These concerns cannot be *prima facie* dismissed as groundless—though some may be inflated by erroneous beliefs. Though they are not simply illegitimate, these concerns are less profound than the forms of harm, humiliation, and marginalization they generally foist upon the targets of gender and sexuality-based oppression. There is thus a point to insisting that gay sex—or any other activity that we frame as a matter of permissions—is simply “not a matter for moral concern.” Yet we should understand such an insistence as a shorthand gesture toward a more complex claim. The more complex claim may be that it is not entirely clear how to make sense of this concern in light of gathering evidence; we do not imagine that this concern demands more attention than moral concerns that attach to various prevalent contrasting activities; and this concern, however we might understand it, surely does not call for the social stigma, cruelty, or legal and institutional sanctions that conventionally have attended it.

For some practical purposes, then, we can say that some so-called moral concerns are effectively empty or even pernicious. From the standpoint of philosophical reflection on moral concerns, however, matters are subtler, teeming with complexity beneath the surface. We contribute to moral antagonism by denying not only the *conclusions* of those who claim a moral concern, but also the very presence of any concern worth understanding, interpreting, or articulating in new terms. Such matters of translation and interpretation shall be our concern in chapter 5. The impulse to rule out certain concerns as lacking in moral “legitimacy” may well be traced to a generally healthy but blunt sort of reactive opposition: it is tempting to deny recognition altogether to a moral concern that has been pressed in distressing and oppressive ways. Yet this temptation itself—we may call it responsive or reactive, depending on our stance—is open to careful and charitable critical engagement.

1.6 Glancing Ahead

Though this book is informed by a pragmatist pattern of thought in which dichotomies are disrupted, much of the discussion proceeds directly as an engagement with mainstream philosophy. Some might argue, with some merit, for disengaging with that conversation entirely—in favor of continental strands of philosophy, or in favor of building a positive account

without slowing down to address the work of analytic philosophers. Yet mainstream ways of conceiving philosophical problems have a power to which I am compelled to speak directly. Further, it would be too simple to say that I argue *against* the philosophical ideas embedded in mainstream ethics; instead, I argue for a wider field of view, adopting the same pluralism that animates Peirce's ecumenical account of categories.

In other words, if there is a hint of Hegelian *aufhebung* in my suggestion of a third way, it is not in any sense of going "higher" or "leaving behind." For it remains possible to illuminate moral concerns along multiple dimensions. To develop an ethics of responsiveness is neither to dismiss nor to set aside the concerns of classic works of moral philosophy. On the contrary, a responsive ethics must guard against casting any text found embalmed in our canon as if it were not also a responsive endeavor in its time. In calling these texts "works" we can recognize them not only as patterns of argument, but also as the efforts by which moral theorists have responded to some gap in moral conversation as they found it.⁵² Concerns that revolve around the good and the right as such *do* call for systematic reflection. A responsive ethics should cast charitable light on the theoretical interventions of others, whether or not that theoretical work devotes explicit attention to responsive intervention as such. Yet we must go on to consider questions that they—or *we*—have not been asking. That set of questions revolves around how moral agency involves engaging, critically, with others' moral agency.

Chapter 2 considers critical responsiveness from an interpretive angle, asking when we should seek to understand activity as responsive. It argues that critical activity is best understood as gesture. Recognition of gesture often requires subtle background understanding and situational attention, for gestural meaning is not generally produced intentionally or transparently by self-conscious authors. As an illustration of social gestural interpretation, I look from a new angle at phenomena that psychologists have explained as the effect of "reactance" or as dysfunctionally "undermined" motivation. In the activity of research subjects, we can read not just flatly individual behavior but also socially critical gesture. Responsive agency dwells not only in the activity that psychologists observe, but also in the research activity itself. Such reflections should lead philosophers to question our historical reverence for psychology as the empirical discipline that illuminates agency. Though we have usually cast "moral psychology" as a value-free inquiry into the engine of individual moral agency, the *interpretation* of human agency is an unavoidably social *exercise* of agency, one open to moral reflection.

Chapter 3 reflects directly on how we should conceive the goal of critical responsiveness once we subject it to reflection. Deontological and consequentialist concerns about criticism have often been placed in conceptual opposition as backward-looking and forward-looking demands. The backward-looking concern is that critics acknowledge and respect the agency of others without diminishing or overriding it. In accord with this concern, critical responses have been praised simply for *expressing* the right kinds of attitudes. The forward-looking concern, meanwhile, is that critical efforts be effective at making a practical difference of some kind. Those who prioritize this demand have tended to emphasize the effective regulation or enforcement of morality. If we wish to salvage the best of both concerns, however, the difference we must aim to make is of another kind, namely, the communication of concerned attention among participants in a critical exchange. Such communication engages without manipulation, showing due regard without laissez-faire sterility.

Chapter 4 explores the temporal and social dynamics that characterize good critical practice, arguing that a widespread philosophical commitment to speech act theory, together with an overly static understanding of moral emotions, distracts us systematically from recognizing how moral concern may be effectively communicated between agents. If we neglect the gestural, interactive, and continuous process of social responsiveness, we find ourselves mired again in an opposition between the agency expressed in speech itself and the causal effects a speech has on everyone else.

Chapter 5 examines the notion of a moral concern in greater detail. It is here that I move decisively from the modest “modular” project to a bolder “transformative” one. Perhaps moral philosophers of even the most theoretically conservative bent might be persuaded to embrace critical responsiveness as one means of implementing moral ideals and norms; yet critical practice is more than a temporal implementation of eternal moral structures. In virtue of our social responsiveness, moral agency means not just the execution of morality, but the cultivation and development of our moral concepts and sensitivities as well. To be morally concerned is not simply to apply the considerations already salient to this or that systematic theory (duties, norms, goods, virtues). Moral concern also involves sustaining and extending attention to inchoate moral predicaments, allowing for the gradual social emergence of newly inflected moral concepts and norms.

Chapters 6 and 7 take a step back from particular interpersonal episodes of critical exchange, inquiring into how we attend selectively to particular currents of concern within the vast social field of concerns that surrounds

us. I argue that moral philosophers and ordinary critics both must rely (explicitly or implicitly) on some understanding of the social field within which concerns contingently come to our attention. Chapter 6 develops a dynamic *geography* of moral concerns, appealing (critically) to social constructionist research to illustrate the emergence and spread of moral concerns.

In admitting that moral concerns become salient only in social contexts, this account might seem to deflate the role of individual moral thinking and initiative. Certainly, it discourages any appeal to metaphysical notions of transcendent autonomy. Yet responsibility is not replaced by the tides of social trends and “memes.” The situated role of responsive critics involves translating concerns and prioritizing among them in light of individual histories, embodied sensitivities and talents, and a reflective grasp of our social positioning. Chapter 7 contrasts two normative ways of approaching both the moral field and our situated participation within it. I discuss these as economic and ecological modes of moral responsiveness. While their precise relation to one another remains precarious, both are indispensable to reflective critical practice.

The last chapter considers the relations between critical practice and virtue ethics. It advances an understanding of how the skills of moral criticism fit within—and improve—a virtue-ethical understanding of moral competence and excellence. While philosophers in the virtue ethics tradition have many resources to offer in connection with the task of critical engagement, there is also danger in such an association. For virtue ethics has also hosted some particularly anticritical strains of thought, invoking role models and cultural traditions in ways that block unfamiliar communications and critical initiative. Nevertheless—and perhaps for that very reason—virtue ethics would do well to embrace critical competence. For reflective critical engagement will prove both culturally relevant and practically useful in our contemporary socially turbulent circumstances.

2 Responsiveness Ain't in the Head: Recognizing Critical Gesture

Second-order morality rests not on a logic of discrete units, but of relationship. From this standpoint there are no acts of evil in themselves, for the meaning of all action is derived from relationship.

—Kenneth Gergen¹

Where should we see critical responsiveness at work? The question of this chapter is a normative one, revolving around a “should.” My argument, over the course of this chapter, is that critical responsiveness can and should be recognized in a wide range of activities, far beyond paradigmatic cases of praise and blame. Praise and blame are familiar and apparently typical ways of initiating critical encounters. Yet these loom large in our portrayal of critical activity only because we tend to describe and explain action by reference to individual desires, beliefs, attitudes, and intentions. Exactly such a framework has been taken for granted not only by philosophers but also by psychologists in their accounts of action. Hence, this chapter suggests decentering the psychology of beliefs and desires, and learning to cultivate, in addition, a social understanding of action. The concept of gesture plays a central role in this social framing of action, and critical responsiveness can take many subtle forms as a gestural phenomenon.

To frame activity as gesture, I will argue, is to notice a kind of socially resonant participation or signaling that directs or shapes the attention of its audience. A gestural recognition of action contrasts both against a narrow view of individual conduct and against an accounting of propositional contents expressed. While gesture may be more or less deliberately enacted, neither its performance nor its meaning is necessarily evident to the agent. Whatever we do in response to one another, it is always possible to acknowledge nothing other than ordinary behavior, and it is often possible to recognize judgments or claims. It is at the gestural level, however, that responsiveness itself becomes clear, and in this chapter I will

highlight the responsive dimension of activity so that we can recognize its ubiquity.

Yet an inquiry into how we ought to understand the world of activity around us may seem unnecessarily indirect and hermeneutic. Why not proceed directly to the key moral questions: When should I *engage in* critical responsiveness, and why, and how? If critical responses are already pervasively underway in our habitual patterns of interaction, however, it is better to ask: How we might reflectively reshape and improve our existing capacity for critical responsiveness? The book as a whole will offer an answer to that question: We refine critical responsiveness by recognizing when and how the communication and translation of moral concerns depend on our participation. Yet spelling out the ingredients of that recommendation will require the work of intervening chapters. The bulk of this chapter will focus simply on *recognizing* the existing critical responsiveness—both in ourselves and others—that can be cultivated and transformed through evaluative reflection.

Perhaps we should dwell for a moment more, however, on the difficulty of the question of when to engage deliberately in critical response. As socially attuned moral agents, we each face an array of concrete moral problems that demand our attention; potential occasions for critical engagement are overwhelmingly numerous. So it would be ideal if some theoretical scheme could help us prioritize among them. But I can offer no general and substantive account toward that end. One reason is that such an account would require a survey of myriad first-order moral concerns—all of those concerns that revolve around treating one another well (or justly, or virtuously). A vast body of work in normative ethics attempts to put subsets of these concerns in some perspective, and that rich terrain cannot be canvassed here.

There will be another reason as well: any effort to sift, sort, and prioritize among moral concerns is bound up with where the evaluator sits within a social ecology of diverse agents. (This argument is developed in chapter 7.) Hence we should not expect philosophical work, even in theory, to furnish a broad readership with an authoritative and systematic listing and ranking of moral concerns. Ultimately, it is not only inevitable but also appropriate that each of us become moderate “critical specialists”—neither oblivious nor unreceptive to others’ concerns, but well attuned to a distinctive evolving profile of concerns to which we attend most carefully. Critical engagement is a kind of moral work, and we bring different perceptions, talents, and social relations to it. Hence, there is no substantively informative way for philosophical moral theory to guide a “generic agent” as to

where best to devote her critical attention. At best, we can illuminate the process by which we each give varying weights to the concerns that emerge around and within us.

This chapter does make one substantive comment, however, on the range of concerns that properly animates our critical responsiveness. For there is a particular kind of moral concern that comes into view *because of* critical responsiveness—namely, concern about how critical interactions themselves are occurring. Critical responses, both our own and others, may be incomplete, counterproductive, or ill directed. To count this as itself a moral problem is different from being concerned about *either* the integrity and legitimacy of a critic's claims *or* the first-order costs and benefits of a critical encounter. It is to treat critical engagement as a focal point of moral interest. A discussion of where we should *see* critical responsiveness can refine our ability to notice critical engagements going awry. And such cases thus yield opportunities and responsibilities for critical engagement at yet another level: critical responsiveness to critical responses.

Clearly, some of these opportunities arise from the discovery of inept critical responses in ourselves. Others arise from noticing the subtle or awkward ways in which concerns are being addressed to us. Yet even when a critical encounter unfolds between third parties, our own responsiveness may be on call. So long as we are part of the same social fabric as participants in moral criticism, we may turn out to be in a good position to help remedy fumbles and misunderstandings between them.

Overview

In recognizing critical responsiveness, some degree of interpretive freedom is inescapable. For most people, instances of blame serve well to illustrate critical responsiveness.² But open blame and similar explicit claims make up a relatively narrow slice of human activity. The concept of critical responsiveness, however, is a broad one less open to ostensive illustration. For we can also see action *as* critically responsive in the absence of the agent's drawing clear attention to that fact. I shall argue for understanding critical responsiveness as manifest in social gesture. Appealing to the work of G. H. Mead, I will conceive gesture as a *dimension* of social activity. As a dimension it is more or less discernable—or, more or less compelling as an angle of approach—throughout the activity of social agents. By attending to gesture, we become primed to see most human activity as reducible neither to mere conduct *in* the world nor to pure claim-making or representation *about* the world. Indeed, it is the appeal of that dichotomy,

between conduct *in* the world and representations *of* it, that makes critical practice difficult to keep in view.

Understanding the social world in terms of gesture involves what John Haugeland calls *existential commitment*.³ We become confident that a concept fits experience, or answers to reality, only by investing ourselves in its potential. We need to ingest the apple—to risk being taunted for “drinking the Kool-Aid”—so as to understand in the particular way that it affords us. Only then can we weigh whether describing phenomena in its terms proves practically helpful, insightful in resolving perplexities, or powerful in amplifying and fine-tuning the application of other concepts. Though it is possible to revoke such a commitment, or simply to refuse to entertain it in the first place, one cannot expect to evaluate a concept well without taking the risk of having one’s own self changed in the encounter. We must each admit some share of responsibility for privileging some concepts rather than others; reality will not simply decide for us. Thus I do not set out to demonstrate the pervasiveness of gesture as if to an audience of skeptics. Instead, this chapter models a certain shift in perspective that marks “getting the hang of it”—that is, seeing activity *as* gesture.

For illustration, I trace out how critical responsiveness inheres in two domains, one near each pole of the troublesome opposition between conduct *in* the world and representations *made of* the world.

First, I consider two related patterns of activity that have been called “reactance” and “undermining effects” by psychologists. Both have been conceived at patterns of conduct—that is, as activity best understood by reference to individuals’ purposive pursuits, with no suggestion that the activity is fundamentally social or communicative in function. These themes fit the domain of “social psychology” only in the weak sense that they seem to be typically prompted or caused by social encounters. In the case of both reactance and undermining effects, what interests psychologists is some kind of anomaly in subjects’ motivational status following an exposure to certain constraining or critically evaluative social cues.

The anomalous conduct that draws the interest of psychologists, in both cases, is conduct that fails to be moved in the “natural” or “expected” direction by social pressures. Taken at face value, then, reactance and undermining theories offer an especially relevant lesson for would-be moral critics. That lesson is that we should not expect sanctions and blame to serve straightforwardly as tools by which behavioral expectations are enforced. Still, reflective critics may greet this work with a more radical response, questioning the narrowly individual view of subjects’ activity

that permeates these studies. A richer understanding of the same phenomena emerges once anomalous “mere conduct” is examined afresh as responsive and communicative activity.

Second, I consider the research activities of the psychologists involved in these and related studies. They present their task as observing and theorizing about the world of human activity, not as responding directly within it. Yet their activity, too—despite the representational detachment projected by the scientific conventions of “publishing results”—can be approached as a form of responsive social engagement.

Both oppositional “irrational” conduct and the cool rational activity of research, then, can be understood as critically responsive forms of agency; when we frame them this way we recognize distinctive moral questions and challenges. In particular, we recognize surprising directions from which we ourselves can be called into conversation. Criticism may reach us in forms that barely resemble clear praise and blame, such as the actions of laboratory subjects and the cool voice of scholarly research.

Turning to the theoretical level, I suggest disciplinary and theoretical shifts within philosophy that might foster the recognition of critical responsiveness. It is hard to discern critical responsiveness so long as we look to psychology, with its emphasis on individuals and their inner states, as the empirical discipline centrally relevant to human action. I suggest that moral philosophers reexamine the habit of expecting all explanatory elaborations of our moral capacities to count as, and to fit the model of, “moral psychology”—at least as this field is often understood. Philosophers should attend equally to empirical studies that describe and explain their themes in distinctly social terms. Unsurprisingly, it is such reflexively social research that has been the most forthcoming in acknowledging its own inescapable role as a form of social engagement.

For that matter, it is not only empirical research that should recognize itself in this gestural light. Even theoretically abstract metaethics is critically responsive philosophical work. To say so is not to deflate it, as if to say “*All* we are doing is nudging human practice in accord with our values.” Rather, it is to recognize theoretical work from another angle. To frame philosophical work as critical gesture is not simply to describe it differently, but to orient ourselves differently in response as well.

2.1 Critical Responsiveness as a Frame of Understanding

Blame is the most broadly acknowledged pattern of critical responsiveness. The existence of such an obvious form makes the task of this book easier

in one respect. Insofar as blame is a familiar phenomenon, reflective questions about it seem straightforward. The following argument is hardly a bold one: Blame in practice is an activity; all activities might be open to moral reflection; therefore the practice of blame is open to moral reflection—qua activity. When we reflect on it as activity, meanwhile, we must consider more than simply the criteria by which acts might *deserve* blame. Even if few have found such matters worth discussing at length, I do not suppose many moral philosophers would resist this argument. Moral reflection should extend to these questions: *when* to consider engaging in blame (or some alternative), with *what ends* in mind, and *how*. Such questions are not simple to answer; more is at stake than the sum of familiar first-order concerns of treating one another well. Still, the questions themselves seem straightforward enough.

Our familiarity with the paradigm of blame, however, can be misleading for three reasons. First, blame is often associated with moral *judgments* or *claims* that can be—and often are—spelled out explicitly. Hence our attention tends to gravitate toward the justifiability of those claims rather than to other aspects of the activity by which blame is enacted. Second, blame is often experienced in a *self-conscious* manner; hence, we might imagine that the occasions for reflecting on critical responsiveness are limited to occasions in which we are self-consciously addressing some moral provocation. Third, it seems that blaming is one example of a *genre* of states or acts we might neatly enumerate, roughly in the spirit of Strawson's account of reactive attitudes: indignation, resentment, gratitude, and so on. Reflection on critical responsiveness would thus correspond to a neatly defined domain of interactions. Fourth, the concept of blame encourages us to conceive of criticism as carried out singlehandedly by an initiating agent, rather than as a pattern of engagement among two or more individuals.

On the contrary, I will present critical responsiveness not as a genre of action—like eating or promising or purchasing—but as a *dimension* of our activity. It comes into view when we look from certain angles, and it is foreshortened from other angles. It need not revolve around claims at all; social beings without language may respond critically to one another. Even linguistically competent adults, furthermore, may engage in unconscious gestures of critical responsiveness; and their intentions and self-perceptions, even as these accompany deliberate critical efforts, carry no intrinsic authority.⁴ These three claims—that critical responsiveness is a pervasive dimension, not a genre, of activity; that it need not be tied to claims; and

that its significance need not be clear to introspection—are the core claims of this chapter.

Narrow and Broad Frames of Understanding

To see a person's action as critically responsive is to invoke a particular broad frame of understanding. Any responsive activity might also be framed, more or less readily, in narrower, nonresponsive terms. If you rebut my argument, by the same token you will have said or written something; if you punish someone, you will have inflicted something. For this kind of reframing we need only "zoom in" and describe the same activity without noting its wider context of social or environmental engagement. Of course, to zoom in too far is to lose intelligibility as well: Someone who answers a telephone (to frame it responsively) has lifted a handset or activated a connection (more narrowly), but the same motions described so narrowly as to leave the phone out of view would not be graspable as purposeful action, at least until some other context or purpose is provided—such as playing charades, dancing, examining one's wrist. But for any given action, we each might acknowledge some limiting threshold of narrowness beyond which we lose our recognition of agency at work.

The converse kind of reframing—from narrow to broad frames, such as the frame of critical responsiveness—is not so easy. It requires recognition of relevant situational details and perhaps some play of imagination.⁵ Suppose I am interacting with children in a playground setting and I have just given Evan something. Casual observers may be in a position to recognize first-order responsiveness in my giving: in this case, perhaps, I was complying with Evan's request, a request made just a moment earlier. A somewhat wider frame may reveal a second-order (critical) responsiveness: perhaps I was modeling how to hand over a toy nicely *as part of a corrective response* to another child, Jana, who had recently failed to share. If so, this second-order responsiveness may not be so obvious to casual observers, despite being quite deliberate on my part.

Yet the uncertainty extends beyond the epistemic challenge of knowing what an agent deliberately intends. Suppose it occurs to me that Jana's own lack of sharing might have something to do with how Evan had been teasing her earlier. Whether her refusal to share counts as *addressing* what Evan did is a much more difficult call than the question about whether my action should count as a response to Jana. What would lead us to affirm or deny that she was herself responding critically to Evan's teasing? Some

considerations might weigh in favor—say, if today's lack of cooperation is uncharacteristic, or of course if she explains her stance clearly. Yet neither of these would settle the matter with certainty. Even her sincerest explanation may leave things unclear; suppose she explains, "I didn't want to share because he was mean." Should we discern an awkwardly inchoate social response, or just a simpler kind of causal path whereby one child has come to dislike another as a result of his perceived meanness?

Some considerations, meanwhile, certainly might weigh against framing what Jana did as a response to Evan's teasing. (Perhaps failure to share has been directed uniformly at everyone, not just at Evan.) But is there anything that would count against the possibility that Jana's behavior is in any way critically responsive—to anything at all? Often, of course, we do not discern any plausible responsive frame in fact; such is implied by the suggestion that she was "simply being greedy" or "plain-old uncooperative." And some responsive frames may be ludicrously implausible; some psychoanalytic explanations, for example, grasp too wildly in efforts to trace patients' actions to some theoretically favored agenda of punishment, rebellion, or vindication. Yet their error would lie in being stubbornly attached to a particular explanatory narrative, such as the Oedipal complex, and not in simply being open to discerning some responsive frame that illuminates a person's activity.⁶

We should not assume, of course, that a plausible broad interpretation ought to supplant all narrower ones. You generally need no grand narrative background to point out that I am stepping on your foot, for example. The understanding that animates our responsiveness need be only as wide as necessary to foster the communication of concerns. When we frame a refusal to cooperate as an inchoate response to prior mistreatment, the failure to cooperate does not thereby disappear, of course. The presence of critical responsiveness cannot simply override signs of moral disregard. Still, critical engagement is quite differently inflected if it acknowledges the broader frame; it invites a conversation of contrasting concerns.

Focusing on a narrow frame in responding to Jana, I might offer or imagine a commentary as follows: "Hey, I didn't see any sharing from you. I know you like these toys, but Evan does too. So it's important to share, like this." By contrast if I have the broader frame in mind, I am bound to approach it from a different angle: "Let's find a *good* way to tell Evan that you'd like him to treat you more nicely. If you refuse to share, he might think you're happy with just being *mean* to each other."⁷ If I focus narrowly on the inappropriate conduct at hand, I risk missing some of the social *point* to Jana's action; hence my correction can come across as irrelevant

or misdirected. The failure here would be a double failure: I less effectively encourage sharing (a form of first-order responsiveness), and I also miss an opportunity to cultivate and refine her own budding capacity to respond well to teasing and other provocations.

Conduct: Noncritical Activity (A Stipulative Definition)

To cast our interest in critical responsiveness in stark relief, it will be helpful to have a succinct way of referring to action *without* acknowledging this dimension. I stipulate that the term “conduct” here will refer to action insofar as we do *not* take it to be critically responsive. If someone claims that Jana was not being critically responsive in our hypothetical case, but was “simply greedy” or “simply uninterested” in sharing, conduct (as I stipulate its sense here) captures the force of that “simply.” Whatever basic account of action we embrace, conduct will meet its criteria. So, depending on how we think of action in general, conduct must be inflected with purposes and intentions, belief-desire complexes, instrumental reasoning about means and ends, or principled maxims. To conceive action as conduct, however, is to understand it as *simply* a doing—that is, as making its impact in the world without *addressing* itself to other agents. Conduct stands nearly opposite to the metaphysical notion of a “mover unmoved.”⁸ It must be potentially subject to critical response while not itself being an instance of such responsiveness.

I choose the word “conduct” here because in the context of first-amendment legal discussion, “conduct” has come to mean that subset of activity which cannot claim the protection that belongs to speech.⁹ Much nonverbal activity (such as the burning of flags) falls on the side of speech in this context, so long as it is taken to serve as significant commentary that addresses itself to others. (Speech in forms like “fighting words” meanwhile is treated as conduct—what it does *to* people is deemed more legally salient than its communicative function.) I employ the word “conduct” here with an analogous intent: conduct *does not speak to* what others are doing.¹⁰ In its relation to critically responsive agency, in other words, conduct is naïve action.

Conduct may involve first-order responsiveness, of course. It might be socially responsive to others as patients or as “ends in themselves,” for example. Yet it does not *ask* to be listened to or attended to; conduct is the mere going about of practical business, of tending deliberately or habitually to something that the agent takes to matter. We should clarify, however, that conduct need not be an entirely individual matter. Conduct might be cooperatively intended and carried out, as perhaps when two

people together carry a piano,¹¹ so long as we do not take them thereby to be addressing others' actions. So conduct need not connote solipsism or selfishness; we can respond to and join with others *in* joint activity. Yet if our activity consisted only of conduct—however benign—we would be effectively inhabiting a stance of “moral solipsism” (see chapter 1), for we would grasp morality as a matter of good deeds that can be enacted without critical attention to others’ moral lives.

We are rarely in a position to say with confidence that a person is engaged *only* in conduct—at least not in at any moment that attracts our moral interest. Yet given a particular frame of observation and interpretation, we often find only conduct to be recognizable within it. “Getting into my car” describes conduct, though “leaving the party” may describe the same action so that we might better recognize how it might be addressed to others. The broader the frame we invoke—such as “getting away from that crowd”—the more we may recognize social responsiveness in my activity.

The more an activity seems to be a mere practical means to satisfy an ordinary desire, the more we are likely to think of it simply as conduct; but by the same token, the wider activity that proceeds *by means of* such conduct may always yet turn out to carry some socially responsive significance. As MacIntyre argues, the narrative with which we make sense of individual action must eventually become a social and historical narrative within which agents situate themselves as coauthors.¹² Participation in such social narratives is not simply a matter of voluntary choice; we are caught up in one another’s stories, and we shape them concurrently with shaping our own.

Nevertheless, even if there is no activity that can *only* be framed as conduct, we are clearly bound to *treat* a great deal of activity only as conduct; whatever critical dimension it may have is opaque, negligible, uninteresting, or overridden by other considerations. Particular activity can be understood as critically responsive only when we recognize its fit within a broader situation. Often we do not know the detailed context of the action we encounter; and only so much complexity can be explored and held in mind at once anyway. So the primary distinction here is between ways of understanding: understanding someone’s action *as* a critical response (to something) *versus* understanding it simply *as* conduct.

Critical Response as Gesture

When critical responsiveness is not as explicit as blame or praise, we may best recognize it under the umbrella of *gesture*, for the concept of gesture

invokes a social and communicative face of activity that is different from deliberate and open claim-making.¹³ Wherever there is gesture there is also action, but the concept of gesture sweeps our attention outward from a person's movements, however subtle, to the social surroundings within which a gesture might become significant to others. Gesture implies meaning, but not—at least not necessarily—conventional or symbolic meaning.

Not all responsiveness requires a gestural frame. The first-order response of feeding the hungry, for example, might conceivably be nothing more than the meeting of a particular need. Such an act acquires gestural depth only when it is *pointed* in some sense—as if to *refuse* to mirror others' callousness, or to *show* what compassion requires. To see activity as gesture is to see it as the kind of activity that *calls for* social response—even if on a particular occasion a gesture may simply rehearse that call for response, or address it reflexively back to the gesturer. Insofar as the idea of *critical* responsiveness (unlike first-order responsiveness) entails being addressed to some audience, critical responsiveness is always open to description as gesture.

The concept of gesture has been the focal point of some controversy in a way that will prove relevant to how we approach critical engagement. For we might wonder to what degree it is the antecedent existence and intrinsic meaning of a gesture that *underwrites* our interpretation, and to what degree our interpretation helps to *constitute* gestures as such. The latter view is defended by the social psychologist G. H. Mead:

What . . . takes the gesture out of the social act and isolates it as such—what makes it something more than just an early phase of an individual act—is the response of another organism, or of other organisms, to it. Such a response is its meaning, or gives it its meaning.¹⁴

Mead's claim seems to be that any action underway becomes gesture by being proleptically grasped and met with a social response—and *only* in virtue of that. The boldest reading of Mead's claim is one on which the response *makes* the gesture. For example, if I am straining to reach for an apple, expecting no help at all, I might suddenly find that someone has stepped in to hand it to me, or perhaps to furnish me with a ladder. What began as a candidate for mere conduct (what Mead calls “adaptive behavior”) has thus been effectively converted *midstream* into gesture. After becoming familiar with such interactions, of course, I may come to reach with some degree of *hope* that someone better situated than I might recognize my project and assist. And should my hope grow into expectation,

I might abbreviate my reach to a socially conspicuous turning of the head and lifting of a hand; and such action will no longer have a point *unless* it is recognized as gesture.

This example has its analog in the more complex world of social engagement. Suppose Jana's nonsharing to have been innocent of any original communicative intent. Framing the sandbox plot exclusively in terms of conduct, we could offer only this chronicle: Evan teases, and subsequently Jana keeps the toys to herself. His counting as a teaser is a fait accompli, a fact about the world that cannot be addressed—as far as Jana is concerned—but merely coped with, perhaps by turning away. But if I (or any other person) enter the scene by framing her withdrawal as a response, *as if* it sends a message (however imperfectly), I invoke a gestural frame. Suddenly not only her own action, but Evan's as well, must be considered as part of an open conversation. For her own reaction to serve as gesture of response, after all, his action must also be reinterpreted as gestural—as a glimpse of activity that might still be engaged. Because of the intervention, she turns out to be not done with her response after all, and his teasing ways have been newly reframed as *midstream* and open to redirection.

But what really gives gestural depth to her activity, on Mead's account, is not the psychological fact that I may have led her to *see things* a certain way, but rather the way in which my uptake makes a material difference to the very social situation itself. For the "innocent" significance of her act—getting free of teasing—is no longer lost in the moment but is sustained and amplified by my acknowledgment. Yet my intervention also transforms her private determination into a concern—into something that can call for others' attention. Even in claiming explicitly that her disengagement was "not a good way" to send a message to Evan, I have made it the case that she *has* sent a signal—not all the way to Evan, but at least halfway, as it were, to a potential mediator. For I present myself as poised either to address Evan myself or to support her in doing so. By framing what she has done as a critical gesture of response, I usher her into the practice of criticism, or further toward confident participation therein.

In claiming that it is the response that *makes* the gesture, in the way I have just illustrated, Mead faces opposition from those who find intention to be a more natural starting point for inquiry than interaction. Habermas, for example, insists that there is gesture only where there is communicative intent.¹⁵ Indeed, it is a widely shared philosophical premise that the nature and meaning of action must be constituted by psychological (or perhaps

conventional) factors that are fully in place at the time of its production. On this view it can be only in a metaphorical or relative sense that we speak of a *change* in “what someone has done” *after* a deed has been conceived and launched.¹⁶

Of course the definition of gesture, like the definition of action or any other concept, can devolve into a purely verbal dispute. For our purposes here, however, we wish for a concept that helps us track the suitability of responding to another person *as* a participant in social criticism. Mead’s conception of gesture serves well to focus our responsiveness. For we may cultivate someone’s engagement in criticism by taking their activity as *calling for uptake*, as worth *treating as* critical gesture. Our receptivity to being addressed *by* gesture must run ahead of our evidence that a person’s activity is conceived or produced *as* gesture. And if our practical purposes frequently require us to *orient* to “activity that is worth taking up *as if* it were gesture,” then pragmatist sensibilities suggest that we may as well use the word “gesture” straightforwardly for such a concept; hence I will. (Should we ever need a concept that revolves around an agent’s self-conscious expectations or intentions, we may then speak of “intentionally produced gesture.”)

The concept of gesture can be integrated with the three Peircean categories discussed in chapter 1. The contrasts there were framed in terms of the good (as a quality of particular and individual experience), the apt (as the fittingness of social encounter), and the right (as the lawfulness of general policies). Without forgetting that these are interpretive concepts rather than ontological cubbyholes, let us see how this three-fold distinction yields three framings of action: as conduct, as gesture, and as representation (see figure 2.1).

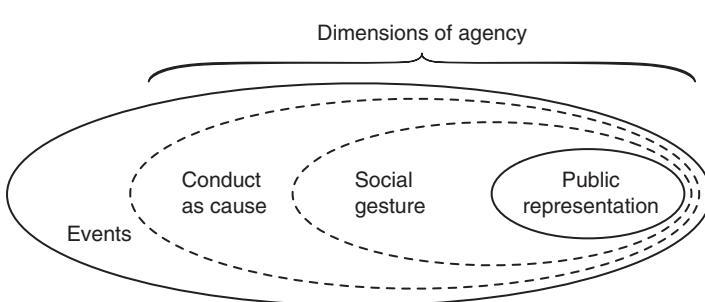


Figure 2.1

The series of concepts {event, conduct, gesture, representation} entails progressively more demanding frames of understanding.

A wealth of metaphors is ready at hand to illustrate the contrasts here: if conduct is “down to earth” and representations are “offered up,” gestures as such play out in horizontal interaction. If conduct seems opaque and concrete, representations seem transparent and weightless; gesture might then be figured as translucently refractive and fluid.

Again, however, the two major schools of systematic moral theory have emphasized one or the other extreme. Consequentialists find moral salience in action *as conduct*—as the cause of non-agentic results or events; the moral value of action depends on the nonmoral value of these. Deontological and rationalist thinkers such as Kant find moral salience in action *as representation*, as symbolically demonstrative of principles which are legitimate or not—so the moral value of such action depends on the truth or consistency of its claims. The responsive ethics I develop here, meanwhile, finds a distinctive moral salience in gesture—agency that answers, socially, to the agency of concrete others. And the moral value of activity *as gesture* lies in something like apt attunement or engagement. Yet both conduct and representation might be thematized *by* critical gesture; hence our moral interest in gesture does not involve discounting the relevance or importance of either of the more celebrated conceptual frames.

A Moral Argument for Seeing Responsiveness

While philosophical discussion of these contrasting ways of understanding action may become abstract and speculative in its details, we are quite differently oriented to concrete experience depending on which frame of interpretation we employ. For there is some choice to exercise about how much to *look for* gestures of critical responsiveness in the world of activity around us; conceptual work can refocus our perception upon what would otherwise escape notice. If our moral agency is enhanced to the degree we recognize critical agency around us, then we have good reason to cultivate our appreciation of the broader frame of interpretation.

We should thus spell out the argument for this suggestion—that is, that our own moral agency is enhanced by the recognition of responsive agency around us. First, responsiveness is an aspect of others’ agency (and our own) that merits recognition; discounting it is akin to noticing life while being oblivious to sentience, or seeing sentience without openness to signs of intelligence. To the extent we can discern it even in inchoate forms, its acknowledgment becomes *part of* treating a person well. It is a failure of due regard if we acknowledge a person as a site of interests and activities, but not as an active shaper of the social world within which these unfold.

Further, if our recognition allows us to help someone become more effective in her critical responsiveness, we amplify her moral agency. This is no less important than helping a person develop the skills and capacities needed for ordinary vital projects and interests. Yet we cannot amplify others' responsive agency unless we can anticipate and discern its form prior to its fully self-conscious and deliberate development.

Second, the recognition of another's critical responsiveness will turn out to be pivotal to our own. In some cases, when we recognize another's critical response, it turns out that our own activity is some or all of what's being called into engagement. Even when that is not so, however, the development of our moral agency is at stake. Being richly attentive to others' moral concerns—even unconsciously harbored ones—is the most fertile means by which we cultivate and redirect our own. Just like the words that become most familiar to our consciousness, the distinctive concerns that shape our respective practical lives have come to us, by and large, through others.

Third, our self-understanding is at stake: attending to unconscious critical responses enables us to make better sense of our attitudes and to take more thoughtful responsibility for how we inhabit our critical perspective. In improving our own critical responsiveness, only half of the story revolves around receptivity to new and entirely unfamiliar concerns. The other half of the story revolves around a more reflective approach to the responses we find already underway within us. In some cases, we may decide to relinquish a particular critical stance as soon as it is brought to conscious light. More often however, we will find that in some respect the unconscious critical gesture is, as they say, *onto* something. The question then is how to follow through well, refining its direction and shape. Either way, bringing our critical response to awareness is integral to handling it well.

For these three reasons, then, increased openness to the responsive complexity of action is of generally positive moral value. Such a conclusion in itself, of course, provides little guidance for seeing its outline in concrete cases. What it does suggest, however, is a case for making a reflective effort to perceive with attention to responsive gesture. For our moral choices concern not just how we move our bodies in space, but how we orient to it conceptually. Indeed, all concepts are vulnerable to skeptical distance, and each requires some investment of faith as we learn to perceive and understand in accord with it. Flexing our conceptual imagination to get richer perspectives on *what's being done* is pivotal to reflective moral engagement.

That our conceptual orientation cannot be shifted by force of instant will is no decisive objection; much morally important action is not immediately achievable by will, and may seem inaccessible to direct choice.¹⁷ An interpretive perspective need not—and cannot—be generated out of whole cloth. Instead, we cultivate our receptivity and responsiveness to it in the most accessible cases, and gradually broaden the range of cases we can recognize in similar ways. The next two sections offer an extended illustration.

2.2 When People Confound Expectations: Anomalous Conduct or Critical Gesture?

This section and the next reflect, from different angles, on a particular social sphere that includes some psychological researchers and their experimental subjects. My goal is to highlight critical responsiveness as it appears in two kinds of activity quite different from explicit blame and related moral claims. Both lend themselves to contrary descriptions—cases of apparent *mere conduct* by research subjects, on one hand, and cases of apparently disinterested inquiry on the part of researchers, on the other. If we can make out the features of critical responsiveness in such cases, we are better poised to recognize both the opportunities and the responsibilities of critical practice in a wide range of situations.

First, let us consider what looks like potentially anomalous behavior from the perspective of laboratory psychologists. Both currents of experimental research I will discuss here seek to reproduce and explain situations in which people tend to act contrary to expectations—or at least to the naïve expectations someone might have based on a simple model of pressures and influences upon choice. Both involve varieties of “boomerang” phenomena—related to what is loosely called “reverse psychology”—in people’s actions that seem to run against the current of incentives and other factors ordinarily thought to condition behavior.

A variety of theoretical labels have been proposed in connection with this research, but I will highlight two. “Reactance,” on one hand, is taken to be a kind of motivational opposition, a behavioral “knee-jerk reaction” that reflexively pushes back against the experience of impact or pressure. “Undermining,” by contrast, is taken to be a kind of motivational anemia that affects how people approach an activity that they have been specifically prompted to pursue. (The labels themselves will come in for cross-examination—hence my use of scare-quotes here and there to prepare for some critical distance.) The somewhat less theory-laden description of

boomerang phenomena covers both, for they share the boomerang claim in common: social efforts to guide behavior “at times produce shifts in the direction *opposite* to that intended.”¹⁸

Boomerang phenomena, regardless of the hypotheses offered to account for them, threaten to complicate the role of critical encounters in moral interaction. Even in otherwise careful moral philosophy, alas, we sometimes encounter reasoning that implicitly sets aside such an empirical possibility. The supposition—neither defended nor articulated, but clearly in the background—is that disapproval, blame, and reproachful arguments are tools generally well suited to enforcing moral norms and curtailing their violations.¹⁹ Approval, praise, and persuasive reasoning, meanwhile, are presumed to promote the moral norms that stand behind them. To the extent that boomerang phenomena occur, reflective moral critics must consider not only which norms to propound (with whom, and when), but also—and with new urgency—how. Insofar as a critic’s intent is to help *implement* morality in practice, boomerang phenomena imply that criticism can backfire.

This research is relevant to us here not only because it bears directly on the potential outcomes of criticism, but also because the researchers’ description of subjects’ behavior invokes relatively narrow interpretive frames. I have suggested earlier that what appears in close quarters as *conduct* may be recognized as social responsiveness from further back. Such broad reframing, however, is in tension with the background assumptions of most experimental psychologists. (Though this work is generally described as “social psychology,” it illustrates the difference between bringing a psychological lens to social interaction and studying mental phenomena with a focus on social processes.²⁰) So I will first summarize the ways in which the researchers themselves explain their findings. Next, I will illustrate how participants in this research might equally well or better be understood as critically responsive agents. Last, I will address, in more detail, our earlier questions about what is at stake in such reframing and why it should matter to reflective moral critics.

“Reactance” as an Explanation for Anomalous Conduct

Early researchers on “boomerang attitude change,” still under the sway of a positivist and behaviorist approach to human activity, were content simply to document certain curious statistical patterns that emerged in their research on persuasive encounters. Subjects exposed to persuasive efforts, under certain conditions, reliably showed a tendency not only to remain unpersuaded, but also to report their subsequent attitudes in ways

that marked a relative *distancing* from the stance of the persuasive message. It is from this research work that the concept of reactance emerged indirectly. For after spending his early career in that experimental setting, Jack Brehm became interested—unlike the behaviorists before him—in motivational hypotheses with which he might explain patterns of resistance to social influence. Despite the social setting in which boomerang phenomena had first appeared, Brehm's explanatory methods were reductively psychological; his emerging account of reactance made no essential reference to social interaction. He summarizes the theory as follows: "According to the theory, if individuals feel that any of their free behaviors . . . is eliminated or threatened with elimination, the motivational state of psychological reactance will be aroused. This reactance state is directed toward the restoration of the threatened or eliminated behavior."²¹

The theoretical posit of reactance, in turn, is supported by observations of various experimental phenomena—"effects such as perception of attractiveness of the threatened or eliminated behavior."²² Crucial to Brehm's research program was an interest in distinguishing reactance effects from the frustration of direct preferences. To do so, Brehm and colleagues conducted experiments in which subjects' preferences among a variety of options (say, a set of music albums from which to choose) was elicited first. Participants in one experimental condition were then subjected to the unexpected removal of a relatively unpreferred option from among the initially offered set. Subjects' expressed preference for (or degree of interest in) that option tended to be greater after it was removed—despite having not been, in each case, the option that would likely have been chosen. The unexpected removal of an option was sometimes orchestrated so as to seem as "irrelevant and impersonal" as possible (attributed to a shipping error, for example). Subjects were thus presumably *not* influenced by coming to see the removed option as the object of someone else's preference, or by suspecting that the option in question was intentionally withheld for some mysterious reason (hence potentially sparking increased interest). Brehm hypothesized that a certain motivational state—the one he calls reactance—must "[possess] energizing properties that drive individuals to engage in freedom-restoration behaviors."²³ What subjects seek, according to Brehm and his followers, is the *experience* of freedom—and such restoration can be experienced symbolically (by increasing one's attachment to the eliminated option) or vicariously (by finding satisfaction in having the option restored to others in a similar position).

Reactance theory has enjoyed credibility since its articulation in the 1960s, with continuing inquiries into the details of its mechanism, the

degree to which it can be formulated as a personality variable, and the conditions under which it can be minimized. Brehm comments, "The applications of reactance are numerous, as the theory has been useful for the study of persuasion and attitude change, consumer research, interpersonal and intergroup relationships, therapeutic issues, and more generally motivation and emotion."²⁴ Quite remarkable, in this array of applications, is the degree to which reactance is counted as a strategic variable, one whose recognition may be turned toward the purposes of profit (such as in "consumer research") as much as to potentially benign projects (as in therapeutic contexts). Reactance is, on this account, simply one of the effects we would all do well to take into account in the pursuit of our various socially strategic purposes.

If we accept reactance theory at face value, it suggests a certain lesson for the practice of moral criticism: in confronting someone who does not sufficiently appreciate a given moral norm or ideal, we must be either so light-handed as to avoid triggering reactance, or so heavy-handed as to silence or override it. What we ought *not* to do is to assume that social pressure is continuously effective through a moderate range of intensity; it is in such mid-range encounters that people are least likely to comply with the moral expectations at issue.

After turning to a parallel exposition of research on undermining effects I will revisit each research program with attention to the difference between interpreting subjects' activity in terms of conduct and interpreting it in terms of gesture.

"Undermining" as an Explanation for Anomalous Conduct

A related thread of social-psychological research, also seeking to explain some apparently counterintuitive effects of social pressure, emerged through the self-determination account of motivation launched by Edward L. Deci.²⁵ Central to this work is a diagnosis of an undermining effect prevalent in various institutional settings—a counterintuitive loss of motivation in the presence of certain social pressures. Like reactance theory, this idea has inspired an extended research community that continues to evolve and refine its concepts. It has also made its way into popular parenting and educational paperbacks.²⁶

Deci's self-determination theory has been more highly contested than Brehm's reactance theory, facing various publications that dispute its claims.²⁷ Unlike the coolly strategic presentation of most reactance research, Deci's hypothesis is offered in the warm spirit of positive psychology and progressive pedagogy; it claims a neutral scientific stance toward its results,

but betrays overt interest in its likely applications. On the surface, the undermining effect may seem quite different from reactance; it seems to constitute not an *anti-conformity* effect, but a sort of motivational anemia that arises in the wake of certain kinds of social pressure.

Despite important differences in their theoretical frameworks, the experimental process is parallel to Brehm's. Subjects—often children—are invited to engage freely in some enjoyable activity, such as solving puzzles. The experiment then pivots on giving some of the children a specified kind of evaluative feedback—a social intervention analogous to Brehm's persuasive pressure. The experimenter then solicits self-reports, or covertly observes “free behavior,” to gauge the level and style of subjects' further participation in that same activity. The central question is how and whether evaluative feedback (or sanction) affects the subjects' interest and engagement once they believe themselves to be beyond the gaze of the evaluator.

Deci's finding is that some kinds of exposure to evaluative feedback, *even if the feedback is positive*, can diminish subjects' quality or quantity of engagement with the activity in question. To be more precise, Deci argues that while standards-driven evaluations and sanctions may sometimes bolster a person's “extrinsic motivation” to perform well in an activity, the presence of “intrinsic motivation” falters. While extrinsic motivation involves calculated strategic efforts (say, to gain further praise or rewards), intrinsic motivation involves taking a direct interest in the activity for its own sake—and hence it correlates with greater curiosity, experimentation, creativity, and identification with the activity.

Over time, according to Deci and his colleagues, an educational or workplace regime of carrots and sticks—or even of carrots alone—risks sapping participants' genuine involvement with their projects, leading either to apathetic disengagement or to perfunctory task performance.²⁸ Those whose motivation revolves around approval and disapproval may continue to be highly driven, in this extrinsic fashion, in their studies and their careers; but their participation falls short on Deci's measures of authenticity, creativity, and fulfillment. To avoid sapping people's intrinsic motivation, a teacher or leader must preserve and bolster their sense of autonomy and competence, steering them clear of the shoals of discouragement or helpless incompetence (on one hand) and the alienation of coming to conceptualize their action as externally controlled (on the other).

Self-determination theory, at face value, also offers a lesson for critical practice: that moral feedback should be careful to inoculate itself against the undermining effect by endorsing the competence and the autonomy

of its hearers.²⁹ Though undermined motivation is not as volatile as reactant opposition, it is still unwise to ignore the risk that criticism will diminish hearers' embrace of the moral concerns at issue. This negative outcome, writ large, would be a morally alienated population that treats morality as a social constraint external to themselves, an obstacle or expectation with which to cope more or less effectively.

Beyond the Search for Inner Motivational Variables

The discussion of boomerang research so far has not questioned the interpretive frames used within these studies, and to that we will turn shortly. Before taking a critical stance toward their interpretations, however, we should note that boomerang research is onto something worthy of inquiry. The resulting publications, no matter how skeptically read, should displace any naïve trust we might have had in the effectiveness of blame and related responses. A familiar range of social sanctions, economic pressures, and persuasive remonstrations surround first-order norms—norms for safe driving, for recycling, for doing homework, for treating animals humanely, for shielding others from smoke, and so forth. Yet such measures can work at cross-purposes to the expectations that prompt them.

Nevertheless, these studies stubbornly confine our attention to the narrow frame of conduct—that is, to activity seen as a function of personal interests or goals. In accord with my broadly ecumenical stance toward frames of interpretation, I shall not suggest that the psychological concepts and hypotheses associated with this research are false, empty, or unwarranted. What I shall suggest, instead, is that the same phenomena may be understood along another dimension, and that the resulting account yields a wider and more engaging view. What is at issue in these interactions is more than the risk of “adverse effects” on an individual variable such as subjects’ “motivation” to follow expectations; what is at issue is whether researchers and readers can recognize a critical social dimension to subjects’ activity—a capacity to *signal* resistance, to bring inarticulate concerns into view. The logic of controlled experimentation, however, precludes imagining that a human specimen *addresses* her action across the line between observer and observed. To listen to experimental subjects, in such a way, is to cease honoring the one-way mirror that is to separate research subjects from those who survey the conditions of their behavior.³⁰

In fact, the juxtaposition of Brehm's and Deci's arguments highlights the methodological premise that they share. In the place of Brehm's drive to “experience oneself as free,” Deci posits a basic need to experience oneself as competent and autonomous. The difference between the two

theories turns on contrary assumptions about how well their subjects are faring at the same thing—pursuit of individual goals. Brehm's approach—shared by many economists—is to assume, when he sees an otherwise unexpected behavior, that there must be some hitherto unrecognized purpose thereby generally (or probably) *achieved*. Deci, by contrast, treats certain observations as clear signs of *dysfunction* (dropping out of activities one would otherwise have enjoyed, or becoming an alienated conformist). From there, then, his theorizing concerns the process by which functions have been derailed. Indeed, this is the very dichotomy we should expect when communicative gesture is interpretively flattened into conduct. One psychologist will say anomalous conduct *must* by satisfying some function for the individual—else it would not continue to be produced. Another will say that what's clearest is that the anomaly flags a disruption of psychological functioning—hence something must be amiss *within* the subject.

A social inquiry into these phenomena, by contrast, will be open to a broader frame of interpretation. When people act in ways that look self-defeating as conduct, we must ask whether their activity acquires significance within a wider interaction. The experimenters thus suddenly appear within the frame of the phenomena under consideration—as additional participants who might recognize subjects' activity as speaking *to* them. What subjects end up doing, in boomerang studies, is neither self-contained pursuit of felt satisfactions nor simply a sign of compromised or broken motivation. They are also engaged in drawing attention to a problem, sending up flares in response to their predicament. Paradoxically, this possibility of gestural significance is a real one exactly as soon as it is acknowledged by any observer, direct or indirect. With this shift of frame, however, the success or “health” of what subjects are doing becomes an open question—for its viability as a social gesture will depend in part upon our own responsive uptake of its significance.

In some passages, Brehm's studied indifference to such an angle of interpretation is striking. He reports for example, as a finding of research, that subjects express “hostility” when their perceived freedoms seem “threatened” by his research associates. The coolness of his documentation invites the same parody as the detached field notes of positivist and colonialist anthropology.³¹ This “expression” of hostility is duly written up by Brehm not as a communication that engages him or his colleagues, but as a *sign* of participants' inner psychological state. Nor does he count his research associates as actual *agents* of threat, except metaphorically. It is as if the experiment involved not real interactions but a kind of offline simu-

lation of human interactions. Brehm's assistants, after all, are just helping in certain *observational* procedures through which people's psychological responses to various stimuli can be measured.

On the other hand, Brehm's informal explanatory gloss helps itself to more communicative rhetoric—speaking, for example, of people's “assertion” of freedom, and their “opposition” and “resistance” to influence.³² Though such verbs imply something like responsive agency on the part of research subjects, Brehm's technical discussion reveals these to be shorthand metaphors. The significance of subjects' conduct is at most symbolic; it is an impotent existential protest that may *feel* satisfying, but it does not call for the attention of specific others, such as the members of the research team.

The point here is not to charge Brehm with incompetently ignoring a direct form of explicit address. Brehm and his colleagues have been diligent—according to conventional methodological standards—in isolating the motivational dynamics within their subjects and “controlling for” social variables. The hostile feelings that emerged in Brehm's results, for example, do not seem pointedly directed *toward* the research associates in his studies; participants' feelings are measured through assuredly anonymous “self-reports” at the conclusion of the study. Furthermore, the particular choices and preferences observed in his studies (such as a ranking of musical albums) would be rather odd means for a participant to choose if her conscious purpose were to send a message to the research team or to anyone else. Hence, according to Brehm, the best hypothesis is that subjects satisfied some *other* need—an inner one—through the attitudes and preference shifts recorded in the study.

The evidence that reactance is not a conscious and overt communicative protest, however, does not suffice to show that reactance has no communicative face. If there can be unconscious patterns of conduct, after all, we may just as reasonably expect to find unconscious patterns of social gesture. And indeed clinical psychologists, unlike their laboratory colleagues, treat reactance as a communicative development. Rather than fielding reactance with “a set of tactics designed to defeat the client's stubbornness,” they may approach it “as a phenomenon that emerges between client and therapist in the unfolding interaction.”³³

Such a recent move among therapeutic practitioners stands in dramatic contrast to Freud's “clinically detached” understanding of gesture.³⁴ For while Freud did take a wide view of the functions that might explain “impractical” actions, these functions are consistently glossed as symbolic. With respect to what both he and Nietzsche called “counterwill”—arguably the very same phenomenon as reactance—Freud found a kind of immature

failure of autonomy. Indeed, all gesture might be counted as a “failure of autonomy”; but its point lies precisely in social interdependence. In dichotomizing rational conduct and symbolic gestures, Freud draws attention away from the concrete encounter in which a gesture might be taken up responsively. For insofar as a gesture is merely symbolic, it can engage with no one in particular. There can be neither skill nor assistance with respect to engaging well in such gesture; nor does it put anyone who observes the gesture in the position of responding to it.

2.3 Critical Engagement in Observation and Representation

The discussion of how and where we might discern critical agency rather than “mere conduct,” of course, has brought us directly to the question of the agency we exercise in the process of representation. Hence, not only “mere conduct,” but also “pure representation” are categories open to doubt. Whenever we see claims about activity—in the form of everyday commentary, publications of scientific research, or philosophical metaethics—the representational face of activity is clear. Yet to the extent we can recognize this representational activity as a social move within a local and historical milieu, we can also invoke gesture as a complementary interpretive frame.

As with our interpretation of putative conduct, the relevant question with representation is not simply whether and how a critical message might be *intended*. Rather, the question is what arcs of continued agency are evident through the making of representations, and what kind of response is called forth from us insofar as we recognize this agency. As with our interpretation of conduct, too, there is no algorithm for recognizing gestural significance as such: situational awareness, background understanding, and imagination are indispensable to the recognition of gesture in any form of activity.

Let us return to the boomerang research, but now with an eye on the representational activity of the researchers. In describing others’ agency in the way they do, researchers engage in various kinds of framing, contrast, emphasis, and synthesis. Brehm puts preferences front and center, prioritizing the distinction between substantive preferences and the hypothetical “ghost preference” with which he explains subjects’ conduct—the desire to experience themselves as free. Deci, meanwhile places motivational patterns at the center, distinguishing more and less psychologically healthy variants. Both of these conceptual priorities subtly rework how

these authors and their readers might approach the social world in practice. Brehm's project comes across as a kind of homage to the recalcitrant stubbornness of preference, signaling a laissez-faire stance on which power may as well try what it will.

Deci's work speaks more clearly as a social intervention, beckoning for the protection of an endangered species—the fragile shoots of authentic impulse that might be smothered by the pressures of education and work. Yet when we read his work in this responsive light, a tension emerges between his two ideals for human action. Educators and managers are presumed to be invested in their work of managing the development and activity of children, employees, and so on. What he values on behalf of institutional subjects, meanwhile, is the self-determined authenticity of their conduct—without mention of their capacity to respond critically to the social world they inhabit. The authenticity of educators' activity lies curiously unaddressed in the margin, as does the social responsiveness of children. If alienated disengagement can function as a critical gesture, that very fact is masked in his deciphering of mute clues. By writing up a diagnosis of their inner dysfunction, Deci grants them no agency in making their own struggle evident. What is arguably a benign effort on the behalf of the voiceless turns out to reinforce the distinction between the social agency of managers and educators and the voicelessly self-contained agency of the many subjects they supervise.

Finding gesture in representational activity, we should note, is not the same as diagnosing bias in the *content* of representation. In recent decades a considerable literature has developed around the impossibility of “value-free observation” and fully disinterested scientific research. In the charge that research “exhibits bias,” however, what is at issue is a vice of judgment (“prejudice”) or a distorted variant on clear representation. To see critical gesture in representation, however, is to focus on how the representation-making both answers to its social world and calls for further engagement.

So, as a philosopher encountering the work of Brehm and Deci and their many associates, I suggest a critical revisiting of the habits of thought they encourage. There is no single critical response that is the right one to make tout court to their work; rather, my own responsiveness *meets* this work with my own perspective and agency. In a yet broader frame, these responses are not addressed simply to these psychological researchers or even their colleagues; they are addressed to any and all who might interpret human activity more reflectively.

Gestural Interpretation and the Difference It Makes beyond the Laboratory

How does the neglect of gestural interpretation affect our patterns of response in the world of ordinary encountered action? And how might our stance shift as we incorporate wider gestural frames of interpretation? To examine how psychological patterns of explanation play out in a broader philosophical context, I turn here to Akeel Bilgrami's treatment of oppositional identity. As a work of cultural critique written by a philosopher, it is indicative of certain philosophical habits of mind while simultaneously illustrating their bearing on contemporary social tensions.

In reflecting on the question "What Is a Muslim?" Bilgrami approaches the consolidation of Muslim identity as an instance of what Bernard Williams calls "fundamental commitment."³⁵ Against the Kantian tradition, Williams argues that such contingent commitments—and not any substantive and universal demands of reason—define the horizon beyond which some acts seem practically incoherent, inconsistent with an agent's self-conception. As a Muslim whose self-conception remains entirely compatible with liberalism and modernity, Bilgrami seeks to come to terms with a tenacious strain of fundamental commitment to Islam, a stance on which anything short of staunch and devout allegiance is experienced as "traumatic . . . [with] integrity-destroying effects on the psyche."

As a third-person explanatory strategy, Bilgrami points to historical conditions under which Muslim populations naturally experience psychological resistance to domination. The motivational predicament of Muslims in the wake of various forms of imperialist humiliation, according to Bilgrami, has resulted in "reactive and defensive actions";³⁶ against the demand for passivity, reactive opposition seems to be the only alternative. Such an explanation, qua explanation, is "impeccable," he grants. It encapsulates the correct third-person stance toward understanding fundamentalists' powerful identification with Islamic doctrine.

Yet the third-person explanatory stance, Bilgrami argues, "cannot be allowed to exhaust one's self-conception. On the lips of sympathetic others ("This is how things are with *them*"), these remarks are the only stance to take. But on our lips, on the lips of Muslims, they cannot be the only remarks we make, unless we treat ourselves primarily as objects."³⁷ In contrast to this third-person stance, he recommends the first-person stance of "free, unreactive agency": "There should be place and possibility for the switch to the first person [with which we will say] 'it is up to us to assess the relative merits of [Islam's] diverse doctrinal commitments . . . to fashion a depoliticized Islam so that its appeal and relevance is spiritualist

and universalist rather than . . . perpetually exploitable by the fundamentalist political factions, whom we oppose.”³⁸

Yet Bilgrami has replicated the very opposition we find in the work of Brehm and Deci: the problematic behavior of Islamic fundamentalists is cast either as the satisfaction of a psychological need or as something broken and irrational. It is a psychological mechanism gratifying essentially individual appetite, or a dysfunctional lack of clear and transparent autonomous intentions. The third person and the first person face off in exhaustive opposition. How might we recognize a second-personal variation on this narrative?

A gestural twist on Bilgrami’s reflections requires resisting the narrow frame he applies to the activity of devout Muslims. Beyond being a psychological reflex, and beyond issuing from a dysfunctional form of bad faith, patterns of fundamentalist allegiance also *address* us, demanding a response. Even if our response is a self-conscious silence, we have left the spectatorial sidelines once we place ourselves within the frame of a social encounter. The wisdom of taking ourselves to be addressed, in this way, does not hinge upon any particular interpretation of a “message” sent by oppositional gestures. For their meaning and status will depend partly upon us—upon all of us who struggle to make something of the concerns that thereby come to light.

One further gestural turn is apt, however: even if the gestural, responsive, and second-personal dimension of agency is missing in Bilgrami’s explicit account, it is not absent in the activity of his writing. For Bilgrami’s reflection engages in a responsive dance with fundamentalist Islam in spite of itself, and engages us readers in that dance simultaneously. Even while claiming that radical Islamists themselves “have taken the wrong attitude,”³⁹ Bilgrami becomes a translucent apologist for their inchoate grievances, pulling their “irrational defensiveness” one step further from the brink of opaquely irredeemable conduct.

These reflections on oppositional strains of Islam may serve here as one case study within a wider field. In the wake of Brehm’s work, several psychologists have developed clinical measures of reactance as a dispositional variable of individuals, and these indicate some correlation between reactance and membership in socially stigmatized groups (though the relation between reactance and gender remains contested).⁴⁰ On one hand, we might conclude that a reactive temperament is one kind of “moral damage” incurred over time under alienating and oppressive circumstances.⁴¹ On the other hand, as Lisa Tessman argues at length, character traits that undermine a person’s individual flourishing are sometimes exactly the traits

called for in the context of resisting oppression.⁴² If reactance represents a turn away from the existentialist ideal of autonomy, we may wonder which social conditions encourage such a turn. As Diana Meyers has argued, the most “unbalanced” emotional dispositions—“hypersensitivity, paranoia, anger, and bitterness”—may serve as an important vehicle of “heterodox moral perception.”⁴³ When a person’s concerns do not “add up” to a legitimate grievance by the conventions of public cross-examination, her actions may nonetheless serve as a cumulative index of frustration, a flagging of attention, an inchoate call for vigilance or solidarity.

2.4 Some Suggestions about Relations between Moral Philosophy and Psychology

In recent moral philosophy, it is evident that psychology (including sub-fields such as neuropsychology) is embraced as the discipline to which we should turn when we wish to describe and explain the actions we observe. Psychology, in turn, is usually understood as value-free inquiry that illuminates (among other things) the mechanisms by which an individual’s moral beliefs, particular judgments, emotions, and motivations are shaped. If normative ethics has been charged with telling us the right way to act, moral psychology has been charged with telling us how it is that people act (or fail to act) on those moral ideals. In what follows, I will suggest that the phrase “moral psychology” might be inflected differently—not as a scientific psychology of the moral domain, but as the openly moral project of psychological understanding. Even with such an expanded vision, however, we should be wary of privileging psychological approaches over more directly social patterns of inquiry.

Focusing first on how to understand moral psychology, we should note two potential approaches—or at least, two ends of a spectrum of approaches—to how normative and empirical concerns are intertwined. At one extreme, there is what we can call “laboratory” or “empirical” moral psychology, and at the other is “philosophical” or “hermeneutic” moral psychology. The former takes a certain paradigm of moral agency as settled (by common sense, intuition, or a particular celebrated moral theory) and then asks empirical questions about how various psychological processes and attributes play a role in that kind of agency. For example, researchers may engage in brain scans while prompting subjects to respond to a particular moral dilemma, such as a forced choice between causing a serious harm and permitting an even greater harm. What counts as a paradigmatic occasion of moral decision making (such as responding to this kind of

dilemma) is taken to be settled in advance, and the goal is to model some aspect of what “goes on in the head” when people are prompted toward it in some way, either verbally or circumstantially.

In this sort of moral psychology, the disciplinary methods of psychological research are brought to bear on morally important situations. Philosophical assumptions about what those situations are, and how to identify them, must be whittled down to what the researchers might take to be uncontroversial, so as to isolate a pattern of data. That data, in turn, may prove strategically relevant in handling moral challenges that arise in education, public policy, penal institutions, and so on.⁴⁴

A rather different approach to moral psychology is illustrated by moral philosophers such as Christine Swanton (to whose work we shall turn in the final chapter). On her account, moral philosophy is enriched by some “background theory” connecting ethics with psychology. Yet this theory is “not to be understood as formed from a value-free ‘empirical’ standpoint which renders it ‘neutral’ and thereby privileged. On the contrary, the psychology . . . is itself deeply philosophical . . . actively informed by the thinking of philosophers such as Aristotle, Nietzsche, and Kierkegaard.”⁴⁵ The psychologists to whom Swanton appeals are not attempting “basic research” that may simply happen to lend support to certain policies or attitudes. They are clinical innovators, such as Horney and Fromm, whose strong normative orientation toward psychic health is already infused with philosophical reflection; their concepts of psychic functioning are perfectionist, highly context-dependent, and not easily operationalized for controlled study. They do not aspire to the stance of disengaged observers; they are unlikely to deny that their normative psychology is subject to a “looping effect”; reliance on its concepts, in clinical practice, is bound to reshape the reality to which they are applied.⁴⁶ Rather than seeking to avoid looping effects, clinicians aspire to tell the difference between virtuous spirals and vicious spirals of influence. Psychological ideas are more or less useful handles on individual experience and activity.

The thinking of philosophical or hermeneutic moral psychologists moves largely from normative premises about flourishing toward interpretive diagnoses of particular cases. Swanton argues that the reason moral philosophers must read such work is to “strengthen the network” of beliefs into which we integrate our ethics; we benefit from bringing a wide range of relevant premises into our philosophical process of reflective equilibrium. The fact that vindictiveness may disguise itself as concern for justice, for example, helps moral philosophers make distinctions more carefully.

To Swanton's argument, we can add that a further role for moral psychology of this second, hermeneutic, kind is to foster self-knowledge even among nonphilosophers. The perfectionist and philosophical psychology of Horney and Fromm is designed not just to capture, but also to empower their patients in their patients' own attempts to reshape their habits and expectations. Familiarity with the value-laden concept of neurosis, for example, is expected to give agents themselves (or perhaps benign therapists in interactive dialogue with them, especially if they are children) new kinds of interpretations and expectations, and hence a new practical grip on their own problematic habits.

Researchers themselves are likely either to embrace or deny the value-laden character of their concepts and aims. Yet an affirmation or denial of this stance carries little weight. So-called value-free inquiry is inquiry whose values have not been drawn into dialogue with clearly critical responses, and this fact might often enough be explained by those values' being widely shared by those whose voices are most prominent. Meanwhile, no confession of value-laden participant-observer savvy can guarantee that one has a satisfactory account of what those values are or what roles they play. No way of interpreting human activity can inoculate itself against drawing critical response from others.

The last reflection we might make on this odyssey through the field of boomerang research is this: we should be wary of casting psychology as *the* scientific work that illuminates human action. Actual psychologists may in fact explain action by reference to a wider frame than the motivational pulleys and levers *within* an individual; yet when they do so, their patterns of explanation lean toward social psychology and sociology. Hence, I call for moral philosophers, and others, to stand back from the uncritical tendency to privilege psychology over other approaches to understanding human activity. As morality is a social phenomenon, it can be illuminated through social inquiry, not all of which gives explanatory pride of place to the features and dispositions of individual minds. We would approach the observation of moral phenomena quite differently if we made room for *moral sociology*—meaning not just the study of how individual moral attitudes correlate with social variables, but how moral concerns emerge and develop through social encounters, as well. Further reflections on the project of moral sociology will be deferred until chapter 6, for it will depend on intervening discussion of moral communication.

Supposing for now that it is possible to frame much of our activity as socially responsive gesture, our next question might be, “What follows?” In particular, what exactly would it mean to suggest that gesture can be

more or less apt or well engaged? What would it mean to approach critical gesture in a more reflective way? The next chapter approaches such questions by means of a more familiar kind of philosophical inquiry—into how to conceive the point of overtly critical responses, such as praise and blame. If this chapter has established that critical responses are more pervasive than we might think, chapter 3's normative account of their point will bear on a wide range of activity.

3 Communicating Moral Concern: The Point of Critical Engagement

Having argued that engaging responsively with one another's action is morally vital, and that such responsiveness is recognizable in a broad range of activities, we are ready to ask directly about how to conceive the point of critical engagement. The argument here is a normative one; in practice people may clearly have a variety of self-conscious aims when they respond to each other's actions. Apt forms of responsiveness, however, recognize a goal for engagement that is distinct both from promoting the good (in the form of preconceived outcomes) and from demonstrating the right or true (expressing justified claims or attitudes).

Relatively little philosophical discussion has focused on critical responses or reactions themselves, as opposed to the moral status of the actions to which we might respond; in this chapter I turn to the most influential thread of directly relevant work. As this work does not take up the possibility (or implications) of framing activity as gesture, I will temporarily set aside the frames of interpretation discussed in chapters 1 and 2. Instead, I will look directly at how philosophers have seemed torn between valuing blame insofar as it promotes the good and valuing blame insofar as it takes the right expressive stance. I will outline the alternative that follows from recognizing blame and related responses neither as mere conduct nor as representation, but instead as communicative gestures. From this communicative angle, we value moral responses insofar as they effectively engage hearers' attention to moral concerns.

3.1 Beyond Cool Judgment: The Practical Face of Moral Criticism

In recent decades, a vibrant philosophical discussion of morally critical reactions has taken shape, spurred by Peter Strawson's 1962 lecture, "Freedom and Resentment" (published in 1974). The main target of Strawson's argument is the mindset of philosophers who foment a metaphysical

debate between determinism and free will. Distancing himself from both metaphysical doctrines, Strawson urges philosophers to begin on a practical note. Praise and blame, he argues, must be first considered not in terms of their metaphysical warrant, but in light of “the *attitudes and reactions* of people directly involved in transactions with each other”:¹

The central commonplace that I want to insist on is the very great importance that we attach to the attitudes and intentions towards us of other human beings, and the great extent to which our personal feelings and reactions depend upon, or involve, our beliefs about these attitudes and intentions . . . goodwill, affection, or esteem on the one hand or contempt, indifference, or malevolence on the other.²

Among the personal feelings and reactions called forth by these perceptions is the resentment cited in his title. Such reactions are woven into the very fabric of our personal relationships and self-understanding. Hence any doctrine that would have us leave resentment aside, Strawson argues, neglects something essential about our lives. No metaphysical theory need be invoked to justify these emotionally charged stances; experiencing and demonstrating them is simply crucial to the form of life we inhabit. Though occasional circumstances, Strawson admits, might lead us temporarily to override or suspend it, our general tendency to resent those who harm or disregard us is not up for wholesale refutation. In practice this tendency is expressive and representative of participation in human personhood and relations.

It is unfortunate, I believe, that resentment is enshrined in the title of Strawson’s essay, as if it were the most essential or emblematic ingredient of our participation in moral life. Yet it would be hard to exaggerate the importance of Strawson’s work in setting the stage for recent philosophical inquiry into criticism. He has helpfully shifted emphasis away from metaphysical debates about the meaning of predicates (such as “is morally responsible” and “is blameworthy”). The emphasis, following in the wake of Strawson’s work, has been on moral and even psychological questions about the attitudes and activities involved in *holding* someone morally responsible. Gary Watson summarizes the significance of this shift, which does not in itself imply a privileged role for resentment:

[Consequentialists and libertarians] share . . . the assumption that our reactive attitudes commit us to the truth of some independently apprehensible proposition which gives the content of the belief in responsibility. In Strawson’s view . . . the idea (our idea) that we are responsible is to be understood by the *practice*, which itself is not a matter of holding some propositions to be true, but of expressing our concerns and demands about our treatment of one another.³

If moral criticism is an integral part of moral life, it is because (and only insofar as) we are not merely spectators debating the status of moral “players,” but are ourselves taking part in morality as a social practice when we criticize.

Strawson was by no means the first philosopher to focus on the practical dimension of holding people responsible. Yet by and large it was consequentialists who had invoked the practical face of moral criticism—and they did so in the course of arguing that blame, like any other conduct, is to be morally judged by its fruits. What Strawson inserts into the discussion, then, is room for debate about what the practical point of criticism might be.⁴ In other words, we should not assume that *if* criticism is practical, its point should be understood as the securing of specifiable behavioral results.

In “Freedom and Resentment” Strawson’s main target is the consequentialist preoccupation with “regulating behavior in socially desirable ways”—a project that seems to call for a wholesale embrace of an “objective attitude” toward others. Such an objective attitude, as he portrays it, entails casting others not as autonomous co-inhabitants of our social world, but as complex organisms to predict, control, and cope with. In contrast, Strawson champions the “participant attitude” as a more natural and personal stance. The participant attitude sets aside such a direct concern with effecting change in the hearer’s behavior; instead it embraces the value of a more personally meaningful project—the project, as it were, of treating one another as agents. In holding people responsible, he argues, we express the attitudes appropriate to regarding them as persons who choose their actions.

To be sure, Strawson’s way of emphasizing practice does not imply that moral judgment and justification do not matter at all; rather, Strawson interprets our moral justifications as themselves invoking the conditions under which we may carry on our moral practices. “Participant” critics, unlike “regulative” critics, do carefully stake out claims about what people deserve. Yet specific claims about desert—rather than appealing to “the panicky metaphysics” of free will—depend for their intelligibility upon their fit with the *general* practice of holding people responsible. That general reactive practice, according to Strawson and his followers, is one that requires no independent metaphysical grounding. In a Kantian pattern of transcendental argument, Strawson understands the metaphysics of moral status to be no more (and no less) than the conceptual terrain to which we are already practically committed. Practices of holding people responsible thus serve as the bedrock upon which we make sense of specific

attitudes concerning responsibility, as well as of the judgments by which we articulate them.

3.2 What Is the Practical Point of Moral Criticism?

Peter Strawson's account furnishes two initial commitments worth endorsing within our larger account: First, that we approach moral criticism, or holding-people-responsible, foremost as an activity—not primarily as an attempt to capture and represent people's moral status. Second, that we should resist reducing the point of moral criticism to the goal of *regulating behavior* in any straightforward way. Around this latter conviction, though, we will need to tread very carefully, for it would be easy to leap to the conclusion that critical responses can be conducted perfectly well without attending to how they affect people.

An Example and Two Familiar Candidates

Strawson's discussion of reactive attitudes juxtaposes two broad ways of conceiving the point of critical responses. His argument leverages readers' suspicions about a *regulative* stance in order to support what I will call (roughly following Gary Watson) an *expressivist* account.⁵ In this chapter I will articulate a third way of conceiving the central purpose of moral criticism. However, it will be useful first to illustrate the two approaches in "Freedom and Resentment," and to recognize how deeply entrenched and polarized their rivalry has become.

Suppose, then, that Ursula finds herself part of a raucous dinner conversation, during which an acquaintance unfurls a grotesquely demeaning stereotype in an attempt at humor. People respond differently to such a situation depending on their sensitivity, their temperament, their sense of social leverage—and perhaps their degree of sobriety. Thrown into an actual case, my response is bound to fall short of what Ursula will fantasize, in retrospect, would have been perfectly apt. Nevertheless, both as her thoughts race toward some actual response and as she later sifts mentally through counterfactual variations, there will be some background hypotheses at work regarding what the point of a critical response might be. Only by recognizing the point of our activity can we hope to refine it.⁶

One proposal would be that the dinner-table critic endeavors to get the speaker (and perhaps others) *not to say things like that*, where "like that" covers (at least) insults of the specific kind that provokes her response—though she might ambitiously take aim at a broader class of insults or attitudes. The point, then, would be to exert a *corrective* influence on

conduct, and hence to do something with the net effect of improving the social climate.

It is an empirical question how best to pursue this first goal, of regulation. Perhaps a pointed remark will suffice to redirect conversation and curb the speaker's thoughtlessness. In settling upon whether to make a pointed remark, however, Ursula must be sensitive to psychological facts about what makes her acquaintance tick. Perhaps she perceives the joker as grasping for attention, so she will be careful not to look dramatically outraged in a way that might yield satisfaction. Recalling debates about Skinnerian reinforcements, she might thus speculate: what manner of reaction could possibly get this person (and those similarly inclined) to *stop* acting so offensively? If she suspects that ignoring the comment will best serve that purpose (and if no other social effects hang in the balance), then she may endeavor to look indifferent. Otherwise, she considers some calculated intervention. If the point of moral response is *regulative*, then her practical priority must be to *steer* this person, and perhaps others in earshot, away from hurtful conduct.

By contrast, Strawson frames the practical point of normal moral reactions as *expressive*: they involve us in demonstrating our convictions and normative expectations. Even if it results in a smug dismissal on the part of the boorish joker, then there would be good reason for Ursula to express her indignation. Indeed, even if it would egg the speaker on and make Ursula the outcast of the party—without even the promise of any happy results down the line—she would have a good *moral* reason to take an open stand. No doubt she might still have overriding reasons to keep mum—perhaps another friend's momentous career opportunity in true public service will be thrown if she disrupts the jocular atmosphere. Still, if we take an expressivist view of critical response, a heavy moral weight rests on the side of at least making a face, if not taking a stand. At stake is who the critic represents herself to be. And if we invoke Peter Strawson's Kantian background, we can amplify this thought: at stake is the representation she implicitly offers of how people always *ought* to be.

Objections to Regulative and Expressive Accounts

Against the Regulative View

An argument against relying on the regulative understanding figures centrally in Strawson's essay; our challenge will be to make sure that we appreciate its force without overstating its conclusion. In embellishing the theme of behavior regulation Strawson introduces the notion of an

"objective attitude," associating it with a broadly causal and consequentialist stance toward social interaction. Unfortunately, the cool and reductive outlook that Strawson opposes belongs to no one thinker in particular. Furthermore, in choosing the word "objective" to describe this stance, he has harnessed multiple connotations that might arguably be teased apart in practice. Must a person count as a mere "object" of treatment whenever "objectivity" serves as an epistemic ideal? Yet because his argument has been so influential, and because his intuitions are echoed elsewhere in moral philosophy, Strawson's portrayal of the regulative account is worth examining.

The leitmotif of Strawson's negative argument is an objection to casting the basic point of criticism (and other forms of sanction such as punishment) as "regulating behavior in socially desirable ways."⁷ That phrase, quite remarkably, occurs virtually verbatim *four* times in his otherwise fluid prose. To be clear, Strawson does not oppose *all* attempts to regulate behavior. Calculated intervention may be required, for example, in crisis situations where we make potentially fateful decisions to thwart or manipulate violent and reckless people; indeed anyone may occasionally take a strategic or managerial point of view toward crime, addiction, and other behavioral problems. The difficulty, Strawson argues, comes with a wholesale adoption of this regulative stance as a guide for our reaction to others. At least some of the time, we must let down our guard and prioritize the personal rather than the strategic.

Strawson's worry is especially compelling against the background of a familiar Kantian refrain: in trying to steer others toward the good, a person shoulders a heavy moral burden of both moral confidence and empirical knowledge. If a moral critic must improve behavior, she must be reliable at not just one but *two* difficult tasks: knowing what behavior to elicit, and knowing how to bring it about. Such a critic arrogates a position of moral and technical leadership—as if standing at the helm of a great ship with one hand on the ship's heavy wheel and the other on a map by which the whole vessel must be steered. Though the sincere regulative critic is surely humble in recognizing that any one person's knowledge and influence are limited, the Kantian rejoinder is that such a critic is still boldly undertaking to exert leverage over what we ought to see as the province of others' agency.

Although particular consequentialist critics insist that we must be conscientious about the limits of our own perspective, the regulative conception entails that if moral criticism is ever practically justified, it is because we *can* achieve reasonable confidence that we are exercising the right sort

of influence on others' conformity to norms. A critic who is agnostic about what is best—say, someone for whom the experience of problem and provocation is more salient than any concrete vision of what norms or ideals to implement—must sit at the margins of critical practice, on a regulative view. She cannot carry out—and perhaps withdraws from the very ideal of—the regulation of others' behavior.

This leads us to what may seem the most decisive way of putting the difficulty with the regulative notion. In her preoccupation with practical results, a regulatively minded critic cannot keep others' agency in view. Given this goal, in other words, she must think of their distinct agency as an obstacle to her moral goal, rather than as a partner in ongoing activity. Insofar as the regulative critic is a problem solver and a prioritizer, she does not neglect the practical dimension of responsive agency. But if I am the target of a regulative critical response, I will find that my moral agency has been flattened into conforming to prescriptions at the level of conduct.

Furthermore, getting others to behave in any determinate way requires some degree of political leverage or other socially extended power. So, the regulative approach seems especially sensible to those with legislative or institutional power, but it effectively consigns less powerful individuals to the critical margins. Part of the appeal of the Stoic refusal to seek influence—and hence of the expressivist view on which influence is not our objective—is the distinction afforded between moral power and political power. Against regulative authorities, Stoics (as well as Christians and Kantians) may insist that those without political power may turn out, by that very token, to serve as better exemplars of *moral* power. Such a consolation has considerable appeal. Yet it carries considerable danger as well if criticism is a necessary tool of social change.

Against the Expressivist View

As Strawson's argument is structured around the opposition between regulative and expressive approaches, the force of his conclusion benefits from a “process of elimination” logic. Such an argument for expressivism can hold water, of course, only if the expressive account is not prone to equally troublesome risks—and only if these two alternatives really do exhaust the field of options. Alas, I think we will find the expressive account to be equally riddled with troubles—and these should add weight to our interest in a third way. So let us consider those troubles.

There are a variety of worries worth raising about putting the expression of resentment and indignation at the center of critical practice. Some of these worries simply concern the corrosive psychological effects of

allowing emotions like resentment to take hold at all—the Stoics voice such a concern, and with a different tone so does Nietzsche. The central *moral* difficulty with expressivism, however, revolves around how *unambitious* it is to express oneself. Though the Strawsonian expressivist is emotionally vulnerable in an entirely un-Stoic fashion, she is like the Stoic in making herself into a sort of exhibit, projecting and expressing her moral ideal in some way. Yet exhibits may easily be either overlooked or misunderstood, especially if they are not moderated with an eye toward their reception.

For expression to succeed as expression, hearers must recognize the nature of what is being expressed. Yet nothing more is required: an expression of sadness succeeds, qua expression, as soon as the audience understands that the speaker is furnishing them, sincerely, with indications of a saddened inner state. The audience need not have a nuanced understanding of circumstances to which the emotion responds, or what bearing its occasion might have on their own lives, in order for expression to have taken place. The same can be said for expressions of moral emotions such as resentment and indignation.

Expression often falls short. There is therefore one respect in which expression does not go far or deep enough for the purpose of practically engaging another person, and another respect in which it may overreach and fail to rein in its practical consequences. First, I will address the ways in which expression may simply fall short. First, we seem to imagine that the power of expression lies entirely on the side of the person expressing. Yet understanding depends on local norms, conventions, and habits. Hence, socially and politically marginalized people often find that their expressive efforts fail to meet with recognition. As Marilyn Frye puts it, “It is a tiresome truth of women’s experience that our anger is generally not well-received. Men (and sometimes women) ignore it, see it as our being ‘upset’ or ‘hysterical,’ or see it as craziness. Attention is turned not to what we are angry about but to the project of calming us down and to the topic of our ‘mental stability.’”⁸ Some feminist theorists diagnose, here, a problem of social dismissal. Dismissal is at work “when what we do or say, as assessed by what we would have described as our intentions . . . is either not taken seriously or not regarded at all in the context in which it is meant to have its effect.”⁹ Yet the abrupt experience of dismissal shades off into a more subtle difficulty. For without confirmatory patterns of social uptake over time, we cannot develop clarity about what it is that we have to express; emotions such as anger do not fully crystallize, do not admit of clear introspection and articulation.

There is another danger in retaining a focus on “expression” while pressing for better political and social conditions under which inner states may be recognized. For we can appreciate an emotion’s significance insofar as it draws our attention to some concern *beyond* the emotion itself. Recall Frye’s observation that attention fails to turn “to what we are angry *about*.” So overcoming dismissal requires much more than making a hearer acknowledge the fact that one is angry. As bad as it is when a critic’s response is dismissed as “hysterical worry” rather than anger, it is not much better when a critic’s response is dismissed as “angry over something or other.” For in such cases anger is dismissed as a symptom of an idiosyncratic qualm or sensitivity.

Consider again Ursula’s dinner party predicament as she encounters an insulting slur. In the worst case, a critical response may meet with restance or with such radical dismissal that the intervention remains a non-starter; people begin to discuss whether she is in a premenstrual phase, or whether she has taken her prescription drugs, and so on. (Paradoxically, anger over this miscarriage of anger may further derail the subject of discussion away from the disrespect at issue in the insult.) Another sort of misfire, however, happens when hearers recognize her reactive emotion—say, indignation—but register it as a fact about *her*, rather than as a sign of the social predicament to which she is alert. “Jokes like that get her all morally fired up,” they might say, or “She’s a moral philosopher, supersensitive about political correctness and never offending anyone.” This shortcoming of the expressive account, in other words, is that it eviscerates the point of critical engagement by converting its content into a bit of information *about the messenger*.

Consider an analogy. One way to look at a photograph is to focus on how the combination of substrate and pigment accounts for the patterns of light reflected by the surface. Someone who engineers inkjet printers might tend look at photographs that way, and we might be amazed at what she can notice about the object in front of her. Yet such an up-close examination prevents the photograph from functioning *as* a photograph. In appreciating a photograph as such, we become receptive to recognizing *the world* in the particular way made possible *through* photographic technology. What I mean to invoke is not, of course, a certain common idealization of photography—as the mechanism of a perfect and inert capturing. Anyone who appreciates the technologies and techniques of photography recognizes that photographs are always uniquely motivated, constrained, situated, and mediated presentations of the world. Though it can be misunderstood, a photograph must always be *taken to disclose*.

The same is true of a critical response to the world, properly understood. To fail to hear the world *through* the critic, reading the expressions of the critic instead as an indication of what lies *within*, is to misunderstand criticism. The expressive account, considered as a thesis about the point of critical responsiveness, amounts to the enshrinement of this misunderstanding.¹⁰

Many people find that the concept of expression resonates positively—certainly expression is a positive trope in an individualist culture. Perhaps that explains why feminists and others have retained the label “expressivist” even for theories that in fact require something much more subtle and socially complex than expression. Indeed, Sue Campbell’s oft-cited feminist discussion of emotional expression builds on Frye’s concerns about uptake, and offers a “process account” that involves “collaboration of interpreters” and “does not just reveal or disclose”¹¹ emotions. Margaret Walker, also, constructs an account of morality she calls “expressive-collaborative”¹² rather than merely expressive. Collaboration, here, clearly invokes the more concrete social interactions in which uptake might happen more or less well.

Feminist process-oriented accounts of emotion are deeply valuable, and their insights will be worth revisiting. A rich account of emotion, however, cannot draw much nourishment from the roots of “expression”—the “putting outward” of something that exists in inner form—for these connotations grow too thick and too pervasively to be shored up as a socially nuanced account. The rhetoric of expression tempts us, at every turn, to imagine a psychological state that is settled first within, and only subsequently published for others to notice.¹³

Expression often overreaches. There is a further difficulty with the expressive account. While some people become disoriented and tentative as they repeatedly find no uptake for the concerns behind their indignation, others enjoy an entirely solid confidence in identifying and expressing attitudes like indignation. Perhaps for lack of attentive dialogue either in early experience or in familiar circles, such confident critics hardly notice when others give the first cues of resisting their take on events, and they take no responsibility for misunderstandings that may result from their expressive speech. In describing the very point of criticism as expressive, we license an aloofness in such individuals that is no less disturbing than the managerial ambitions implicit in the regulative view.

This danger is evident in R. Jay Wallace’s book-length development of Strawson’s account. Wallace articulates his expressivist thesis in the course of denying that negative Strawsonian attitudes—his “moral sentiments”—

are malevolent and revenge-like. On the contrary, he argues, we should understand blame and other sanctions in light of their expressive function:

We are not just venting feelings of anger and hatred . . . ; we are demonstrating our commitment to certain moral standards, as regulative of social life. Once this point is grasped, blame and moral sanction can be seen to have a positive, perhaps irreplaceable contribution to make to the constitution and maintenance of moral communities: by giving voice to the reactive emotions, these responses help to articulate, and thereby to affirm and deepen, our commitment to a set of common moral obligations.¹⁴

Since this is the central location at which the function of reactive attitudes is articulated, it is striking that Wallace mentions only the ways in which expressions can highlight morally salient facts about the critics themselves. The commitment of “ours” that is affirmed can only be the commitments of the critics, those doing the articulation. No particular concern for uptake—for what others *make of* a show of indignation—comes to the surface within Wallace’s account of the function of critical moral responses.¹⁵ Thus, should the expression of resentment and indignation be entirely misunderstood, nothing about this expressivist view, as such, would give pause to the expressivist critic. If agency is neatly apportioned, we can place all responsibility for interpretation on the side of the interpreter.

A purely expressivist view, then, invites one of two disturbing corollaries. Perhaps we are to embrace a consequence-indifferent stance and aim only for the individual task of exemplifying a moral ideal. Or perhaps we are to assume (as Wallace seems to do) that expression reliably makes a “positive . . . contribution” to a community’s convergence on shared moral commitments. To say so, however, would be to imply that boomerang phenomena are impossible, inconceivable, or somehow inapplicable to morally critical responses.¹⁶

Peter Strawson himself was confident that the expression of typical reactive attitudes pretty reliably tends to work out well. Of course, it is in one sense reasonable to expect unreflective reactions to serve an indispensable role in some moral interactions. Under favorable background conditions, meeting avoidable injury with resentment might prompt moral repair, promote mutual regard, and refine people’s normative bearings. We can certainly give a morally charitable reading to expressive intuitions.

Nevertheless, under difficult but familiar conditions, the expression of reactive attitudes is liable to cause misunderstanding and failure of communication. Expressivist intuitions may lead us astray in exactly the kinds

of difficult cases that should invite philosophical reflection—namely cases in which critic and hearer do *not* share a common normative vocabulary, a history of clear communication, and parallel ways of parsing cues and gestures. The meaning of an *expressive* act, *as such*, is contained entirely on the initiating side. Even if I am not infallible in *judging* my inner states, the metaphor of “venting” or “letting them out” implies that emotions will present *themselves*, just as they are. As a result, misunderstandings of my attitude must count as failures of apprehension. Hence nothing about the expressive account, as such, encourages the vigilance of imagining that what actually *comes across* can reflect on the speaker as much as on the hearer.

The risks of indulging in reactive “expression” are in fact considerable. It matters little that the expressivist *disavows* any intent to control or substantively guide behavior; the problem is precisely that the expressivist believes that her own intentions suffice to settle the social meaning of her critical response. She does not do her part to head off misunderstandings—or at least, her expressivist account does not prompt any such concern. As third parties, of course, we may step in to bridge misunderstandings in the wake of reactive attitudes that arouse resistance and misunderstanding. Nonetheless, we should resist the expressive account as a *philosophical* account of the moral point of critical responsiveness. For our philosophical account ought to guide the way forward in transforming emerging and habitual responses into a more reflectively tuned practice.

3.3 Sketching a Third View: Communication of Moral Concern

What alternative is there to the expressive and regulative views? I will describe a middle path, on which the point of moral criticism is to communicate moral concern. Picking up the thread of argument from chapters 1 and 2, we can affirm that this ideal—communicating moral concern—fleshes out what the vague compliment of “aptness” should capture when we apply it to critical social responses. It will illuminate critical activity along its gestural dimension, highlighting neither its representational claims nor its blunt profile as purposive conduct.

On this account, the aptness of a critical response will hang on whether and how fully the hearer comes to *recognize* the very problem that animates the critic’s response, and to focus practical *attention* upon it. This account has the advantage of making sense of some unreflective or habitual critical gestures, while also offering grounds for reflective improvement in light of the shifting and volatile social world in which moral problems appear.

When our criticism aims to communicate moral concern, we avoid both the moral condescension involved in attempting to prescribe or manage specific beliefs and behaviors, and also the carelessness of expressing reactive attitudes without sensitivity to an audience's interpretation and uptake. Reaching a hearer's attention with a concern means pressing one's agency *just far enough* in the other's direction to spark her own engagement with moral concerns without overriding the distinct perceptual and perspectival qualities introduced by her own agency.

In confronting the offensive joker, for example, the moral point of critical responsiveness as such is not to bring the joker's behavior into line with some guideline, though a critic may fall back on this regulative project. Nor is it to express outrage—though a gesture of outrage may sometimes serve communicative purposes, especially in securing the attention of third parties. Insofar as response is a practical form of agency, it does not aim its attention entirely "backward" toward the moral status of the joker's action, though a wise critic may marshal persuasive claims and arguments in an aptly engaged fashion.

What reflective criticism aims for—if it attends both to the joker's moral agency and the possibility of making a practical moral difference *to* that agency—is that the character of her moral concern come across and engage attention. The character of concern will not be wholly determined by the status or content of *what was done*, but by the considerations that animate a particular critic's response. One who has indulged in offensive slurs, for example, ought to emerge with his attention focused not on the mere fact that someone was alarmed or offended, but on how to respond to the problem to which the concern gestures—a problem about the relation between his denigrating speech and its social implications.

In some cases, apt communication will take forms that overlap with expressive or regulative methods. Expressing outrage may lead a hearer to take a critic's concern to heart, and this taking-to-heart may in turn prompt future conformity with a socially beneficial norm. And especially where a background of trust sets the tone, a prescriptive intervention may prompt a reconstruction of the considerations behind it. When a friend cuts me short with the order, "Don't say that!" there's a chance that such a prescription alone will strike me as a sign of my friend's concern, and hence orient me to the cause for his alarm. But our philosophical account of critical practice must be especially applicable to difficult cases—and it is in difficult cases that regulative and expressive goals do not dovetail with each other well; nor does either goal require agents to engage with one another as such.

The details will require considerable thinking through. For one thing, the concepts of *problem*, *concern*, and *attention* have not been central to most moral theory, and I aim to give them the sort of pivotal role in criticism that is usually accorded to concepts such as belief, justification, effects, and intention. For now, I will allow a fairly vague notion of moral concern to serve as a placeholder for the focal point of critical communications. Chapter 5 will develop the notion of concern in greater detail, showing how its content or significance is wider—and more dependent on embodied details of interpretation—than the content of moral propositions as such.

A related difficulty is that modern philosophical ideas of action, and their commonsense counterparts, tempt us to think of agency in terms of distinct actions, each performed by one or another individual. The kind of social skill that enables good criticism requires us to recognize critical agency as a kind of communicative agency that is *essentially distributed and intertwined* over temporal and social dimensions. Chapter 4 takes up the temporally and interpersonally distributed dimensions of agency as they emerge in critical communications.

Shifting Attention

If what we care most about, as critics, happens at the level of hearer *attention*, then we will need a rich set of concepts with which to describe attention.

What I have in mind differs from the kind of attention involved in idealistic, theoretical, or mystical contemplation in two related ways. First, such contemplation must fix on something taken to be already determinate and clear in its own right, and the stance taken toward its subject is usually distant from practical and moral engagement. When we speak of contemplation, we invoke a sort of timeless suspension of practical demands, as in prayer or meditation. Contemplation may even include certain interpersonal forms of attention, as when people become engrossed in one another, each basking in the wonders of the other and of the relation that makes intimate familiarity possible. This sort of contemplation is rich with moral implications—explored, for example, by Iris Murdoch;¹⁷ yet it still keeps the practical world and its demands at arms' length. Critical moral attention, by contrast, is the kind of attention we pay when, as we say, something *needs attending to*. It is the attention we pay to problems and concerns, and these are not neatly delimited and clear in nature. Attention in this practical sense is poised to shift; something is going wrong if attention does not issue in some kind of change

and transformation. Paying attention is more like following a butterfly than sitting still.

The second difference is that moral attention is not just attention to something; it is the triangulation of attention that relates some matter of concern to the agency of those who are attending. While contemplation implies solitary concentration of attention, concerned attention requires noticing how one might be called to act. Because we are social beings, this also means considering whether and how this concern might demand the attention of others—either to achieve something that can only be done together, or to carry it forward on their own. Critical moral concern is social, but the attention we pay to other agents is often not carried out in the name of sustained relationships of care.¹⁸ Communicating concern requires full recognition of the other simultaneously with an anticipation of the other's coming to meet the critical communication in progress. It means putting the other in touch with a problem, as it were—expecting the problem to engage another's responsiveness in ways that are shaped distinctively by their own histories, capacities, and opportunities.

Crucially, for a hearer to pay attention to a shared problem is neither for the hearer to act as I would nor for the hearer simply to attend to me as a source of demands. It is for the hearer to come to experience the very same problem as I do, though of course how she will understand the problem—what she makes of it—is bound to differ in some respects. If I cannot embrace the prospect of any such difference, then I cannot approach her responsively as an agent. Of course we may not know how to tell the difference between a failure to recognize the nature of a concern at all and a case in which “getting it” prompts a woefully inadequate response. This difficulty is considered in chapter 4, where the focus is on method.

3.4 Problems and the Transfer of Concern

Moral critics need ways of affecting their hearers that are not just unmanipulative but also positively conducive to moral agency. Moral *agency*, in turn, requires more than conformity to any finite list of moral norms, and more than propositional attitudes about what is true or good. Such criteria might be satisfied even by shallow forms of moral agency. Agency, once we open up its critical and responsive dimension, also requires being able to attend to problems whose nature is uncertain, thereby investing oneself in the process of framing and resolving moral concerns. No amount of action according to habit and custom acquires this significance, and no list of beliefs entails fully motivated engagement with problems at hand.

The moral dimension of our agency emerges in response to problems. Thus, to give someone a problem—to draw attention to a predicament so that she perceives herself in relation to it—is not only compatible with someone’s agency, but also amounts to an occasion for the cultivation of agency.

It is in terms of problems and attention that Martin Luther King Jr. describes the point of many of his communicative actions: “Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and establish such creative tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue . . . I am not afraid of the word ‘tension.’ . . . There is a type of constructive, nonviolent tension which is necessary for growth.”¹⁹

To develop tension in the hearer is to press toward circumstances under which agency can take more meaningful shape. Of course, the gratuitous unsolicited manufacture of problems designed to provoke another’s agency would be no favor. But moral critics do not manufacture a problem from scratch: regardless of whether any given critic has any articulate account of her problem (and problems as such do resist articulate accounts) each critic is already charged with some problem in the form of a moral provocation. As King says, “We who engage in nonviolent direct action are not the creators of tension. We merely bring to the surface the hidden tension that is already alive. We bring it out in the open . . . to the light of human conscience and the air of national opinion before it can be cured.”²⁰

In accord with the guiding premise that moral criticism need not focus on verdicts, it is worth recognizing that King’s famous letter at no point communicates any claim in the form of a moral verdict upon the actions of the white clergymen to whom he writes. He does remark that they have “failed to express a . . . concern . . . about the conditions that brought about the demonstrations . . . taking place in Birmingham.” He also writes, expressively, that “your statement . . . has troubled me profoundly,” and “I wish you had commended the Negro sit-inners and demonstrators of Birmingham for their sublime courage, their willingness to suffer and their amazing discipline in the midst of great provocation.”²¹ King’s letter thus refrains from “moral appraisal,” and his discourse instead is aimed carefully at putting his readers into a state of tension—or of facing a problem—concerning their relation to the antiracist struggle in Birmingham and beyond.

If a critic embraces King’s kind of intention—bringing listeners into a state of tension around a problem—then the crucial emerging question is

how the critic's initial problem can be made salient to this particular audience. It is not the mere belief *that* there is a problem, or even the desire to solve it, that is aimed for; it is a kind of attention more or less vividly focused on the problem and the ways it might be articulated into concerns. Since a problem is an occasion for agency, rather than the specific path by which agency is discharged, drawing someone into an encounter with a problem is compatible with respect for her moral agency.

One apparent weakness of this communicative goal, compared to the regulative goal of securing behavioral results, is that even when communication succeeds, the further outcome of our efforts may be disappointing. However, no way of facilitating the *moral agency* of the hearer can proceed without making space for that agency to take an unanticipated or even incompetent direction. In some cases, we may have strong grounds for suspecting that someone is unlikely to take our concerns seriously, or does not have the competence necessary to interpret and act upon it. Given what is at stake—in terms of first-order moral concerns—these cases may call for more strategic efforts that supplement or preempt communicative engagement. Still, if the communicative approach reflects moral agency in its most socially developed form, then we should experience a residue of regret²² when communicative aims are consciously set aside.

3.5 Forward-Looking and Backward-Looking Concern

Many philosophers have picked up on Strawson's discussion of reactive attitudes as the cornerstone of an account of moral responsibility.²³ They have been especially concerned to emphasize the backward-looking face of attitudes such as resentment—that is, the criteria under which someone is an appropriate *candidate* for reactive attitudes. By treating the central question as one about *who* will count as a candidate for such attitudes, they tend to invoke a narrowly psychological rather than social lens. As Andrew Sneddon notes, "Contemporary work on moral responsibility [is] individualistic, [and] the overwhelmingly obvious thing about these positions is that they seek psychological conditions of being morally responsible. On these sorts of view, the issue of moral responsibility is a moral psychological one. In particular, these theorists conceive of their task as to provide general positive moral psychological conditions of moral responsibility."²⁴

It is striking that these accounts may be quite savvy about the social and relational context within which someone achieves the status of moral responsibility, but not about the social and relational context within which

we respond to these accounts. For example, Andrew Sneddon decries the individualism of other commentators, but still conceives responsibility as a predicate that either does or does not belong to an individual:

The criteria of being an apt candidate for the reactive attitudes should not be causal, but *participatory*, or, to use a more familiar word, pragmatic. That is, it is public, behavioral facts that make it true *of someone* that they are morally responsible. In particular, it is important to see how someone interacts with others, or, to put it even more broadly, how someone fits into the social context in which s/he finds him/herself.²⁵

Despite thinking of responsibility as a practice that we should make sense of only by invoking a social and contextual frame of reference, Sneddon implicitly puts himself and his readers outside of that frame. Someone either is or is not a candidate for reactive attitudes, as we can assess by considering their patterns of social interaction. Reactive attitudes, in other words, must accurately reflect something about someone else's relational and contextual social competence. It is odd, then, that engaging in practices such as blame does not come in for the same emphasis on social competence. To *be* responsible, one must interact well, but to *hold* others responsible pretty much remains, on this account, a matter of getting the other's status right.

Of course, my claim is not that there can be no status such as blameworthiness; rather, I think we should be suspicious of the preoccupation with status judgments here, at the expense of critical practices—especially among those who have reflected well on Strawson's basic project of deflecting debates about metaphysical status in favor of more nuanced reflections on moral interactions.

It may be objected that if criticism can be carried out without being grounded in moral status, we have lost track of a vital difference. Shouldn't moral criticism reflect some truth about what others have done, while socially competent engagement might mean little more than enlisting others' help with a project or urgent need? If blame is glossed as a social competence of responding so as to *draw out* the right kind of response, has it not lost its distinctive character?

Certainly there are such paradigmatic cases of backward *complaint* and forward *request* in relation to a moral problem. When we attend to particular cases, however, we will often find that our critical options do not sit neatly on either side. Considering human contributions to global warming, for example, we can press moral judgments upon what has been done up until the present, or we can avoid pointing fingers and frame the problem as a new cause for which we want to enlist others' efforts. Yet both of these

extremes lack traction in practice; we gain practical insight with respect to global warming through scrutiny of existing and ongoing habits, while our judgments are worth the breath of pronouncing them only when they redirect someone's forward-looking efforts. Both representation and conduct, taken as distinct genres of action, lack the capacity for responsive practical engagement. We must therefore recognize a fertile continuum extending between backward-looking complaints and forward-looking requests, a continuum along which social gestures reside.

Yet it is not simply that many concerns lie between the clear cases of backward-looking complaints and forward-looking social prompts. If problems and concerns are always matters that unfold over time, the very same communicative interaction can shift back and forth between moments of edgy complaint—of calling someone to task for signs of *insufficient* attentiveness—and moments whose force is simply of sharing information or requesting help in the unsuspicious spirit of expecting uptake. Suppose, on one hand, that I seek to hail a driver to transport a friend whose medical emergency is dire. I begin with a naïve and forward-looking appeal for assistance, but it may take a quick turn toward outrage if the only driver in sight not only declines to help but acts cheerfully oblivious to the distress of my friend. On the other hand, suppose we forcefully confront someone who has done something terrible. In the event that our allegation is immediately embraced and taken seriously—perhaps even amplified into remorseful solicitude—then our backward-looking focus on the grounds for complaint may shift toward a forward-looking interest in repair and resolution. Chapter 4 will explore such temporally dynamic aspects of critical responsiveness.

Here again, to see criticism itself in the light of gesture (as in chapter 2) may prove helpful: the point of a gesture is never reducible to capturing how things already are, or to securing some optimal end-results at the level of well-being or final goods. A responsive gesture meets its circumstance with a social redirection of activity, and it reveals itself as more or less apt in the pivotal moments of shared attention.

3.6 Moral Address as Communicative Gesture

Gary Watson offers a careful elaboration of Strawsonian accounts of reactive attitudes, placing “moral address” at the center of his account. Watson’s emphasis on “address” rather than “expression” promises a more communicative reading of moral responsiveness, though the promise is only partly fulfilled. In the process of considering how or why we might

exempt some people (such as children and those with character disorders) from attitudes such as resentment, Watson writes:

In a certain sense, blaming and praising those with diminished moral understanding loses its “point.” This way of putting it smacks of consequentialism, but our discussion suggests a different construction. The reactive attitudes are incipient forms of communication . . . The most appropriate and direct expression of resentment is to address the other with a complaint and a demand. Being a child exempts, when it does, not because expressing resentment has no desirable effects; in fact, it often does. Rather the reactive attitudes lose their point as forms of moral address.²⁶

The details of moral address *as a practice* are surprisingly vague in Watson’s discussion, perhaps because Watson does not explicitly distance himself from Strawson’s emphasis on expression. However, the very idea of “address,” and his explicit reference to the communicative function of reactive attitudes, implies some concern for a concrete audience and for uptake.

Because Watson introduces the term “moral address” without pausing to elaborate, we must stop and question not only *whom* to address, but also *with what* we address them. In the context of Strawson’s expressivism, it seems natural to suggest that one addresses the other with a reactive *attitude*. Yet the rhetoric of attitude expression is soon subsumed, in Watson’s discussion, by the notion of a moral *demand*. What, however, is the demand? The demand for basic recognition of the speaker or her attitudes is, on the one hand, necessary but not sufficient. The demand for compliance with some violated norm is, on the other hand, too much. For then moral address becomes essentially prescriptive; any worry about its effects on a hearer “smacks of consequentialism.” Strawson’s ideal of spontaneous expression requires a kind of reverent noninterference with another’s sphere of agency.

Uptake of Concern: A Nonprescriptive Interest in Effectiveness

Watson is apologetic about admitting an interest in uptake, perhaps because he follows Strawson in conflating this with the “regulation of behavior,” an agenda that bypasses the moral autonomy of others. Yet Watson need not associate wholesale consequentialism with a practical interest in what follows from our efforts. The specific consequence at stake in the communicative approach is that of having brought something *to* someone’s attention. Of course, attention is not a magical internal process insulated from other activity; attending is among the things a person does. Yet the place of attention within agency makes exactly the kind of difference that distinguishes manipulative engineering from reciprocal interac-

tion. *Having engaged someone's attention* is a kind of effect by which another's agency is called forth, rather than overridden through prescription or the orchestration of specific behaviors. Though Strawson's famous argument does not do much to illuminate the middle path, it does nudge Watson one step closer to recognizing the need for just such a path.

On this more practical reading of moral attitudes, what is of fundamental importance is our manifest response in social encounters; and when we respond to others, we aim to make a difference not just *through* the hearer but *to* her and in some sense *for* her as well—to get things across, to orient her to a concern as one that bears on her own choices. This is not a reductively utilitarian interest in maximizing happy results; it is a kind of interest we can take only in exchanges with specific other moral persons. It is an interest in enlisting their active concern—and in that sense, it meets the spirit of Peter Strawson's appeal for "participant attitudes" even more directly than does his own expressivist ideal.

Our responsibility to criticize effectively does not follow from a general moral demand to optimize well-being or any other static value, but is rather occasioned in each case by a particular provocation, one that makes salient some concern hitherto unknown, unappreciated, or mismanaged. Thus, although criticism is oriented toward results or consequences of a sort, they are local outcomes that can be described only in the context of the problem at hand.

Indeed, we put the result partly in the hands of the hearer of criticism; demanding that the hearer take on a moral concern is, at the same time, entrusting the hearer with following through on the concern, and with directing the concern toward its implications for practice, where such implications must be understood at least partly by her own lights.

The Phenomenology of Moral Address

Watson introduces the concept of moral address to clarify how some agents might be globally exempt from reactive emotions such as resentment. Oddly, the concept of moral address makes its appearance only obliquely: there are "constraints on intelligible moral demand, or, put another way, . . . constraints on moral address."²⁷ In addressing a child, for example, "the reactive attitudes lose their point as forms of moral address."²⁸ Yet if a child can recognize anger—and most children do seem to orient themselves to anger from an early age—then the "pointlessness" of directing moral anger at a child makes little sense on an expressivist account, unless we make special appeal, as Strawson and Watson do, to the normative claim that some agents are exempt. But this is an unsatisfying explanation:

why would children be exempt from being addressed with certain expressive interactions—supposing such interactions might further the *expressive* point of the practice, and that criticism need not have any particular practical efficacy? Since children may even exhibit considerable affective responsiveness to many forms of expression, the urgency of this question helps to underscore our conclusion that expression (even together with its uptake) is not the point of moral address as such.

It seems likely that Watson himself conceived moral address as elaborating, not departing from, Strawson's expressivist line of thought. ("Moral address" does not make an appearance in Watson's index; its significance seems to have been discovered by commentators more than by Watson himself.) Watson seems to proffer "moral address" as an intuitively clear concept. He makes only one explicit claim about it—that it "seems essentially interpersonal," supplemented by the further hint that reactive attitudes are "incipiently forms of moral address."²⁹ The most striking fact about this concept, though Watson does not remark upon it, is that moral address is *not* equivalent to expression. An expression may be directed outwards to nobody in particular, as an "expression" (say, of pain or grief) entails nothing more directed than an impulse to empty one's lungs loudly, or at most, *to be heard* by unspecified others. One cannot *address* something, however, to no one in particular.

Yet the departure becomes clearer when we consider the awkward place of address among speech acts, keeping in mind that the theory of speech acts was one of Strawson's central interests. (Chapter 4 develops a line of concern about the influence of speech act theory.) "Address" hints at lack of closure; to address someone is to make an overture toward further interaction, as when a name is called out before asking a question. When I address you in that way, I anticipate further communication. An address makes room for something—perhaps an apology or reproach or question—but it gestures toward that further communication without itself *containing* the apology, reproach, or question to which it gestures.

Addressing, it turns out, is a precarious and potentially disjunctive concept. In addressing you, I intend to engage you in further communication. But we also speak, for example, of addressing a letter to someone, in which case either it arrives or it does not; I am done with my *act* of addressing the letter before it enters the mail. Yet when there is no obstacle to mutual interaction, address usually functions differently: to address you is to ready myself to field a response and to discover or negotiate a wavelength for subsequent communication. The critic who addresses a hearer is poised to adjust his register and tone in accordance with the gesture and

expression he encounters. This does not mean, of course, that he will not proceed without an express invitation. It does mean, however, that if he meets with an overt refusal to listen, or with an apparent pretense of having heard nothing, he will take such resistance up as a gesture to which his activity must in some way adjust. Address is, in that sense, the basso continuo of social speech; initial address is extended as long as a conversation continues. The open-textured nature of address resurfaces more or less often in critical encounters—particularly often if the joint focus of speaker and hearer attention is difficult to establish or maintain.

One who addresses another acknowledges, or at least acts as if, she is in the presence of the other. This invocation of the critical situation itself brings into view what Darwall has recently called the *second-person standpoint*; moral address, Darwall rightly argues, is a form of second-personal encounter.³⁰ If I address you, then insofar as the situational constraints allow it, I recognize your personal presence. And such recognition is inseparable from being receptive to cues from you—about where your attention is currently engaged, and whether and how you seek to address me in turn. These matters are central to chapter 4.

Children, Attention, and Translation

Before turning to the temporal and interpersonal unfolding of critical encounters, however, let us note that Watson's concept of moral address—understood in this not merely expressivist way, allows us to answer this question that remains unresolved on Watson's account—namely, *why* the responses in question tend not to be appropriately directed at children. It is not clear, after all, why *expressing* oneself toward children would be not just idle or pointless (supposing they are ill equipped to understand it anyway), but in some sense inappropriate. How might we recognize the difference between expectations that ought to extend to children (or certain children) and those that should not?

If the matter with which one addresses another is a demand for attention to a problem, then it is clear why cases of moral criticism risk not only losing their point but also working out badly when they are addressed to young children. For the possibility of entrusting someone with attending to a problem depends not so much on their being able to sympathize with our feelings or to follow prescriptive directions, but rather on their being capable of extended attention to a complex problem. Children, in general, are less capable of following through well on a range of complex concerns with which we might attempt to entrust them. To entrust them with the task of responding competently to concerns about their own

activity, we easily obscure our own responsibility to help usher children through the process of digesting the concern, recognizing its bearing on their habits and attitudes, and considering responsive options.

If we remark here that children are indeed capable of extended attention in some respects and in some contexts, such proffered exceptions prove the rule well: for there is no bright line that children cross as they gain months and years. Nor does their moral agency accumulate uniformly and gradually like light on snow before dawn. Rather, each child becomes able to attend especially well to some kinds of concerns before others. (We need not even imagine a single profile of moral attention that marks developmental maturity; chapter 7 will consider the importance of embodied differences.) A child's growing capacity for attentive concern, meanwhile, is not simply an internal character development; the details will depend on *how* concerns are raised and translated, and—especially—by whom.

Children respond better when critical responses come from familiar and trusted adults. The reason is not just that the child is more motivated to please such a person. Someone who is familiar with a child is likely to recognize and read the child's gestures better, and hence can monitor *how well* the child is orienting attention to the concern at hand, and what kinds of orthogonal concerns may be salient to the child in response. When moral address engages with children, it is especially evident that it requires not just justification but skill as well. For one cannot trust that uptake will take place simply because conventions for moral address have been followed; instead, critical conversations are carefully navigated.

This point, however, can be carried back to our understanding of criticism among adults. A responsive critic's primary aim—so long as she takes it to be feasible—is to secure joint attention to a moral concern. Securing joint attention means presenting a concern so as to highlight its practical significance for hearers, listening and watching for signs of uptake or confusion, and perhaps pursuing the same concern through multiple rounds of engagement and through social intermediaries. All of these suggestions will be elaborated in chapters 4 and 5, and revisited in chapter 8.

4 Dynamics of Engagement: Time, Interaction, and Uptake

In a continuous process system both partners are continuously active and continuously engaged in the communication. There are opportunities to modify the actions of partners as they occur, without the need to wait until they are finished.

—Alan Fogel¹

This chapter builds on the thesis of chapter 3, that the point of moral criticism is the communicative transfer of moral concern. Our question here is thus *how* does the transfer of moral concern happen, and what skills do we need in order to participate in it? I propose that apt critical engagements involve us in the temporal coordination of attention so that concerns become jointly recognized and translated for practical uptake. For now, our focus will remain on how events unfold within a particular critical encounter. Chapters 5 through 8 consider how we handle our concerns—and how each of us might select among incoming concerns that compete for our attention—within a complex and extended social environment.

4.1 Metaphilosophical Aside

First, let us pause to note in what sense this work—this spelling out of a *how*—demands philosophical inquiry. It is not obvious to everyone that moral philosophy must concern itself with questions of practical method once goals or intentions have been articulated. Both the regulative and expressivist accounts discussed in chapter 3 spell out what moral criticism ought to do, but on neither account do the details of method hold much philosophical interest. How to express an attitude, once that attitude is felt and vetted as a reasonable one, hangs mainly on contingencies of opportunity. A person generally knows without much inquiry whether she has managed to express herself. If we make room to speak about the *skills* of expression—expressing oneself *well* or *poorly*, such that we must take

ourselves to be fallible in our self-assessments—then we surely have begun to frame the task as communicative after all.²

Meanwhile, the practical skills implied by the regulative account also admit of little philosophical elaboration. Once our goals are conceived clearly enough (we are confident which norms have been violated, and we wish to effect better compliance with them), then all questions of *how* seem to boil down to techniques of benign social engineering. When philosophers have something to offer to such a discussion, it is just in so far as philosophers have some astute observations about the ways things can in practice go wrong. Moral reflection also sets constraints on social engineering, of course, but philosophy has nothing more to offer in distinguishing skillful from nonskillful practices of regulation and management. Sophisticated proponents of a regulative approach to criticism may respond to reactance phenomena by out-maneuvering them. They may encourage those in positions of institutional authority (parents, teachers, health-care agencies, and so forth) to discover empirically confirmed techniques for insulating their prescriptive speech against resistance, thus better securing conformity. Insofar as critical responses aim to secure behavioral results, philosophy as such has little to offer in spelling out details of method.

According to the arguments of chapter 3, neither the expressive nor the regulative account yield a sufficiently rich understanding of the *point* of moral criticism, and that is why the sophisticated regulative program remains unsettling. Reactance is not just a problem in the sense of an obstacle to be overcome or bypassed; it is one mark of the dynamic social complexity that emerges whenever agents engage each other as such. Confronted with prescriptive criticism, hearers must consider whether compliance is tantamount to relinquishing a role in framing the moral problem and working out their relation to it. But the expressive stance respects hearers' moral agency at the cost of making no concerted effort to prevent misunderstanding or ensure uptake. Thus, neither standard account takes seriously the transfer of moral concern as such. Our third account, a communicative one, takes the central point of moral criticism to involve a certain interpersonal engagement of attention. The *telos* of this kind of engagement is the transfer of a concern between persons.

Given that neither of the prior accounts invites much philosophical inquiry into method, should we expect the third account to be different in this regard? In a word, yes. But it is not so much that the practice of critical responsiveness is intrinsically philosophical in any positive sense, but rather that refining this practice is difficult because of entrenched

misunderstandings; philosophical discussion may help us bypass these. We cannot reflectively tune our communicative practices without clearing away common but misleading conceptual assumptions. It may even be, as Wittgenstein suggests, that philosophy itself has caused the difficulty that it must then set out to remove.³ Whether or not that is so, the parallel grip of various conceptual dichotomies threatens to distract us from understanding critical communication well. Only after beginning to clear those conceptual oppositions away can we cultivate more adequate concepts in their place.

Furthermore, because critical responsiveness is most urgent in strained and contested circumstances, it is unwise to rely on our unreflective habits, no matter how well they have been shaped by past conditions. In hard cases, we cannot easily succeed at critical communication until our attention is well attuned to the nature of the communicative challenge. Concepts, meanwhile, are vital tools with which we direct our attention more or less well. So philosophical work is relevant not just to describing the communicative task in general (as a philosophical spectator); it is relevant to performing it well—at least as long as “commonsense” concepts threaten to distract us from communicative engagement.

4.2 Temporal and Interpersonal Dimensions of Critical Agency

The chapter will thus explore the phenomenology of successful transfers of concern. By “phenomenology” here, I simply mean the way things unfold at a detailed level—not anything ineffable or essentially subjective. In “zooming in” on the details of critical interactions, I will draw attention to two distinctive aspects. The first is the temporally *diachronic* axis of communication; critics must be able to shape and adjust their message concurrently with gauging uptake. The second is how an apt critical encounter, conceived as a whole, exhibits a robustly *interpersonal* form of agency. These two points turn out to be intertwined; the diachronic and interactive aspects of moral criticism feed off one another.

I will emphasize the first aspect—the diachronic dimension of critical activity—by questioning some conceptual baggage associated with speech act theory. Speech act theory is an important landmark here, as its project of considering speech as action helps to undermine an insidious contrast between representation and conduct. In emphasizing the conventions through which speech acts are structured, it also promises to illuminate how practices of moral criticism depend on social conditions. Yet the tools of speech act theory amount to a mixed blessing. For speech act theory

tends to distill communicative activity down to granular or ballistic moves,⁴ as if speakers did not responsively reshape their interactions even during the “delivery” of sentences and words.

The second aspect—the interactive or *transactive* nature of agency within critical encounters—will be illuminated through a consideration of jointly attentive activity. Because it depends on sustained joint attention, the aptness of any communicative response is inextricable from an ongoing receptivity to the hearers’ agency—and such receptivity implies that speaker and hearer roles are not rigid. We may speak of an individual’s skill at engaging hearers’ attention, but we take such skill to be continually developed in social encounters. Hence it will not be easy to assess the competence of one participant in isolation. We cannot expect any set of skills to guarantee success, nor does an apt encounter entail enduring skills in either participant. But if engaging others’ agency is vital to a successful critical interaction, then a critic cannot be generally confident of her virtue as something that might be fully manifest *in spite of* actual hearers’ recalcitrance and failure of uptake.

Conceptual and philosophical baggage easily distracts us from this transactive aspect as much as from the diachronic aspect of communication. For we lack models of shared agency except by way of positing a virtual or collective subject to which cooperative actions may be attributed. Yet transactive agency differs from collective agency. Or rather, our philosophical tools for discussing collective agency overunify the collective, failing to capture movement and turbulence *within* the institutions, families, and conversational dyads that act together.

The philosophical error to be cleared up, here, is the assumption that action should be explained sufficiently by states or attitudes properly ascribed to actual or virtual agents. Collective agency is possible insofar as we can, more or less metaphorically, describe the attitudes of a group *as* a virtual agent. But when we try to describe how dynamic transactive agency takes place, we’ll come up short if we want to describe its motives in familiar ways.

In particular, the emotions frequently involved in overt critical interactions—resentment and guilt in particular—are usually conceived as essentially individual attitudes. So it is a stretch for us to emphasize their complementary and mutually shaping significance. I will reframe these so-called “reactive” moral emotions within wider transactive patterns of response. Rather than simply manifesting inner states, these emotions function gesturally, signaling and orienting us during the interpersonal process of transferring moral concern.

These two lines of inquiry together suggest that skills of moral criticism depend on prompting and participating in joint attention, while these in turn require fine-grained responsiveness to gesture and affect. Because joint attention need not involve joint *intention* (nor other joint propositional attitudes such as shared belief), we can further vindicate the hypothesis that moral criticism need not depend in any systematic way on shared norms or verdicts.

Insofar as this chapter's dynamic account of critical activity must bypass some deep-seated structuring assumptions—common assumptions to which philosophers too (or especially?) are prone—this chapter may also solve a certain mystery lingering after chapter 3's argument: *Why* have we repeatedly seen a face-off between only two apparently exhaustive accounts of critical practice, if a third possibility deserves consideration?

4.3 Inoculating Ourselves against Speech Act Theory

Speech act theory—an intellectual project launched by J. L. Austin's work *How to Do Things with Words*—would seem to hold promise for a practical account of morally critical speech. The motivating insight of speech act theory is that in our efforts to understand what we *say* with our words, philosophers have neglected to consider what we *do* with our words. Strawson's initial premise in "Freedom and Resentment," which we embraced in chapter 3, is a special case of that general insight: morally critical speech ought to be appreciated as a practice, not simply as a confirmation of impersonal propositions about moral status, justifiable only by reference to obscure metaphysical truth conditions. Indeed, Austin and Strawson presented their two landmark works within the same historical-philosophical milieu.⁵ It might seem natural that any account of moral criticism as a practice is an account of how we are acting when we speak as critics, and that any such account must focus on the *speech acts* of which critical practice is composed.

Another round of philosophical work will be necessary, however, to loosen certain habits of mind that become crystallized by speech act theory. One of the fundamental analytical moves of the theory is distinguishing between illocutionary and perlocutionary acts: what is done *in* or within the locution, as set against what is done *by* or as a consequence of it. In effect, the distinction invokes an inside-outside boundary line around each speech act. Such an attractive tool for analysis turns out to conceal a Trojan horse. For it prompts us to conceive of speech activity as made up of discrete acts. With that simplifying assumption, we set

aside the temporally unfolding and socially dynamic patterns of activity in speech.

Curiously, Austin himself ought to have been sensitive to the dangers of such habits. When we explicate “what we do” by referring to discrete acts, we fall into one variant of what Austin himself diagnoses as “the myth of the verb”:

“Doing an action,” as used in philosophy, is a highly abstract expression—it is a stand-in for any (or almost any?) verb with a personal subject, in the same sort of way that “thing” is a stand-in for any (or when we remember, almost any) noun substantive. . . . So we come easily to think of our behaviour over any time, and of a life as a whole, as consisting in doing now action A, next action B, then action C, and so on, just as elsewhere we come to think of the world as consisting of this, that and the other substance or material thing, each with its properties. . . . All “actions” are, as actions (meaning what?), equal, composing a quarrel with striking a match, winning a war with sneezing: worse still, we assimilate them one and all to the supposedly most obvious and easy cases, such as posting letters or moving fingers, just as we assimilate all “things” to horses or beds.

If we are to continue to use this expression in sober philosophy, we need to ask such questions as: Is to sneeze to do an action? Or is to breathe, or to see, or to checkmate, or each one of countless others? In short, for what range of verbs, as used on what occasions, is “doing an action” a stand-in?⁶

Austin warns that a reference to “actions”—as to “things”—can mask the diversity of phenomena. Alas, there is one consequence of this apt comparison that Austin did not spell out, and it is of central importance here. When we imagine, say, all the *things* within a house, we may overlook not only the animate beings within, but also the many material ingredients of the space that resist the census of solid objects—water and air, patterns and relations. Similarly, when we ask what counts as “doing *an* action,” we must render as mere background the stream of activity within which countable actions emerge. Through a whole morning I might stay at home, wearing my pajamas, keeping an eye on my toddler who is learning how to walk, all the while awaiting a postal delivery. Yet all these “things being done” in the household—staying at home, wearing pajamas, learning to walk, etc.—are done without there being any moment of, so to speak, “firing off” a distinct act. In awaiting a delivery, for example, I may keep my eye and ear out for the truck, but how I manage this task shifts as I move through the house and yard, adjusting my form of attention as obstacles and distractions come and go.

The activity of speech is central to communication. But like other activity, it involves much more than discrete *acts*. Alas, paradigmatically

ballistic forms of speech have taken center stage in speech act theory: Austin sets the tone for his work by showcasing the “I do” of wedding vows, the christening of ships, and other neatly triggered utterances. The trope of “performance,” pervasive in speech act theory, is similarly misleading. Although even a theatrical performance can unfold only with time, the etymology of “performance” is bound to an execution or carrying-out; some choreography, script, or score is implicitly settled in advance.

What we ought to steer around, here, is an implicit atomism about action. An assimilation of speech activity to discrete speech acts—even if these admit of compositional complexity—would make two axioms seem inevitable:

Temporal closure The nature of a speech act is logically settled prior to its reception; hence it cannot be responsive to its own actual uptake;

Agent-closure A given speech act must be attributed to one (individual or virtual) speaker-agent.

These two axioms, as we will see, reinforce Strawson’s opposition between regulative and expressive accounts of criticism’s point. Hence, it is difficult to free ourselves of Strawson’s dichotomy without also reconsidering the nature of action within critical speech. The two axioms may structure a perfectly coherent theory of speech acts as such. Yet they mislead us if we press them to cover the varieties of speech activity that saturate critical communication and other conversational practices.

Temporal Closure vs. Temporally Dynamic Conceptions of Action

The structure of Austin’s account hangs on distinguishing what one does *in speaking* (illocutionary acts) from what is brought about *through* one’s having spoken (perlocutionary effects). The former, Austin suggests, tends to make sense with a “hereby” emphasis, to wit: I might “hereby inform you” of something, but I cannot sensibly comment that I “hereby frighten you.” Once a speech act is carried out, however, a train of consequences is set in motion, and some of these may also count as things I have done. Of course, consequences may be immediate or remote, known or unknown, intended or unintended. The attribution of a perlocutionary act to a speaker (such as “frightening the children”) must depend on such details. Still, an illocutionary speech act, conceived as a unit of action, is implicitly figured as a projectile, perlocutionary effects as its impact. A ballistic action can “misfire,” as it were, but then it cannot be salvaged or redirected; at best we may try again or undertake damage control.

This distinction between ballistic acts and dynamic activity is not a simple one.⁷ Even the most “ballistic” act, like throwing a baseball pitch, takes time to execute. Having initiated a throw, a pitcher who registers a base runner’s jump toward second might still adjust the spin, speed, or direction of his pitch (though he cannot abort it without committing a balk). In delivering a written statement, a speaker may still adjust the tempo and emphasis of phrases. Conversely, dynamic activities are rarely pure improvisations without plans or projected directions. With both gross motor activity and speech, the best question is not whether the activity is dynamic or not, but rather how and how much an activity underway is open to shifting course, and in response to what. Hence, depending on situation and interest, we may draw the distinction differently. The same stretch of activity—*mowing the lawn*, or *informing one’s boss*, for example—is best described as act or as activity depending on its context. For in some contexts, what matters is a person’s resolve and capacity to complete the activity—getting the lawn mowed, or making sure the boss is informed. In other contexts, what matters most is the variety of paths along which even a clearly purposive act may unfold.

With respect to speech in particular, the central variable is the degree to which a speaker is responsive to social cues. To recognize social responsiveness within the course of activity is to recognize *gesture* as discussed in chapter 2. To conceive something as a speech act, meanwhile, is to highlight its closure under some description, so that its illocutionary nature is established independently of its subsequent effects. For example, we prioritize *act*-level modeling when we imagine delivering a lecture or expressing an opinion, and *activity*-level modeling when we imagine following a line of thought or leading a discussion. A lecture might not complete itself seamlessly, but in such cases it is distracted or interrupted by intervening events. A discussion, by contrast, embraces and shapes itself around receptivity to certain events—specifically to incoming speech and other social gestures.

Given our perceptual and cognitive limits, of course, it may be that no activity is perfectly continuous and dynamic. Especially when encounters are freighted with significance, individuals may quite bluntly *rehearse* their role in conversation, navigating a silent decision tree according to signs of favorable or unfavorable reception. Smaller decision points and micro-intentions may also arise in ordinary conversation; dynamic responsiveness does not preclude watershed moments of choice. Yet anticipation and adjustment may be more or less fine-tuned and pervasive; communicative fluency hangs on relatively more continuous responsive attunement.

Whether we conceive our own and others' activity as gestural and open to social adjustment matters not only to theory but also to practice. If we (we philosophers as well as we critics) think of moral criticism as embodied in speech acts, then we add normative weight to the practice of fixing the nature of the act we intend and then proceeding to carrying out that intent. To conceive of a situation in terms of dynamic speech activity, by contrast, entails an ongoing openness to new descriptions of what we are doing. The *existence* of activity—to borrow from Sartre—may precede its essence.⁸ The same cannot be said for acts as such; they can succeed or fail, but the essential identity of an act—insofar as we conceive it as an act at all—is determined by the time it begins.

Agent-Closure vs. Transactive Fluidity

In the case of communicative and social activity, there is something further at stake in whether our models are dynamic. For an act can only be attributed to one agent or speaker (including the virtual sense in which a collective may act or issue a statement). Activity, however, may also be ascribed to interpersonally dynamic agency.

In this vein, Yueguo Gu complains that Austin's account of perlocutionary effects obscures the role of hearer agency:

Treating H's [Hearer's] response-act as a consequence of S's [Speaker's] speech act denies H's status as agent of the response-act. It is only through denying H such status that S can be truly said to have caused the response and that S can thus be attributed with the performance of a perlocutionary act. Otherwise the perlocutionary act is not something done by S alone, but a transaction, a joint endeavour involving S's speech act and H's response-act.⁹

Austin himself had sought to eschew the unwelcome implication by drawing a neat line between passive mental events within the hearer, and overt acts that might be chosen by the hearer in response. Strictly speaking, only nonvoluntary shifts in hearer attitude, perception, and so forth would thus count as perlocutionary effects attributable to the speaker. Austin in this way would need to deny that my *compliance* with a demand is, properly speaking, a perlocutionary effect of your demanding speech act. Nor would it be correct to say that one of my perlocutionary acts was "to anger you"—unless anger is to be understood as a "passion" in the strict sense. The effect of your speech is, at most, a certain *impression* made upon me, its *impact*, as it were.

Nevertheless, Gu's complaint retains its force. For the suggestion that something in the hearer is a mere impact—an immediate perception, emotion, or gut reflex attributable entirely to a speaker, and not at all to

the hearer, implies that hearers are entirely passive in some phase of their own responsiveness. But there is no reason to think of the hearer's ability to reshape her own interpretive and emotional stance as suspended while a speaker is taking a turn at the wheel. How things go with a hearer are never simply *effects* of a speaker's utterance; they are responses that emerge in overlapping tandem with a speaker's words. The speaker-hearer encounter is thus what Gu rightly calls a *transaction*.

A transactional model compatible with Gu's argument is prioritized within Alan Fogel's developmental-social-psychological research on communication: "Most forms of social communication are *continuous process communication systems*, rather than discrete state systems. In a continuous process system both partners are continuously active and continuously engaged in the communication. There are opportunities to modify the actions of partners as they occur, without the need to wait until they are finished."¹⁰ The concept of transaction is also the core of John Dewey's phenomenology of organism-environment relations, including embedded social relations among organisms. Because the dynamically shared activity serves to maintain and regulate boundaries and identities, even the familiar word "interaction" may be misleading, as it may suggest a constellation of discrete acts performed by turns—each by a clear individual. Dewey's account encourages us to recognize, instead, a pattern of social agency that is more meaningful than the individual activities out of which it emerges.

A Case in Point: Persuasion

Let us turn to illustrate our concerns about speech act theory as they affect our understanding of critically responsive speech. For it is fair to say that many apt critical encounters involve effective persuasion. Persuasion is indeed one of Austin's own examples of a perlocutionary effect, yet it is ambiguous in an illustrative way. One kind of persuasion can fairly be called the perlocutionary effect of a neatly bounded act: for example, a candidate's more-or-less scripted response to a debate question may *happen to persuade* me as I watch on a television; I may suddenly find my belief to have changed. Presumably this is the kind of persuasion Austin had in mind when he listed it among his examples of perlocutionary effects.

Plato's dialogue between Socrates and Euthyphro portrays a case of persuasion that works altogether differently. Socrates' success (if indeed it was success) in *persuading* Euthyphro of his own ignorance regarding piety involved no single *act* of persuading Euthyphro, but a constantly responsive improvisation of discourse. The net upshot of this discourse is that Euthyphro has been shepherded—and has in a sense helped to shepherd

himself—closer to recognizing a glitch in his understanding of piety. Persuasion, in such cases, is dynamic activity.

Plato's *Euthyphro* consists of nothing more than a fictional sketch, however, and it presents only the verbal script of a conversation. Fully dynamic cases of persuasion are even more nuanced than the transcript of a dialogue can possibly capture. Embodied conversations cannot be reduced to an exchange of utterances, as if they were analogous to the alternation of moves in chess. Had the conversation in the *Euthyphro* really taken place, Socrates' persuasiveness would have depended as much on his timing, gestures, and affect as upon his sentences. Each speaker and hearer would have been monitoring the other's gaze, tone of voice, timing, and gesture, each modulating his own in accord with fresh perceptions. Indeed, apart from such cues, nothing determines when one speaker's turn yields to another's. (In reading the dialogue, then, we presuppose such gestures of alternation.) Even with the benefit of such cues, partners in conversation often stumble or barge into each other's utterances, and instantly scramble to restore some coordination to their exchange. We are in such ways constantly *inhibiting* and *drawing forth* one another's verbal responses.

There is thus some stickiness in Austin's distinction between what is in a speech act and what is merely accomplished by it. Persuasion may be, in a most central sense, what someone is *doing* in uttering certain words. What kind of speech act is this, then? Persuasion is clearly not embedded in a locution by convention, so it is not an illocutionary force (It fails Austin's test: "I hereby persuade you!"). Yet reaching the point of persuasion, in dialogical exchanges, is no ordinary kind of consequence, for a consequence is a distinct event "following after" and not a jointly shaped configuration. It would be very difficult to disentangle the concept of a perlocutionary effect from its dependence on delineating cause from effect. If a robustly dialogical encounter persuades someone of something, this resolution has emerged in the process of conversation; there is no distinct speech-cause to which it corresponds as perlocutionary effect.

Socrates—both the historical character and his fictional reconstruction in Plato's work—refused to present his thinking in the form of self-contained lines of argument aimed at a generic or passive audience. Oratorical performances, the equivalent of political stump speeches, draw Socrates' suspicion as much for their method as for their aims. Indeed, Socrates must be imagined to take an ironic stance toward the fictional dialogues in which his voice appears, for they too include cleverly canned devices of persuasion, however subtle. This tension between methods itself becomes the topic in the *Phaedrus*, in which Plato has written up a Socratic

argument *against* the writing out of arguments. Written words, according to this ghostly Socratic voice, quickly become cold and unresponsive—“dead” to their readers. If they have any force at all, it is by simulating dynamic responsiveness, as only a skillful and more or less dialogical genre of writing can do.

We might say, then, that the concept of persuasion is phenomenologically disjunctive: it can take either a neatly bounded form or a more or less dynamic and communicative form. More broadly, we can contrast speech acts (whose intended influence can only be realized through perlocutionary effects) with communicative activity as the alternative. The possibility of communicative activity allows for a temporal interpenetration of speech activity and responsiveness to signs of uptake. Thus the state in which a hearer emerges from such activity is not strictly a consequence of my speech, for speech would not have proceeded as it did were it not for adjustments made while monitoring ongoing signs of uptake or lack thereof.

Feminist philosophers of language note that a preoccupation with expression and influence—and a lack of interest in communication as such—“might be explained,” as Jennifer Hornsby puts it, “by ways of thinking which are arguably characteristically masculine.”¹¹ In connection with critical speech, we should note that open-textured patterns of communication—frequent pauses for confirmation, upturned intonation, and epistemic “hedges”—are especially concentrated in at least some conventional settings for women’s speech.¹² We need not survey the outlines of differentially gendered speech patterns here, nor settle upon an explanation thereof. It is not unlikely, though, that a ballistic model of individual speech acts, such as Austin’s, was particularly well received within the ranks of a disproportionately male and culturally privileged profession.

Phases of Uptake

Persuasion, in practice, requires attention to details much more fine-grained than speech act theory easily illuminates. As Daniel Marcu argues, “Empirical data . . . challenge . . . the very basic understanding of speech acts as fundamental *units* of communication.”¹³ He draws attention to research on persuasion that highlights a sequence of “stages of change” through which hearers typically pass in their responsiveness to health-care advice. We should note that his topic here is *practical* persuasion, which approximates criticism in its practical and problem-oriented focus:

1. Pre-contemplative—the recipient does not recognize the problem or the need for a change.

2. Contemplative—the recipient is seriously thinking about the problem and the need for a change.
3. Preparation—the recipient is making a commitment to change and is taking steps to prepare for a change.
4. Action—the recipient has already modified their behavior for a period of one day to six months.
5. Maintenance—the recipient has changed from six months to an indefinite period.¹⁴

Though five stages are articulated, it is obvious that the number is arbitrary. The movement is more or less continuous and distinctions among stages, especially toward the end of this sequence, are rendered precise only for the sake of being measurable in data gathering. Practical persuasion is a path along which speaker and hearer are more or less finely coordinated.

Marcu takes this research to show that a message has variable success at persuasion depending on the hearer's position along this five-stage trajectory; furthermore, the subtle details and ordering of a message affect its ability to engage with its various hearers. Nevertheless, his focus remains on the factors that make a single message persuasive or not. Thus the "perlocutionary act" paradigm is not entirely displaced. Furthermore, Marcu traces the trajectory of persuasion as linear; hence we are led to imagine that speakers "nudge" hearers along a single track, more or less successfully. If so, hearer agency is registered only as degrees of resistance and degrees of acceptance.

We should pursue the more radical hypothesis that the most paradigmatic cases of persuasion are ones in which speaker and hearer *define* the path jointly. Speakers tune their contribution in accord with incoming cues—not only of hearer "position" along the linear "route" toward persuasion, but also to multidimensional cues concerning the clarity and depth with which the hearer is taking initiative and becoming poised to understand a concern in terms that lend themselves to response in the context of her own activity. Moreover, in any real social encounter, multiple concerns may bear upon an exchange; hence dialogical responsiveness demands reciprocal openness to a shift of conversational focus.

4.4 The Moral Mischief Wrought by Speech Act Theory

Langton's Speech Act Dilemma

I have suggested that our account of moral criticism as a practice must undo the atomism of speech act theory. In what way could an apparently minor technical inadequacy of speech act theory lead to real difficulties in

approaching the task of moral criticism? Here is how: Focusing our question on the *aim* of morally critical speech acts means systematically bypassing—by way of atomism about speech acts and rigid assignments of speech agency—any communicative and conversational account of responsive competence. For speech act theory presses us toward a dilemmatic question: is the practical point of moral criticism realized *in* the speech act itself (in expressing something with the appropriate content and *illocutionary* force), or is it realized in some result *external* to the act (in having the right kind of *perlocutionary* effects)?

The juxtaposition is not flattering for the latter option. For the perlocutionary emphasis requires admitting that our purpose in critical communication is only *contingently* furthered by speech that reveals our attitudes and concerns; if we could achieve the desired effects through other efforts, then perhaps no morally vital role would attach to critical communication as such. Whatever the most optimal net outcome is, it presumably might be furthered by calculative conduct, or by dishonest and manipulative speech. It might sometimes be *useful* to blame perfectly innocent or uncontrollable acts. Could a moral critic be obligated to speak in such an *uncommunicative* spirit?

Rae Langton—one of the few philosophers to raise clear moral questions about the activity of moral critics—relies on this disjunction as the central lever of her argument concerning the “virtues of resentment.”¹⁵ She asks readers to choose between two possible measures of resentment’s value: an *accuracy* measure and a *usefulness* measure. This distinction maps well onto the distinction between the internal (locutionary-and-illocutionary) content of a speech act and its external (perlocutionary) results.

Given this dilemma, Langton argues that consequentialists must be torn. On the one hand, consequentialists are reflective philosophers who have spelled out a standard that makes a negative stance accurate to acts or traits with negative consequences. Extreme clumsiness should thus appear as blameworthy as incompetently executed malice. On the other hand consequentialists see that blaming takes place in the practical world, so expressions of resentment should be warranted exactly insofar as those expressions themselves produce a net benefit. Excoriating certain people—an irredeemably clumsy person, for example—will bear no likely fruit with respect to utility, however. The consequentialist critic, therefore, cannot speak with integrity about the moral world around her.

If consequentialism offers incoherent guidance to critics who must reflect simultaneously as speakers and agents, then so much the worse for consequentialism, in Langton’s eyes. We would be wiser, on her view, to

affirm the spontaneous expressions of Strawson's reactive attitudes: "One does not look to the typical effects of clumsiness or malice before deciding whether to feel resentful. Nor does one look to the typical effects of resentment before deciding to feel resentful. . . . In the typical case dispositions to resentment are as Strawson described, namely, dispositions for unrehearsed responses to deliberate ill-doing to oneself. The anger, the grudges, the misery, depend on the badness of . . . intention."¹⁶

In other words, Langton would have us cleave to the accuracy criterion as the central constraint on critical reactions. Though spontaneous reactions of resentment may not always be accurate, we will at least be transparent in explaining them.

Beyond Accuracy and Usefulness

On a dynamic account of speech activity, however, Langton's opposition between accuracy and usefulness is a false dilemma. The communication of moral concern requires not simply a compromise or synthesis of these two ideals, but also a distinct kind of attention to what occurs within the critical interaction itself. Yet the notion that anything transpires *during* a critical interaction remains absent from Langton's argument precisely because speech act theory has an extended grip on philosophers' imagination.¹⁷

Indeed, Langton's opposition is a corollary of the opposition posited by Strawson in defending expressive reactions. If Langton recognized some further moral axis, besides consequentialist benefit and deontological rightness, she could have considered resentment's value from a third angle. The measures of value she offers us, accuracy and usefulness, dichotomize representation and conduct (again) as the two available dimensions along which critical activity can be measured. As we saw in chapter 2, however, a gestural frame of understanding allows us to approach criticism as a responsive engagement with others' ongoing activity.

Ironically—given that Langton's argument is entitled "Virtues of Resentment"—virtue ethics plays no explicit role in her discussion. Yet virtue ethics, as we will explore further in chapter 8, helps to disrupt this standoff between consequentialist and deontological (regulative and expressivist) accounts of morally critical speech. Philosophical accounts of virtue have sought to illuminate the dynamic and continual aspects of activity, rather than a neat evaluative stance toward discrete actions. Many paradigms of *arête*—virtue in the sense of skill or excellence—are continuously responsive activities. Courage, for example, is fully exhibited along the whole path of a fearsome encounter, not simply in any single decisive

moment. If there is a virtue connected to resentment and its alternatives, it will be equally distributed over time, as well as socially distributed between participants in a critical encounter.

A Commonplace Example

Wanda arrives home at 8:30 p.m., and Vere complains that her arrival is too late for the plans he had made. Wanda apologizes but insists that it was important to buy groceries. Vere insists the cupboards have enough food to get through another day, and asks why Wanda did not communicate about the delay. Wanda claims to have left a phone message—which Vere didn't get. Which phone had been called? It turns out Wanda had simply used her mobile phone's “call back” function. Vere points out that any such message surely wound up at the office he had left earlier in the day, and asks whether Wanda can use more care in efforts to stay in touch. Wanda mumbles something about the inadequacy of her mobile phone's interface for frequently dialed numbers. Vere asks whether they should look into that problem together, and Wanda resolves to do it alone.

The precise nature of the critical concern that is in play shifts as the conversation evolves; it is easy to imagine how a different response early in the conversation might have led the discussion toward a very different understanding of the situation. The problem to which Vere is pointing—a problem initially manifest as a late arrival—remains the focal point of attention, but the practical connection between the problem and hearer's agency is initially indeterminate. After both participants have their attention on what is, in some inarticulate way, *the same* problem, the critical interaction moves toward convergence on some account of how the hearer can recognize it as reflecting on something open to her agency. And in that very convergence, the contour of that “something”—the *kind* of practical shift the problem might invite—is clarified. What might initially have seemed to be a concern about promptness shifts toward a concern about how communication tools are used. (Of course, future experiences might reopen concerns that focus more directly on punctuality, or on the differing levels of priority the partners place on shared domestic time.)

In conversational practice, critics constantly recalibrate their expectations and rearticulate concerns so that they resonate with hearers' perspectives and practical stances. Because criticism unfolds over time, it is possible for a critic to initiate the working out of a path connecting an appropriate cue (whose description is up for mutual determination) to a certain kind of practically oriented response (whose nature is up for mutual determina-

tion). Yet this process, of course, is not accomplished by the critic alone. What helps a critic reframe and translate her concern is an emerging sense of hearers' attitudes, perspective, and information. All of these serve to distinguish more and less viable translations of the critic's concern. In this way, a critic's concern becomes dynamically shaped to improve the chance of uptake, but without losing sight of its initial provocation. The dialogue goes well not because it manifests the right intentions, or because it secures an optimal outcome; its going well is inseparable from the paths it generates in getting both participants' concerns across.

All this may seem so obvious as to be uninteresting. Of course conversations involve constant adjustments of expectation and interpretation. Yet the path toward Langton's dilemma—and hence toward the expressivist solution—is neatly paved as soon as we allow that a good question to ask, in moral theory, is *whether* to blame (and on what grounds), rather than *how* to approach a critical encounter. Blame and resentment emerge and take shape through interaction. Critics and hearers take preliminary steps along this path, unconsciously and inarticulately, far more often than they approach full-blown expressions of resentment. The question that guides the transaction is not what is *the* accurate claim to press. Neither is it what is the most *useful* thing critical speech can cause to happen. It is how a certain concern animating the critic—one introduced by a kind of pointing and refined through joint attention—might best be understood so that it becomes a concern for the hearer. The concern must be shaped so as to highlight potential connections to the hearer's ongoing practical agency. To put it differently, an incoming concern is well translated insofar as a hearer's past activity might now be recognized as incomplete gesture, as gesture that might be redirected in light of this critical response.

4.5 Getting Something Across: Communicative Transfer and Its Metaphorical Ground

Chapter 3 concluded that the practical point of moral criticism is the communication of moral concern, meaning the transfer of practical attention so that one person brings another into connection with a moral problem. We have also just seen that by modeling critical speech not as an action but as the initiation of a transaction, we are in a better position to explore how effective criticism depends upon fine-grained skills of attunement to hearer uptake.

Philosophers may be predisposed to treat attention as a subjective psychological state. Following that habit, there would seem to be a gaping

and problematic metaphor in the proposal that moral criticism's point is the transfer of concerned attention. For my attention cannot literally become your attention—so it would seem.

But the difficulty is no worse than for any other account on which communication happens—communication of thoughts, feelings, or even of diseases. Attention is precisely the kind of thing that can be passed from one social being to another; without sharing attention, we would share nothing else (except in the sense in which we can share by coincidence, as two cars share a garage). And if another's attentive uptake never served as a cue to release our attention from an object, the burden upon each individual's attention would be ever increasing and unmanageable. Thus, I hope it will not seem absurd to suggest that having a concern (in the sense that interests us) means not just attending to a problem insofar as it affects one's ordinary practical activities, but also being poised to pass such attention along to others.

The expressivist will suggest, here, that there is no better way to convey a concern than to express it. What else is language, besides a tool for generating representations by which the mental states of one person can be apprehended by others? Yet this apparent straightforwardness of expression is precisely what must be resisted on a dynamic and communicative account. We need not argue, of course, that expressive intent never serves to convey concerns. Rather, when it does, it is in virtue of embodying and being situated among much more complex skills. When we contemplate cases where expression seems to suffice for communication, we ought to ask not just about the actual course of conversation, but also about how—and how promptly—the speaker would have responded to signs of misunderstanding, resistance, distraction, or confusion. In the absence of such responsive dispositions, no amount of eloquence shows skill in communication; indeed, the skills of responsive attunement are crucial to all social processes of transfer.

Transfer as a Joint-Attention Social-Motor-Control task

Let us step back, for a moment, to the physical ground of communicative metaphors. The ordinary and familiar move of handing an object to someone—at least when it is carried out by adults—rarely requires conscious attention. Yet such a move in fact requires a fine-grained coordination honed through developmental training. It is a socially collaborative movement, and it requires both the social-cognitive skills of joint attention and the motor skills of hand-eye coordination. We can learn from a frame-by-frame analysis of the relevant movements. Fogel's film-segment narration

and commentary, here, describes the concentrated effort exhibited by an infant achieving this developmental task.

Andrew is seen at 1 year . . . this is the first time this infant voluntarily released an object into his mother's hand . . . First his arm extends (frames 1–6) and then he releases the object (frames 7–10). In past weeks, Andrew has extended his arm many times toward his mother without releasing the object. Once Andrew's arm is extended his hand remains relatively stationary and gradually opens as mother's hand moves underneath his hand. The fork gently leaves Andrew's hand as it is pulled only by the slightest contact with the mother's moving palm.

This object release, therefore, is not entirely due to Andrew's initiative. Since the child does not actually drop the object into the mother's hand and the mother does not actually take hold of the object, the object transfer seems to be jointly constructed by both, a genuinely co-regulated activity. Thus, communication is present in this example in the form of shared information about the position of the object relative to each person's hand and body, and the intensity and timing of hand opening and closing.

. . . Andrew no doubt feels the differences between his own hand opening and his own movement of the fork in relation to those movements of the fork for which he is not responsible. Indeed, the relative slowness of this sequence, lasting almost seven seconds, may assist Andrew in perceiving the relationship between his own and others' actions. Andrew's continuing gaze at the object after he releases it, his hand poised in space as if still holding on to the object, suggests that although the physical contact is broken the infant may perceive the object's motion as still related to his own activity. This is similar to an adult's follow through upon the release of a bowling ball or after hitting a golf ball.¹⁸

This slow-motion account of handing over makes evident that handing an object to someone is not an act, but rather a coordination. Adults execute this physical coordination so quickly and routinely that we seldom problematize it after it is learned.

Yet there are situations that call for adults to problematize and relearn the social-motor skills of handing off. Consider, for example, the passing of a scalpel to a surgeon whose eyes must remain fixed on a tiny cyst; the handing over of a newborn baby; the handoff of a relay-race baton or a football behind the line of scrimmage. All of these are precarious coordinations. Because it is vital to avoid fumbles and bad grips, we rehearse such exchanges carefully. Such social transfers become fluidly choreographed—enough to feel like the handoff is simply “an action”—only through attunement and practice.

The intention to hand something over resembles a perlocutionary intention in that one hopes for a certain outcome—that the object one is holding will end up in the other's hands. Yet it would be odd to speak of

this end state as the *effect* of one's action. The activity of handing something to someone entails recognizing when and in what way the other is receptive, adjusting one's movement, in real time, so that the object comes smoothly into the other's orbit of receptivity. The movements of giving over would not have continued forward just so, were it not for emerging indications of receptivity and alignment and their contrasting cues for adjustment. Handing over is not an act, or the *outcome* of an act, or even a composite sequence or combination of acts—one act of giving and another act other of accepting. Handing over is one coordinated activity navigated by two attentive persons.

Objections to Taking the Metaphor Seriously

In effect, the hypothesis emerging from chapter 3 is that critical responsiveness paradigmatically involves *handing* a moral concern from one person to another. It is thus subject to all of the challenges of coordination that attend other handing-over activities. We may even become relatively skilled at participating in such transfers. The constantly evolving field of social problems makes it quite likely, though, that we will never become uniformly adept. We are prone to find ourselves in novel predicaments, like a quarterback suddenly asked to hand off surgical tools, or infants. It is no accident that we say, in such circumstances, that we do not know how to handle the problem at hand.

The handing-over metaphor will meet with objections, of course. One objection is that a speaker often faces an unreceptive hearer. It is egregiously naïve to initiate a critical encounter with confidence that one's concern will be embraced—even if one has great skills of communicative adjustment and translation. Surely a responsive critic would be naïve to expect her concerns to be met, halfway, by eager listeners.

This objection I must embrace, counting it as a feature rather than a bug. For when a critic fails to achieve uptake for her concern, there is a sense in which she remains awkwardly “holding the ball.” Yet a failure of uptake—far from closing the episode (as it must on an expressive view)—marks the continuation of the critic's moral predicament. She faces more and less conscious questions about whether to approach the encounter again in some other way, whether to take her concerns to other hearers, whether to revisit and reinterpret the signs of difficulty that mark her concern. The differential responsiveness achievable within different social relationships should lead us to ask how concerns can be redirected within a social field. This will be one theme in chapters 5 through 7.

Another objection is that a critic would be naïve to approach a critical encounter with the optimistic expectation that she would emerge from the conversation entirely liberated from her moral concern. It is often wiser to spread one's concern to others, but without giving it up. In this respect, "communication" of concerns is a wider and more apt metaphor than is the "transfer" of concerns.

Two things might be said here. On the one hand, it is tremendously useful for us to keep track of the fate of our moral concerns; if we tend to forget our concerns after passing them along, then we cannot monitor our effectiveness as critics, and we lose much of our ability to hold one another accountable. For grave concerns, the very process of giving over extends into a period of follow through that may have no determinate end point.

On the other hand, the suggestion is not that our interaction with a responsive hearer neatly dispatches our relation to a typical moral concern. It is appropriate for me to remain concerned insofar as the problem in question has further implications for my own activities—both communicative and otherwise. So, the suggestion is that we give over to the hearer—at most—that portion of a concern that connects more directly to his own agency than to ours. For example, I may succeed in transferring to a student nearly all of my concern over her minor failure of academic honesty as it relates to how she must carry on. Yet I continue to be concerned over the incident insofar as it reflects on how my assignments and expectations are communicated, how well our educational institution engages student efforts, and so forth.

4.6 Reframing Resentment and Guilt as Phases of Communication

Thus far, emotions have played no essential role in spelling out the communicative account. It might seem that I have left the importance of moral emotions to the expressivists, for whom they clearly play a constitutive role in moral interaction.

Let us then step back to the conclusion of chapter 3 for a moment. To flesh out the third, "communicative" account of moral criticism, we can begin by imagining a *transaction* among the moral attitudes valued by Strawson, such as resentment and guilt. A paradigmatic moral confrontation begins with resentment, and resentment is transformed and taken up through guilt. Strawson himself calls guilt and resentment "analogues," drawing attention away from the fabric of functional connection between them. But when Allan Gibbard offers a similar claim (calling guilt and

anger “counterparts”), he adds the observation that “[g]uilt meshes with anger in a special way.”¹⁹ What exactly is that “special way”? Perhaps the very *function* of moral anger—at least when it is addressed to the agent who provokes it—could be the prompting of guilt. Guilt’s function, by the same token, would be to signal and tune our receptivity to what is at issue in the resentment or anger we field (or anticipate).

Thinking of the critic’s task in terms of provoking hearer emotion does represent a move toward the middle between prescriptive-regulative and expressive accounts. Guilt constitutes a more robust sort of uptake than merely acknowledging the critic’s resentment as such, and yet causing guilt does not involve prescriptively overriding another’s deliberations or choices. Guilt may play a role in spurring a hearer toward repair, amends, or corrective commitments; yet the particular path of response remains open for the hearer to determine, and indeed it remains possible for a hearer to choose some response quite distinct from what a critic would have wished for.

This way of thinking about moral criticism would also embrace one of the phenomenological points of our discussion of critical conversation as distinct from speech acts. If the point of resentment is to stimulate a corresponding response of guilt, then clearly speakers can progressively refocus their gestures of anger so that they “hit the mark” less bluntly, as it were. An angry critic wants much more than to be recognized *as* an angry critic, but she should not—insofar as her task is moral criticism—be satisfied to provoke fear or shame *or even obedience*. Criticism may be fine-tuned, in the course of delivery, so as to reach far enough—to evince the special kind of attention associated with guilt—without overreaching.

Yet there are still fundamental difficulties. For guilt sometimes does not facilitate but rather paralyzes the moral agency of the person experiencing it. Thus, it would be worth looking a step further. When guilt fails, *how* does it fail? When it plays a positive role in critical communications, *how* does it do so? If we gain answers to such questions, we will also have some sense of whether guilt itself is essential. If no, we may ask when and how critical interactions might proceed well even without it.

What Is Guilt?

Let us first acknowledge that moral emotions have a complex and long lineage. Every human tendency has some historical trajectory of development including drift, variation, and contrastive effects. Even a naturalistic account, on which traits and tendencies take shape in virtue of selective pressures, can only highlight more or less recent, more or less powerful

patterns of differential survival and reproduction. It remains open for us to highlight what is morally salient about our tendencies toward guilt. Human guilt tendencies surely enjoy genealogical continuity with shame and deference displays in other social mammals. Yet guilt also entails the focusing of attention on some specific deed or habit, rather than on relatively stable matters of family ties, social status, embodiment, and so on. Guilt, on many accounts, is a distinctively moral emotion.

In the context of inquiry into moral criticism as a practice, we can narrow our attention to the forms and aspects of guilt that might play some role in our ability to take initiative and agency in relation to moral concerns. Deference displays as such may do nothing more than appease those in a position to intimidate. Whether or not it derives from deference mechanisms and strategic forms of appeasement, moral guilt must do more.

Cognitivist accounts of guilt emphasize suggest that guilt implicitly represents the moral status of our own actions. An expressivist, on the one hand, emphasizes how guilt embodies the acceptance of demands and an impulse toward interpreting one's actions in light of normative expectations. Yet these accounts have little to say about how and why guilt shifts or diminishes over time even while our beliefs and commitment remain the same. A prescriptivist, on the other hand, emphasizes that guilt congeals around a motivational component: either aversion to future transgression or compulsion toward reparations and amends. Yet such an account tends to underplay the importance of reflection and reasoning in the phenomena of guilt.

What extant accounts of guilt have in common is two things: first, that guilt is taken to be a subjective emotional state for which we seek analysis, justification, or explanation; and second, to the extent guilt includes a cognitive dimension it is to be specified in terms of the *belief states* of the person who experiences the emotion of guilt. Yet if it is possible for moral criticism to be sparked by concerned attention in the absence of a verdict, it is surely also possible for moral criticism to be fielded with concerned attention that does not take the form of anything like a specific negative judgment.

Clearly, guilty patterns of attention may precede anything like a cognitive judgment. Guilt may be prompted by something as simple as being addressed in a certain tone of voice. But to say then that guilty feelings in such cases represent impressions²⁰ or presumptive beliefs is to miss a vital aspect of their influence: their grip on our practical attention, their call to *listen*.

To think that the prescriptive face of guilt involves only reparative and self-regulative activity is to assume that the guilt state sets in only *after* closure is achieved in the process of information acquisition that determines the appropriateness of guilt. Yet much of the cognitive dimension of guilt is bound up in efforts to *come to grips with* the concern with which we are addressed. Understanding the nature of a concern is a temporally extended process requiring both receptivity and reflection.

A Dynamic Account of Guilt

Here, then, is an alternative proposal. In the sense most relevant to an account of moral criticism as a practice, guilt is not really a state at all, but an active path. Or rather, it is *half* of a path that is more or less jointly navigated by participants in a critical encounter. The full path begins with distressed attention to a concern in one party—the critic, we can assume for now—and comes to a close with the hearer’s integration of responsive attention for some aspect of that concern. Resentment and guilt are active processes which in parallel (though with shifting weights) contribute to the social process of holding-responsible.

The task of these emotions is not just complementary; they are different facets of the same process. The single social process is one in which these emotions help us transfer, transform, and translate what is salient within the critic’s distressed attention so that it informs the practically effective attention of the hearer. Our common habit of highlighting emotion’s subjectivity, combined with a preoccupation with *states* rather than activities, makes this hypothesis outlandish. Resentment, indignation, and guilt are faces of the *same* social process of emotion. Resentment and anger animate our efforts to initiate and direct the process—to *push* it along; guilt is the emotion by which we bring it home or *pull* it through. As with the physical transaction of handing over, the resentment-guilt transaction is one activity jointly navigated by two attentive bodies in motion.

Of course, resentment and guilt may appear in isolation from one another, and even when both occur they may fail to mark a unified coordination of attention. The functional claim that they are part of a single process simply entails that we recognize their work as fully consummated when they work together in a certain way. One may be “angry with oneself”—and we can understand this as an intrapersonal effort to make the nature of a concern vivid to the self emerging into the future. One may feel guilty over some act or omission without having been called out, and yet it would be difficult to make sense of someone who confessed to such guilt while being unresponsive to critical gestures on the part of

victims or others with related grievances. In the case of guilt in particular, we can say that had it never contributed to the coordinated transfer of attention, it would surely not have taken root as common syndrome in our repertoire of emotions.

This account requires not *ignoring* the subjective and qualitative distinctness of these emotions, but seeing how such distinctive characteristics play vital roles in marking and orienting us toward significant and difficult moments in the transfer of moral concern. Emotions such as guilt and anger serve to *bind* our practical attention—to *flag* a concern en route. This is especially important when concerns are highly inarticulate in content. Moral emotions rivet our attention and orient us toward the social process of communication when there is much at stake and yet no satisfactory habit of understanding and handling the concern in question.

Two strands of argument supported by empirical research reinforce this dynamic account of guilt. First is research that suggests that models of guilt must include temporal dynamics: guilt levels follow characteristic trajectories over time.²¹ Furthermore, while early stages of guilt are characterized by inhibition and withdrawal, the motivational effect of guilt typically shifts over time, and “transforms into approach motivation aimed at reparation.”²² Indeed, the loss of connection to someone around whom one experienced guilt—such as the loss of connection entailed by death—creates a special challenge for the full resolution of one’s moral confidence.

To date, no studies seem to engage specifically with the question of *how* guilt rounds the corner between its inhibition phase and its approach phase. Yet we might venture a hypothesis: that the onset of the approach phase is gradual, and that it is correlated with confidence that one understands *how* to address others’ concerns about one’s actions. Meanwhile, the inhibition phase of guilt marks not simply a withdrawal from all activity, but also an opportunity to focus attention on a certain communicative and cognitive task: that of taking up the concern with which one is addressed, reframing it so as to allow some better (if never ideal) path forward.

That there are many flavors of guilt should therefore be no surprise, yet we should expect them often to succeed one another in practice. Thus, any of the following phases of a guilt trajectory might be characterized as guilt, and yet it is the general path they outline—rather than the subjective state marking any one of them—that characterizes the uptake of criticism:

- emotional startle in response to confrontation
- muteness in the face of anger

- inarticulate preoccupation and reflection on sources of concern
- tentative belief formation regarding how to conceive the problem and its intrapsychic factors
- energetic practical commitments of amends, repair, and self-transformation
- lingering self-doubt and more or less anxious monitoring of relevant aspects of one's agency

Of course, there's no reason to insist, *a priori*, that such a sequence is rigidly ordered or ever exhaustively illustrated in actual cases. Nevertheless, each phase of guilt builds upon what is gained by the focusing of attention in prior phases.

Static and Dynamic Guilt: An Example

What, then, do we make of the observation that emotions such as guilt can become paralyzing? For it has often been noted that when guilt itself dominates a hearer's attention, she cannot well attend to concerns behind it. It is this possibility that prompts a radical dismissal of the value of provoking guilt, as expressed here by Shelby Steele: "Guilt makes us afraid for ourselves, and thus generates as much self-preoccupation as concern for others. The nature of preoccupation is always the redemption of innocence, the reestablishment of good feeling about oneself."²³ Or similarly, as expressed by Garrett Hardin, quoting Paul Goodman: "The guilty do not pay attention to the object but only to themselves, and not even to their own interests, which might make sense, but to their anxieties."²⁴ Such an unqualified dismissal of guilt is too facile; moral problems cannot all be addressed by enlightened political constraints on freedom, which is the route Hardin wishes to champion. Still, the association of guilt with unhelpful anxieties is worth understanding.

Let us then explore a concrete example. Sustained paralysis and self-absorption often mark certain experiences of guilt in connection with persistent social injustices. Consider Marilyn Frye's description of how she felt in being confronted with claims, presented by credible interlocutors, that her well-intentioned actions were racist:

It all combined to precipitate me into profound and unnerving distrust of myself. All of my ways of knowing seemed to have failed me—my perception, my common sense, my good will, my anger, honor and affection, my intelligence and insight. Just as walking requires something fairly sturdy and firm underfoot, so being an actor in the world requires a foundation of ordinary moral and intellectual confidence. Without that, we don't know how to be or how to act; we become strangely

stupid. . . . If you want to be good, and you don't know good from bad, you can't move.²⁵

Frye's reflection seems initially to square with Goodman's observation: most of her attention, according to her reflection here, was consumed by questions about her own moral standing—what Steele calls “the redemption of innocence”—rather than the problem of racism. Given the association of ethics with such guilt, Frye poses a surprisingly Nietzschean challenge: “*Why Ethics?*”

Yet the connection among guilt, self-absorption, and anxiety is misunderstood if we insist upon evaluating the role of guilt as it is portrayed in such a freeze-frame description. For decades, psychologists have debated whether guilt ought to modeled as a kind of inhibition mechanism, or instead as some kind of impulse toward repair and reconciliation. This choice turns out to be a false one: a dynamic model of guilt suggests that it begins with a phase of inhibition and, where it functions well, resolves into a greater commitment or motivation to act once a suitable direction becomes clear. It is only when a situation seems to allow no viable paths of repair that the dynamic process is more or less stalled, resulting in passive anxiety.

In Frye's case, for example, the initial inhibition of action—caused by credible evidence of her racism—could not resolve fluidly into a reparative project. At least, her habitual ways of understanding such projects were frustrated. It seemed clear that the very character traits she might turn to with redoubled efforts (perception, common sense, good will, anger, honor, affection) would be unreliable in restoring “innocence” and preventing further racist behavior. Thus, no fix would restore her habitual confidence in her status as a moral person above reproach.

Yet this state of paralysis apparently yielded, eventually, to the reflective recognition that a tenacious attachment to moral confidence of a certain sort—of the sort that marks a social status beyond reproach—was itself suspect. Guilt may still have served, then, as the echo of a moral startle reflex, a disruptive disorientation capable of exposing almost any ingredient of the predicament to redescription and revaluation. The emotion of guilt seems to have catalyzed the process that allowed Frye to reframe her situation, and to go on, albeit without the same moral pride. She describes having recognized a wish to “know how to be or how to act” that included a desire to know, with transparency, that she was in the right. The resolution of her subjective crisis, as she recounts her experience, came with letting go of “ethics” as she had always known it—by which she means letting go of the idea that she could define her

identity and agency in terms of her *knowledge* of right and wrong, knowledge that could underlie a mastery that would be specifically and confidently *her own*.²⁶

On the contrary, only a social process could give strength to a moral commitment against racism. The racist elements of her habits would have to be confronted and dismantled through something other than introspective scrutiny. Rather than being able to eliminate the taint of racism in one fell swoop, she would have to remain receptive to feedback, and at risk for further justified anger. There was no way to internalize “the right way” to go on once and for all, as if she could thus prevent any possibility of further action that could be recognized as racist.

An insight or profound recognition of this sort may thus mark the return to more fully engaged practical attention, unfreezing the paralysis that would accompany perpetually unresolved guilt. We recognize a positive role for guilt if we think of the problem Frye describes not as an excess of guilt, but as a crisis for the individualist moral ideals that promised clear conscience without social stumbling. One might well be unsure how to travel along the path of guilt when there’s no hope of instant gratification in the form of “getting there” (getting to a point where no further guilt will be in order). The path Frye describes as a tentative resolution of her crisis required continuing receptivity to further signs of the social significance of her actions as they related to racial oppression. We might say, then, that the counterproductive factor, in this case, would be not guilt (as a phase of communication) but the consolidation of this guilt into an enduring state. For paralyzing guilt is a suspended and isolated state, one away from which no path of uptake seemed possible.

Of course, there is no guarantee that any sort of redescription “Aha!” moment will come along to dissolve any given case of immobilizing guilt. For this reason, successfully provoking guilt cannot serve as a sufficient sign of a critics’ success in engaging hearers’ agency.

Moral Emotions as Somatic Markers of Moral Concern

Inhibition that interferes with carrying on is thus appropriate to one stage of fielding a critical response. Inhibition rightly honors the predicament of having attention called to a problem whose nature is yet poorly understood as it impinges upon our awareness. The onset of guilt heralds the need for further orientation: one needs perhaps better deliberation, better empathy, better self-knowledge, better skills, and so forth. A guilty person is unsure of how exactly to proceed: which of the above remedies (or some further alternative) should be sought, and how?

Not only guilt but anger, too, appropriately emerges, shifts focus, and dissolves within a temporal flow of events. I may find that my anger is at its subjective peak when I have not yet even found the words with which to address someone. People will say, at this point, that anger “clouds my thinking” or “rushes through my veins.” Yet it is as reasonable to say that my anger *marks* the disruption of my thinking, where it is not anger that does the disrupting, but rather some concern whose importance is flagged by anger. Thus, the initial edge of anger may give way as one develops confidence in a path of response. For, on a communicative view, this confidence is bound up with some optimism that my own grasp of a concern is relatively clear and no longer likely to be lost in the noise of distracting thoughts. Anger similarly loosens hold with growing confidence that I know how, and to whom, I can entrust a concern for follow through. If we trust that anger will fade simply with the passage of time, then we are ignoring its call to engage with others. But if its fading tracks the clarification and practical uptake of its concerns, then the arc of anger is complete.

As Frye’s reflections make clear, uptake need not be understood as the hearer’s complete individual mastery of the challenge at hand. The process of attending to a concern may require residual monitoring and communication. Yet to the extent we come to cognitive and practical grips with the concerns behind a critical encounter, it becomes possible for emotion to play a less and less salient role in following through on the concern.

The dysfunctional aspect of guilt and anger are manifest, by contrast, when they linger statically. Indeed, the very recognition of guilt as a “feeling” may signal some stagnation of attention. What Dewey claims about *sensation* we might also say about guilt: it intrudes most upon consciousness when we find no fluid path of action. The more robust the uptake, the more a subjective state is reabsorbed into the ongoing stream of experience.²⁷ In accord with Damasio’s suggestion that emotions be viewed as “somatic markers,”²⁸ we may say that both anger and guilt can rivet our bodily attention to a social process underway. This social process, however, calls for the communication of concern, and moral emotions serve as visceral and affective reminders of the urgency with which an unresolved concern demands attention.

If this is right, then what is called for in our receptivity to apt criticism is not the feeling of guilt itself, but a kind of further social participation that is potentially *facilitated* by the urgency of guilt. Since our ordinary-language concept of guilt does not distinguish between effective attention and stagnant discouragement, however, we should be especially wary of

assigning an essential role directly to guilt within exchanges of moral criticism. A fixation on producing guilt is particularly troublesome when background conditions make a concern seem especially opaque or intractable to those to whom it is addressed, or when the hearer of criticism faces a practically overwhelming set of concerns. In those cases, criticism depends for its success upon some additional efforts at translating and contextualizing a concern so that it becomes an occasion for the hearer's agency, rather than for its suppression.

Interlude: From a Modular to a Transformative Account

The second half of this book makes a bolder argument than the first. Hence a brief transitional comment is in order.

Thus far we have developed a relatively thin and philosophically ecumenical account of critical engagement. The arguments of chapters 2 through 4 remain largely compatible with a wide range of views about the substance of moral norms, the nature of moral reasoning, and the grounds of moral value. Systematic moral theories come in several flavors, each one organizing moral concerns around its distinctive theme. Depending on the theory, a central role attaches to deontological, contractarian, consequentialist, virtue-ethical, or care-ethical considerations (to take the most widely recognized secular candidates). These theories have generally focused on standards and ideals by which to guide what I have called “conduct,” that is, activity considered in abstraction from any communicative dimension it may have.

Any of these familiar moral theories might easily supplement or extend its focus so as to embrace the importance of critical responsiveness. Having settled on an account of what first-order morality itself requires us to promote, exhibit, or respect, proponents need only add that critical practice is valuable in the course of *implementing* or *following through on* the demands or ideals of morality.

This approach to critical engagement suggests a *modular account* of critical practice. Whatever anyone’s favored account of morality is, good critical practice could *plug into* that grasp of morality and serve as its “office of social outreach.” The communicative practice of criticism might thus *extend* moral agency into the social dimension. Good critical communication about moral matters would thus run parallel to good conduct, functioning as another means of “putting morality into practice.” A modular account entails only minor amendments or caveats to the generalizations of a moral theory. For example, consequentialists would have to find value

in getting attention engaged with concerns about consequences—a value irreducible to the consequences (actual, likely, or intended) of that attention. Kantians, by contrast, would need to slacken their opposition between autonomy and heteronomy, allowing for a kind of moral influence by which agents make a difference to one another. In such ways, a systematic theory of moral conduct can *make room for* critical responsiveness, adding a socially tuned annex to its blueprint of moral agency.

On a modular account of critical engagement, a full appreciation of the social dimension of morality requires only a complex amplification of the already understood project of moral agency. If moral agency means making sure that conduct is shaped through an awareness of basic moral demands, second-order moral engagement simply brings those basic moral demands to the attention of others. So morality in a robust sense means conducting one's own activity by the light of moral reasons, and also doing what one can so that others' conduct may be attentive to the same demands.

Indeed, given familiar starting points for ethics, such “communicative outreach” would be the only proper place for critical practice. Critical practice can go no further if morality, at its root, means adherence to ideal norms of conduct.

The second half of this book moves beyond a modular account of critical practice to explore a *transformative account*. On a transformative account of our social responsiveness, the relation between morality and critical practice is dialectical. Rather than supposing that ideals of moral conduct set the agenda for critical practice, we begin to consider how reflective critical practice itself shifts our grasp of what morality entails. To explain how this might be so, however, we will need a more detailed account of what a “concern” might be, for “concern” is no longer a shorthand abbreviation for this or that *prima facie* moral principle or deliberative consideration.

In communicating moral concerns, then, part of what is at stake is our ability to help develop moral concepts that are responsive to moral problems. Our concerns may come to be reflected not just in the attention of one or another person, but in a shared moral vocabulary and perspective as well. Rather than being driven by a static understanding of “what makes good moral sense,” we can frame the patterns of moral sense-making around us as gestures that call for response. In treating those patterns as incomplete and in need of development, we gradually reshape our moral concepts.

Communicating moral concern is a vital and nonmodular component of moral agency, in other words, because without it our relationship to moral norms and ideals would not be an active and engaged one. Moral agents must be able to see moral concepts not as mere givens, but as answering more or less well to the *need* for moral concepts. Thinking and speaking in certain ways are among the activities we can subject to critical response. We must tune ourselves to moral demands insofar as we can recognize them, but we can also—gradually, collectively, and reflectively—tune the concepts with which we all make moral demands.

None of this, of course, implies that a reflective person should not gravitate toward a systematic moral theory. On the contrary, theories are among the artifacts of many people's gradual and collective responsiveness to deficiencies and infelicities in the moral habits and vocabularies they have encountered. Further, I will suggest that the moral force of responsive activity depends upon the social depth of concern that it carries. Celebrated moral theories are the product, arguably, of particularly deep threads of critical responsiveness to human concerns—and more recently, to concerns as they extend beyond the human world. What a transformative account of criticism does imply, however, is that our stance toward even the most promising moral theory should be nontotalizing. Instead, our stance must be tentative and fallibilist. We must be receptive to shifts in the salience of various details, and conscious of the historical and social contingency of a theory's appeal for us.

Chapter 5 shows how the concept of concern allows for a kind of inarticulate moral attention that can run ahead of our moral vocabularies and beliefs. Though various claims and tentative judgments may be entertained and asserted in the course of handling moral concerns, a concern is not itself identical to any of these. Instead, the presence of concern involves a temporal continuity of attention, and this continuity underlies and supports shifts in the articulate content we associate with it. This concept of concern turns out to underwrite both our capacity for charitable interpretation (when we defer claim-oriented judgment in favor of seeking alternate interpretations) and our ability to participate in cultivating and reshaping the set of moral concepts available to ourselves and to others. As in chapters 3 and 4, I find it necessary to elaborate on the powerful influence of a philosophical dichotomy—this time, Grice's opposition between natural and intentional meaning—that threatens to obscure how the transformative handling of concerns might occur.

The historical and geographical contingency of moral concerns figures centrally in chapters 6 and 7. Much of the sociological work that traces such contingencies is in deep tension with normative work in philosophy—for it seems to present explanations for the “contagion” of moral ideas that make no special place for conscientious and deliberate reflection. Furthermore, such sociological work seems not to countenance the difference between moral concerns and social pressures whose origins lie in superstition, oppression, or deference to authority. In other words, it makes our moral lives seem heteronomous in the most banal way.

Nevertheless, we can develop strategies of social explanation, just as of psychological explanation, that illuminate and cultivate moral agency. Chapter 7 seeks to show, in accord with several strands of recent social theory, how admitting the social contingency of our concerns does not require leaving moral agency aside. On the contrary, social contingency turns out to give us our occasions for moral agency—provided only that we approach our relation to moral concerns as situated, active, and transformative. This situated agency, however, admits of two normative accounts, between which I find a precarious tension. These are what we may call economic and ecological stances toward our handling of moral concerns.

Chapter 8 considers critical engagement in juxtaposition with virtue ethics. Appealing to the resources of virtue ethics helps to illuminate many aspects of critical practice, and yet the demands of critical practice, in turn, will call into question some traditional assumptions of virtue ethicists. Most strikingly, an account of critical practice will allow virtue ethics to respond to the suspicion that virtue ethics must promote a generally conservative attitude toward social habits and traditions.

5 Unconventional Threads of Communication: The Social Elaboration of Inarticulate Concern

It is one thing to take moral considerations as a familiar and fixed domain, and to argue from there that moral agency entails drawing attention to these considerations as we respond to one another in practice. It is another to take critical responsiveness as a vital dimension of moral life, and to argue from there against treating morality as a fixed and familiar set of considerations. This latter line of thought unites the second half of this book, casting moral responsiveness not simply as a kind of practical module for putting morality into practice, but as a more complex capacity that can also transform how moral concerns are understood. The communication of moral concern turns out to be more than a way of implementing morality; through this activity, we make morality what it is.

5.1 To Play the Moral Game or to Change It?

This hypothesis—that morality evolves through moral agency itself—elicits doubt from both old and new quarters. Systematic moral theorists will demur for familiar reasons. If morality has an essential structure, change can occur only at the level of the comprehensiveness and clarity with which we articulate and apply what morality requires. From an opposite direction, historians and antitheorists are just as likely to greet this hypothesis as fuzzy-headed nonsense. For on views such as Richard Rorty's, morality amounts to a kind of language game, whose participants embrace a particular moral vocabulary combined with shared norms about how and when to apply it. From within a moral practice, a cogent argument might be made for local reform—for better enforcement of acknowledged norms or for tightening their internal coherence. What playing a language game *cannot* involve, however, is making substantive changes to the shape of the game itself. Richard Rorty puts the distinction this way: “[Notions] of criteria and choice . . . are no longer in point when it comes to changes from

one language game to another. . . . A talent for speaking differently, rather than for arguing well, is the chief instrument of cultural change."¹

There is indeed a difference between forging new ways of speaking and arguing well in conventional terms. Yet a starker opposition is implied here: changes at the level of a language game, on Rorty's view, do not come about through choosing; it is a matter of doing something *differently* rather than of doing something *well*. The process of cultural change resembles mutation, drift, and play; it is poets who offer us new directions, not moral philosophers. Game changers can be admired for talent and creativity, but not for answering a call to action. Those who praise the "progress" of a historic moral step—a turn toward procedural rights, toward parity between women and men, toward recognizing diverse affective bonds—mark progress along an axis that has itself been redrawn in accord with new values. On the language-game view, moral agency can aim only for an internal kind of validity. In this respect an ironist like Rorty comes into full alignment with Kant: whether or not morality reflects ahistorical forms of reason or experience, there's no sense in talk of a substantive *improvement* in the scope of moral concerns.

The Moral Agency of Forging New Values

Kathryn Pyne Addelson writing in 1972 (under the surname Parsons) was among the first to respond to Kuhn's distinction between normal and revolutionary science by offering a parallel account of morality. To illustrate the process of moral revolution, she chooses early feminist activists, such as Sarah Grimké, who worked against a fierce current of dismissal and ridicule. Grimké's revolutionary moral stance, Addelson argues, could not hope to win assent by conventional means. Yet traditional moral theory, apparently, can countenance moral agency only as the application of shared and public standards. It systematically fails, therefore, "to account for the behavior of the moral revolutionary as moral behavior."²

While argument and justification are deployed coherently by a conservative or reformist speaker, matters are otherwise for Addelson's revolutionaries. When Grimké wrote in 1837, for example, that "our powers of the mind have been crushed . . . our sense of morality. . . impaired by [men's] interpretation of our duties,"³ such claims struck many people as off-key and confused—much like the hypotheses offered by scientists exploring a novel paradigm. For the distinct character of each sex was counted as a matter of manifest evidence. Refusing to acknowledge the "obvious facts," Grimké instead subjected the obvious facts themselves to explanatory reinterpretation. If early feminists now strike us as having

offered cogent arguments, Addelson writes, that is merely the effect of our historical vantage point: "It is only after the revolution that they can justify what they have done—if the revolution is a success, that is."⁴ As they actually unfold within their social and historical context, she argues, the rhetorical efforts of revolutionaries such as Grimké "serve . . . at best [as] calls for a new paradigm."⁵

Indeed, the relative merit of contrasting moral vocabularies cannot be adjudicated before a neutral jury in neutral terms. Yet Addelson, unlike Rorty, counts the work of moral revolutionaries as the exercise of moral agency, not as an upheaval that affects morality from without. To vindicate this view Addelson turns to Nietzsche, for whom "moral revolution contains what is essential to morality in a way that morality in stasis does not."⁶ While it is jarring to see the word "morality" spun as a positive Nietzschean notion, part of Addelson's point can be easily paraphrased: Creative transvaluation figures centrally in a Nietzschean life, while conventional morality functions, at best, as a petrification of values. Whatever it is that matters to us about morality, therefore, its precondition is the process by which someone gives *birth* to values. Each of our favored norms admits of a genealogical discovery; what strikes us today as "saturated with reason" can be traced to "irrational origins."⁷

It is easy to object that Grimké does not take herself to be doing something essentially unjustified and unjustifiable in available moral terms. Many of her arguments seem to fit precisely within the reformist genre; they present themselves explicitly as pleas for better implementation of Enlightenment and Christian ideals. Addelson acknowledges that "moral revolutionaries may sometimes *feel* they want to relieve suffering and injustice,"⁸ and that such relief efforts connect Grimké's work to a perfectly intelligible nineteenth-century moral agenda. Yet this connection is a tenuous one, for "The vast majority of nineteenth-century women did not feel they were suffering from sexism. It is difficult to make a case that one is struggling to relieve suffering when the 'sufferers' themselves deny the suffering."⁹

In other words, even in her attempts to harness public opposition to suffering and injustice, Grimké turns out to be interpreting these ideals in strikingly controversial ways. Like Kuhnian scientists working with an upstart paradigm, she presses new meanings into familiar terms. What makes Grimké's life morally exemplary was not her diligence in playing an old moral game well, but her reworking of the rules. For revolutionaries, Addelson concludes, "it is creation, and not the relief of suffering and injustice, that must serve as their foundation."¹⁰

The Invocation of an Ur-Feminist

Such a poetic revolutionary narrative, however, remains awkward as an account of Grimké's work. For her critique draws its charge not only from a reinterpretation of the Christian and liberal traditions, but also from a meticulous portrayal of women's "condition"—predicaments of paralysis, exhaustion, confusion and bewilderment, distraction, and self-debasement. Indeed, Grimké's published *Letters* constitute a painstaking attempt at a global survey of women's situation—an investment of tremendous sustained attention to the conditions that call for change. The thought of equality, Grimké insists, is not an "invention" but rather "the rising of the general tide in the human soul."¹¹ This phrase, borrowed from Emerson, marks her refusal to choose between the methodical reason of tradition and the creative disruption of independence. Grimké places herself, instead, in the midst of a social movement whose influence does not seem to depend on a poetic genius at its origin.

Whether Grimke explicitly discounts her revolutionary role, however, is somewhat beside the point of Addelson's account; Grimké's Emersonian solidarity might be both self-deceived and politically effective. For that matter, whether Grimké herself was the catalyst for feminist moral change is also beside the point. For feminist change did happen, and Addelson's premises require some person to have stood at its point of origin. Creativity has a long history of seeming irreducibly individual—a revolutionary acts on a cultural and historical stage, to be sure, but she acts there in radically unprecedented ways. It was within this ur-feminist, or perhaps in several independent ur-feminists, that the prevailing silent acceptance of women's "different lot" must have first been supplanted by a strident new way of formulating charges of injustice.

By insisting on creative and pivotal individuals, however, Addelson must struggle to distinguish her moral heroine from her Nietzschean counterpart. If what matters is the "creative" initiative of unsettling of customs and perceptions, how is it different from irresponsible mischief? Indeed, Rorty invokes his Nietzschean heroes in just such an amoral light, as poetic innovators who unleash their individual spontaneity within an otherwise dull world of sincere conformity. This view draws support from Nietzsche's express disdain not only for "morality" but also for mass movements of political and social liberation. How then can we distinguish a moral revolutionary from a capriciously clever antisocial imp? Addelson discounts the moral value of the Nietzschean heroes who "create themselves in isolation as sovereign individuals."¹² Her activists, by contrast, "must begin to create themselves as the first of their kind . . . a revolutionary of the people [must]

help them to overcome themselves, to help each create him, or herself as a new kind of individual. In this process, the new paradigm comes into being—that is, the new values are created.”¹³ Here we seem dangerously close to suggesting that innovation becomes socially responsible simply by sweeping other lives up into its visionary project; Grimké (if indeed she fits the bill) will be the first, but *only the first*, of her new kind. She is socially committed in her call for change and in her willingness to spur others on toward their own self-overcoming, but she seems to have entirely disengaged with the moral concerns of her actual contemporaries.

Does moral change require such discontinuity? Must it issue directly from existential self-overcoming? The appeal of this view is bound up with the same dichotomies that have been challenged, from different angles, in prior chapters. Given an opposition between opaque individual conduct and explicit public assertion, we see no room for the cumulative social work of shaping awareness. Indeed, we lack the concepts with which to discuss social communication except as the transmission of propositional claims. Given evidence of a shift in public judgment, then, we must trace its origin to individual spontaneity.

Between Speech and Silence

Perhaps we are gripped by the elegance of Wittgenstein’s last words in the *Tractatus*: “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.” As this contrast serves as a coda following his discussion of propositions, it draws a dramatic line at the boundary of propositional understanding. Whereof one cannot speak *articulately*, is there nothing to communicate? Whereof one cannot speak, is there only solitary and quarantined contemplation? While Wittgenstein’s silence seems mystical and passive, it shares a common premise with Nietzsche’s suggestion that the most authentic voice must be an absurd one. For both set up speech and silence, agency and suffering, in dramatic contrast.

We must resist the assumption that for any given prefeminist woman, the various ways in which she handled herself either *did* carry a specific intended critical propositional message or they *did not* carry any such message, playing out only as ordinary conduct and bodily reflexes. On the contrary, a continuum stretches between two equally rigid and uninhabited extremes: the self-possessed author of justifiable claims and the diffusely passive suffering body whose symptoms, at best, become the occasions for someone else’s pity and rescue efforts.

Even when we find no claim worth staking, we act always within the social fabric of gesture; and our gestures, whether silent or verbal, draw

and call for the attention of others. This intervening continuum of gesture, between fully articulate speech and self-contained silence, is the space we all inhabit as social beings. Indeed—and this is the kernel of the argument to come—our clumsy inarticulacy itself may be thematized in gesture. We walk in the wake of one another's unresolved predicaments, each passing along our own half-finished sentences, and tending to thoughts that others have dropped with a shrug or a sigh.

We are now in a better position to challenge the contrast between playing by the standards of conventional morality and venturing beyond them to become an author of new values. New values, for their part, gain salience only gradually, building on the overlap of social experience. Meanwhile, even the most conservative moral speech cannot force standards to interpret themselves. To learn a moral practice, we pick up on the kinds of things to which others are attending. When a traditionalist summarizes what a rule “really means,” he cannot flatten the gestural dimension of his action; his words confront a particular audience and redirect its attention just so, and just at a particular moment.

The same might be said for the practitioners of “normal science” and for those who explain the rules of “ordinary games.” They are not always fully articulate, nor can exposition proceed directly and abstractly. To teach is to harness the gestural skills of responding to some examples warmly while distancing oneself from others. The difference between “normal” and “revolutionary” social interactions lies not in their alignment with actual stasis and actual change, but rather in how much participants *understand* their practices as structures for implementation rather than processes for continued development. A moral revolution, just like a scientific one, is not so much a challenge to inherently stable norms of practice as a challenge to the *idea* of such norms. Even the most staid tradition lives on only precariously through a continual redirection of social attention.

To some degree, Addelson comes to a compatible conclusion—that a revolutionary aims not to author a new stasis but instead to foster a “continued state of revolution,”¹⁴ perpetually open to further change. What we must clarify, however, is that moral stasis is not “out there” as an actually closed system of convention from which the revolutionary makes a historical break. During periods of dramatic moral change, moral responsiveness takes unfamiliar directions, no doubt, and such responses may be called revolutionary. Yet if we declare resistance to “normal” morality, we should be prepared to learn that there’s no “they” there—no “they” whose moral moves proceed strictly “by the book.”

5.2 Inarticulate Competence: Not an Exclusively Individual Affair

According to a long tradition in philosophy, intelligence or mind is best distinguished by its grasp of concepts and its capacity to deploy these in judgment. The details, of course, have evolved. Compared to a prior emphasis on ideas or impressions as the basic contents of mind, Kant's work ushered in a more holistic focus on judgment as the basic unit of cognition.¹⁵ Robert Brandom frames this as one of Kant's "epoch-making insights"—that "judgments are the fundamental form of awareness, so that concept use must be understood in terms of the contribution it makes to judging." Those who frame intelligence as participation in contingent "language games," however irreverent in their stance toward other Kantian tenets, retain Kant's preoccupation with the phenomenon of judgment.

Recent threads of work in moral philosophy have partially succeeded in decentering judgment. In her book *Beyond Moral Judgment*, Alice Crary takes up the later Wittgenstein's interest in our grasp of "how to go on." Iris Murdoch's *The Sovereignty of Good* foregrounds the challenges of moral attentive contemplation¹⁶ as another nonpropositional facet of our intelligent engagement with the moral world. In insisting that moral reflection involves much more than articulate reasoning, these works embrace a kind of attentive awareness that merges seamlessly with nonverbal skills and affective responsiveness. To excel in these nonpropositional aspects of morality, we must wade into the current that carries perceptions into judgments, scanning for alternative ways of contrasting figure and ground. Such attention may be quiet, but it is by no means passive: it requires a situational and embodied competence, inflected with self-knowledge.

Virtue ethicists have embraced and extended such reflections, arguing that the differential responsiveness associated with virtue and skill often runs ahead of the ability to give a clear public accounting of one's choice, or to invoke criteria in any non-question-begging way. Indeed, virtue requires forms of perceptual play and situational adjustment that fit poorly within a conventionally rule-governed morality. The virtuous person is one for whom complex patterns of practical demands or possibilities achieve salience at the level of perception. Without inferential effort, she discerns the moral lay of the land much better than she can explain it in words.

Philosophical accounts of mind as well, increasingly interdisciplinary in scope, have been prompted to question the centrality of judgment.

Some successful inroads toward modeling mental activity invoke neural networks, for example; and in the “hidden layers” of such neural networks, the tokening of propositional contents need not play more than an optional and marginal role.

While all of this work captures important aspects of moral competence, most of it has portrayed our inarticulate practical capacities as “inner” phenomena, as forms of attention that play out under the surface of our overt interactions.¹⁷ The inarticulateness of virtuous attention and neural processing looks like an essentially *internal* arc of semi-awareness that opens at the moment of individual perception, takes shape through further active perception and cognition, and reaches closure at the level of that individual’s fitting conduct. This individualist focus has an underbelly: inarticulate subtlety seems to be vindicated at the cost of casting social morality in a conservative light and allowing shared moral vocabularies to remain bound by convention.

In chapter 8, I will return to the strengths and weaknesses of virtue ethics in making sense of critical practice. For now, however, I wish to suggest that this cluster of ventures “beyond judgment” have gone only halfway in noticing how our encounters with practical indeterminacy figure in our moral competence. For the subtle and dynamic adjustments of perception and perspective on display here seem to transpire only within the process of individual attention. The value of inarticulate attention remains linked to an essentially individual kind of recognition and know-how. Meaning at the social level, meanwhile, continues to be limited to conventional, exchangeable, and accountable claims. Social patterns that fail to carry such content can register only as forces, disruptions, and noise. It is this remaining assumption that a transformative account must undermine.

What the balance of this chapter seeks to provide, therefore, is some further elaboration of how unconventional action can emerge at a social level—even while participants lack the terms in which to formulate their activity. As in chapters 2 and 4, it will be crucial to deny that doing something together entails parallel *intentions* to perform the task together. To recognize a social process of creative moral transformation, we need only understand *what it is* that runs steadily enough through the social interaction to be transformed without being abandoned. A philosophical fixation with judgment has made it difficult to see such a common thread uniting the “before” and “after” moments of moral change. That common thread, I shall argue, is concern.

5.3 Concern as the Social Life of Unresolved Attention

On a transformative account of critical responsiveness, the uptake of concerns is not a matter of assenting to a claim or accepting the inferential role of this or that consideration. Uptake does not revolve around the replication or re-tokening within oneself of some content delivered persuasively by another. To take up a concern is to extend a temporally continuous thread of attention. For this attention to have a distinctive value, in fact, its focal point must remain in some regard *incompletely* understood. Of course, we are not left speechless in relation to our moral concerns. Yet the stance of concern is perpetually poised to call for a revisiting of the scenario and its practical implications. The focal point of concerned attention, in other words, must be conceived as a *problem*.

Following Dewey, I take a problem to consist in an indeterminate situation, the predicament of an organism whose environment affords only conflicted or unclear cues as to how to proceed.¹⁸ Not all problems, of course, are moral problems; and not all problems arouse extended or concerted attention. All animals must orient to unfamiliar stimuli. They must discern whether movement portends prey or predator, whether unfamiliar vegetation is edible or toxic, and so on. Given the repertoire of responsive capacities any animal has, it must resolve indeterminacy with respect to those. Erring either more or less on the side of conservative safety, it will need to cope with incomplete or mixed signals about what kind of stance is fitting. In many animals, we might think of the resolution of conceptual indeterminacy as a matter of precognitive processing—inscribing a firm impression for the animal with respect to what sense to make of the case at hand. A problem may be as brief and individual as an unfamiliar form of discomfort, a loss of one's balance or perceptual functioning, or a glimpse of something that calls up both curiosity and fear. What problems have in common are the disruption of habit, the arousal of attention, and the urgency of weighing alternatives and settling—at least tentatively—for some way to proceed.

When both our perceptual capacities and our agency are complex and socially extended, however, our “tracking” of a provocative situation need not resolve into one or another responsive stance quickly, nor must resolution be sought at the level of individual conduct. A cognitively complex being—especially a socially communicative one—may have good reasons to resist the foreclosure of indeterminacy. We may draw one another's attention to the situation as one for which our concepts seem to fall short,

one that seems to call for a profile of response that is not—or not yet—ready at hand.¹⁹

Only social animals, then, can field a problem with the stance of concern: to be concerned is to resist closing or settling the problem by means of an immediate recalibration of conduct. Concern marks a problem as something to revisit, something that may call for the attention of minds other than one's own—perhaps even one's own future mind, as it might hope to have been informed by intervening experience. When we are concerned, we take the predicament at hand to extend beyond this immediate place and time. To make a problem available to others for consultation or resolution, we must be able to indicate, for others, not only the fact of our unsettlement but also something of its direction and nature.²⁰

Skill in Attending to Concern

The significance of a concern is thus not a kind of mental content—something within—but rather it is the signature of a gap in discursive content, a gap we must navigate by means of an essentially *indexical* form of attention.²¹ Of course, the experience of concern does not doom us to speechlessness; various kinds of articulate speech may help in illustrating a concern. Hence, the experience of concern might be conceived as a continuum. At one extreme, a concern may seem well-captured by fully articulate claims; at the other extreme, we may be perplexed even about which open-ended claims might be nailed down around its edges. Perhaps we are reduced to vagueness: “Something is wrong,” or “Something is odd in her tone of voice.” Yet such a claim does not show the content of a concern so much as gesture toward it.

To see how this is so, consider how we respond to claims in connection with concerns. To the claim “something is wrong,” the most apt response is often a question: “What is it that’s wrong?” or “How so?” To affirm or accept the claim as testimony (“I’ll take that into account then—there is at least one thing that’s wrong”) is generally to miss the point. And the ineptness of beginning with weighing the proposition is not simply a failure to consider what is implied (as when a beggar’s “Do you have a quarter?” is answered with only “Yes, I do”). A concern calls for a response whose nature is partly to help sort out what response is called for. Hence, in attempting to answer “What’s wrong?” the stance of concern focuses more on bringing the hearer’s attention to the same difficulty than on spelling a claim out explicitly.

Asked to elaborate “What’s wrong,” we may imagine someone saying, for instance, “Well, something looks different about Maya today.” If the

questioner is immediately satisfied that on the contrary Maya *does* look very much like she always does, such a questioner fails to engage at the level of *concern* at all, listening instead for a claim that turns out to be clear, but simply false. Alternately, a claim-oriented hearer may concede that indeed Maya does not look quite herself today, but infer quite confidently that since there's generally nothing wrong with variation, there's no reason to infer—from the mere fact of variation—that there's anything wrong today.

If the questioner is tuned instead to concerns, she will tend not to discount a concern so quickly on the grounds that a claim is trivially true or apparently false. She will tend, rather, to be unsatisfied with her recognition of the speaker's concern. A hearer does something at odds with the communication of concern if she proceeds by fixing upon this or that claim, deciding its merits, and then moving on. In taking a concern-oriented stance, indeed *both* participants must show some persistence in seeking alternate conversational gestures with which to bring joint attention to the *same* problem, rather than taking any one claim to define its scope and implications.

The preceding example suggests that a speaker may focus quite directly on communicating a concern, bracketing her attachment to particular claims and seeking only to bring a hearer's attention into alignment with her own. Indeed, an ability to raise concern in such a flexible way is a vital moral skill. Yet it would be misleading to suggest that a speaker has a concern just insofar as she takes such a dialogical approach. Some degree of interpretive choice is always bound up with whether to highlight concerns rather than claims. As with our discussion of gesture in chapter 2, whether to appreciate a person *as* a bearer of concerns is not settled by a psychological variable within the individual (such as whether the person herself employs the rhetoric of problems, indeterminacy, or inarticulable doubts). Concern may manifest in many ways—including through visceral processes of orienting, tracking, and alerting others. The arousal patterns that carry concern can run beneath the surface of other styles of speech—including righteously confident moral diagnoses and flat denials that there is anything “the matter” at all.

Beyond the Question of Legitimacy

As a state of attention, concerns are not subject to legitimacy questions, any more than a startle reflex, a dream, or an association. A concern might be relatively trivial, it may be mishandled, and it may be confused; yet as a concern, it cannot be false or wrong. To be clear, however: our handling

of concerns is often bound up with assertions, arguments, and the presentation of articulate considerations. What we say *about* concerns (like what we say about anything else) is subject to scrutiny in terms of accuracy and legitimacy. It may be more or less reasonable, more or less inferentially cogent, more or less explicable by ideological conditioning or reason-resistant attitudes.

In suggesting that critical response revolves around concerns as much as claims, my intent is to widen our field of view. Not all morally charged communication focuses on or reduces to the matter of determinate claims and their warrant. Concerns take shape along what is usefully figured as another *dimension* of communicative significance—one held together by temporal continuity of attention, rather than by the logical terrain of conceptually articulate claims. Indeed, concern resides along the same dimension as gesture; it amounts to a gesture within our own process of attention, a passing forward of the baton of troubled attention.

Philosophy has endured a tiresome standoff between cognitivist and noncognitivist accounts of moral belief. It will thus be difficult not to assume that moral concern must align with either a cognitive or noncognitive account of moral attitudes. The argument of this chapter is analogous to the argument of chapters 1 and 2, however. It will generally be possible to frame the same general region of experience and interaction with attention to different categorical dimensions. The typical cognitivist habit is to look for representations and judgments and to be poised to cross-examine them. The typical noncognitivist habit is to look instead for preferences, diagnosing everywhere the elaborate push and pull of warm and cold qualities of feeling. The habit of thinking I wish to encourage here is neither of those for it shows how we may also orient to the moral world *not* in terms of what is settled (by either the right or the good), but precisely in terms of what is *not* settled, and what therefore calls for further social attention. This habit deserves cultivation not because it should eclipse these other, more familiar ones, but because it allows us to recognize critical responsiveness without collapsing it into either conduct or representation.

Hence the suggestion is not that the appreciation of moral concerns ought always (or even usually) to take priority over moral argumentation and scrutiny of the warrant for moral claims. In some particular discussion, participants may readily reach agreement about the moral claims at issue in their conversation—or at least over how such claims should be understood and resolved. They may not, then, have any compelling reason to raise questions about how best to interpret a moral concern. Yet moral

interaction enjoys such robust convergence only in rare and confined cases. To the extent that our moral encounters are marked by divergence, uncertainty, and confusion with respect to substantial moral claims, the distinctive skills of attending to concerns become pivotal. Such attention to concerns facilitates our capacity to reinterpret the provocative situations at issue. It affords us social room in which to develop and reshape moral concepts so that they afford a better grasp on evolving moral challenges.

Although questions of warrant or legitimacy are misplaced in connection with concerns, concerns are never found in existential isolation from representations that do remain subject to such scrutiny. Like rhythmic and harmonic structures in music, each dimension can be more salient in particular contexts, even while both are interwoven in practice. An ability to subsume phenomena (subject matter) under concepts (predicates), crystallizing such predication into discrete claims, is one important dimension of our intelligence. A less celebrated aspect of intelligence is the ability to orient to anomalies, challenges, and disturbances within our situated experience—in short, to track certain provocative phenomena that resist clear representations. Concern marks our *lack* of closure in orienting ourselves, and one another, to action.

Between Accountable Assertion and Passive Susceptibility

To appreciate concerns as such (in the sense I intend) is to step away from the preoccupation with propositions, judgments, and legitimacy that dominates most philosophical accounts of meaning and discourse. Yet this position—that it is a mistake to think of moral concerns as directly open to questions of legitimacy—is clearly subject to a parody that impugns its moral seriousness. A tempting parody of this position might compare it to a simple mantra associated with individualist therapeutic culture: “Feelings aren’t right or wrong; they just are.” Do I mean that concerns, being neither right nor wrong, true or false, are like feelings as they are figured by popular psychologists—neither good nor bad, right nor wrong, just things to share and acknowledge?

Alas, such rhetoric about feelings collapses in another direction: into merely qualitative and internal phenomenology—a kind of inner “weather” of a person’s passively experienced subjective impressions. While such feelings might be traced to causal origins, we are not to see the person’s own agency at work in the occurrence or shaping of them. (And indeed, such feelings can be “communicated” only in one of two ways: by making assertions that *inform* another about what one’s feelings are, or through

some kind of visceral contagion or reaction whereby a copy or variation has been caused, but no meaning *conveyed*.)

Such a passive notion of “feelings” is a lifeless and irresponsible substitute for a more robust concept of emotions, however. Emotions are more than feelings, as they bring into focus some aspect or other of the world in which they occur. Emotions, as Heidegger says, *disclose* the world.²² Yet, their doing so is not something that happens *to us*; it is equally important that we disclose the world, both to ourselves and to others, *by way of* emotions. And yet the disclosures that are underway in our emotional reflections and communications do not translate neatly into claims about the world. Indeed, speaking of the propositional content of emotions can mislead us in just the same way as we are misled by talk of the propositional content of concerns.

Emotions, like concerns, stand in need of a kind of third account. They ought to be reduced neither to claims—prescriptive or descriptive—nor to the qualitatively striking impressions that reflect nothing beyond their conditions of origin. I find it plausible to cast the significance of emotion as largely indexical or ostensive—that is, as the means by which attention can be kept or trained both in the direction of a certain tentatively picked-out salient provocation, and in the direction of a certain tentatively framed call for response. If the focal point of an emotion is likely to be a situation whose implications for conduct are not yet entirely clear, then such an emotion can be meaningful in precisely the way concerns are.

I will not further enter the fray of philosophical debate about emotions here. It is consistent with my account, however, to suggest that we can treat many or perhaps all emotional developments as *manifesting* concerns. I have already shown how we might treat two paradigmatic “moral emotions”—guilt and resentment—as phases in the communication of moral concern. Yet concerns, including moral concerns, also take forms that are not well recognized as emotions (at least not without begging the very questions at issue). For this reason, I opt to develop a broad account of concerns, rather than emotions, in order to illustrate the demands of moral communication. The philosophical task of making room for concerns as such may proceed more directly, I hope, by starting freshly from a point outside the densely contested literature on the philosophy of emotions.

Still, it is no coincidence that philosophical accounts of emotion have been stymied by the very dichotomy that a good account of concerns must resist. This is the dichotomy between the kind of accountable agency associated with propositional claim making, on one hand, and the passive

lack of agency associated with causal transmissions and effects, on the other. Concerns, as I shall wish to understand them, resist this well-worn and polarized dichotomy. For it is too easy to think of meaning as recognizable in just two senses: the kind of meaning wielded by intentional agents on the one hand, and the kind of meaning we attach to natural clues on the other. As this dichotomy is enshrined in Paul Grice's influential account of "non-natural" versus "natural" meaning, the conceptual work in the next section will treat Grice's account as a reef buoy around which to learn to navigate carefully.

5.4 Clues, Claims, and Emergent Meanings

What people are doing, in communicating concerns, defies any neat opposition between "claims" (accountable tokenings of propositional content) and "clues" (passive propagation of informationally rich causal patterns). Like many Hegelian gestures of synthesis, my emphasis on concerns will in some ways seem to straddle or compromise between two contraries, but in other ways it requires us to shift our angle of approach altogether. I will first review Grice's account of the dichotomy in question—its clearest articulation—and then offer suggestions about how to loosen its grip upon our philosophical imagination. In addition to cases that fit fairly neatly into the conceptual space of either accountable claims or passive clues, we will highlight cases that demand a third concept, *emergent signs*, or *signs under cultivation*. It is under this broad concept that I believe we should locate concerns, including moral concerns.

I will speak of this third dimension alternately as the terrain of emergent meanings and as the occurrence of signs under cultivation, because I wish to emphasize both that the *meaning* of concerns emerges progressively through temporal development, and because I wish to emphasize the active and perceptive process through which we cultivate such meaning. As foreshadowed in the initial chapters of this book, the evaluative ideal that best characterizes this dimension of meaning cultivation is neither the good nor the right. Rather, our handling of concern—and of the significance cultivated through it—may be more or less *apt* or responsively engaged.

Grice's Distinction

Paul Grice's landmark paper, "Meaning," offers the most explicit presentation of an opposition between what he calls "natural" and "non-natural" senses of meaning.²³ In this section, I will pursue the hypothesis that

Grice's dichotomy both resonates with and consolidates a powerful intuition that may exert a widespread influence even among those who do not render it explicit.

While I find it necessary to dwell for a few moments on an exposition of Grice's dichotomy, I will resist Grice's terminology. His labeling of "natural" and "non-natural" forms of meaning has two troublesome implications. First, if accountable claim making stands in stark *opposition* to what is natural—counting as a "non-natural" sense of meaning—there must be a fundamental paradox to imagining that accountability and intentions might develop *within* nature. Second, this rhetoric invites us to think that these two kinds of meaning saturate the logical possibilities, in just the way that, say, objects currently orbiting the earth divide into natural and non-natural satellites. My aim is to characterize the same *field of differences* to which Grice calls attention, but to do so in language that does not beg those two questions. (Indeed, I want to *do* what I'm saying critics must do: to attend to his philosophical *concerns* more than to the claims he makes about them.) I will move slowly through what's at stake in Grice's opposition, because its starkness so easily derails our appreciation of *emergent* meaning—a middle ground that is in certain ways more fertile than either of Grice's familiar senses of meaning.²⁴

Grice's distinction hinges centrally upon how we conceive the possibility of falsity or misrepresentation. Paradigmatic natural signs "tell us about" the world just by presenting one facet of a natural pattern whose other facets—generally those aspects that *matter* more—happen to be relatively hidden. In this way, for example, tracks reveal where an animal went, dark clouds can signify rain, certain reddish spots may mean measles, and a certain purring roar signals the passing of a Harley-Davidson. Changes in skin conductivity may indicate a sudden surge of adrenaline, which in turn may belie the social stress of dishonesty.

Grice argues that the first distinctive feature of the natural sense of meaning is its "factivity." If some event really *means X* (in his "natural" sense), that something cannot happen without X being true (though X itself may be something tied to the mere probability of some Y).²⁵ Another way of putting this aspect of Grice's distinction is that with natural signs, we might say, "Buyer beware: any liability for false inferences you draw from such a sign belongs to you, the interpreter." Natural signs do not lie; they only get misconstrued. Grice's second observation about natural meaning is that it lacks "quotability"; if there is one satisfactory description of X's meaning, any synonymous description serves equally well to capture its meaning.

Someone can “read meaning into” nearly any event whatsoever, treating it as a trace, symptom, or natural omen. Yet the occurrence itself need not be seen as “intrinsically meaningful”—that is, meaningful in virtue of function or intention.²⁶ Something that will likely be taken up as a passive clue may be purposefully generated and placed so as to provoke inferences, but by itself it remains, as it were, mute. Here the double connotation implicit in “passivity” is useful: passivity is not just failure of initiative, but also the disposition to *pass* or *transmit* forces in determinate ways, for it is their reliability *in passing differences along* that makes them fit as natural signs. In being passive to a footprint, the sand carries information forward; if it were more resilient to impact, it would pass nothing along.

What Grice calls “non-natural” meaning, meanwhile, depends on an *author* who is subject to both credit and liability in connection with the content of an utterance or gesture. A doctor’s nod (at just the right moment) can *mean* “This is a case of measles,” with a kind of normatively charged and accountable *force* that the red spots cannot muster. Assuming linguistic and other conventions are sufficiently settled among parties to the discussion, we can generally remain confident that we have understood the doctor’s claim even if she was deceived, medically incompetent, or lying. A doctor can *misrepresent* the facts only because we treat her speech as *more than* a natural sign. In treating it as an accountable claim, we must attribute it to an agent who will count as answerable for it. Speakers must be ready to offer reasons or explanations of their entitlement to say what they do. Further, they must respond in suitable ways to contrary claims or challenges—with reasons, explanations, apologies, indications of how they are willing to revise their claims, and so on.

Furthermore, accountable claims are bound up with the concepts deployed by speakers. Rabbit tracks usually mean (in the natural sense) that a rabbit *and hence a mammal* passed this way. But young Connie—having never heard of mammals—can make a claim about rabbits without making any claim *about* mammals. It is only by treating Connie’s utterance *as* a natural sign (as a vocal pattern set in motion by conditions that include a rabbit) that it could be heard as bearing evidence of mammal life.

An Intermediate Sense of Meaning

In drawing attention to the multiple forms meaning can take, Grice’s work is a precedent to which this discussion is indebted. The warning I wish to raise here targets the starkness of his contrast. There is the meaning at issue when someone *asserts* that someone has measles (or indicates it through

conventional gestures), and there is the meaning at issue when symptoms passively *show* that someone has measles. Interweaving of these senses is ubiquitous: a person can assert, for example, that a certain photo reveals that a doctor certified that someone's symptoms indicate measles. Yet Grice resolves such complexity into its intentional and passive elements as cleanly as we can resolve a newspaper photo into printed and unprinted patches.²⁷ Where there is agency, Grice supposes, there is authorship of a clear message; where there is no clearly authored message, there is only the propagation of causal chains.

What even Grice's hybridized cases obscure, however, is the kind of showing that we should understand as the communication of concern. It may be simplest if we consider a concern with relatively little moral charge to it. Suppose, then, that Paz seeks out a doctor precisely because she does not know what to make of her symptoms (or even, perhaps, whether to count various unsettling experiences as symptoms at all). What she presents to the doctor is herself—herself not as a passive object, but as the bearer and site of a concern. Paz opens herself not only to physical examination, but also to questioning and collaborative inquiry. Nor should we assume that there is any single fixed claim—implicit or explicit—that summarizes the content of her concern. She may hypothesize that she is sick, while in fact she is pregnant. Paz may complain that she is burdened with a leg that is not her own, while the doctor's diagnosis may be that her proprioceptive capacities are disturbed.²⁸ Whether or not the patient is circumspect and fallibilist about her interpretation, the doctor's uptake of concern owes itself to her *noticing* and having already begun the social process whereby the problem may become more clear and tractable.

It bears repeating, here, that a contrast between kinds of meaning—whether it is Grice's dichotomy or the threefold contrast I recommend instead—should not be understood as an ontological taxonomy of instances of meaning. In other words, candidates for meaning can't neatly be sorted, based on any intrinsic facts about them, into two (or more) piles. Instead, the differences here take place at the level of interpretive and responsive stance toward events. While some events are especially *ripe* for framing as accountable claims, and others are best scrutinized for what they reveal to us as passive clues, many interactions put us in the position of fielding communication with attention to emergent meaning—that is, with attention to significance that is actively under cultivation.

In particular, going forward, we must refrain from assuming that the recognition of a communicating *person* as such—a respect for her as a co-

participant in the intelligible world—requires focusing on the content and status of her accountable claims.

5.5 Three Ways of Listening to Moral Testimony

Having spelled out the kind of meaning that must be recognized between the poles of Grice's opposition, I will turn next to clarifying its relevance to morally charged discourse. In several ways, Karen Jones's work on moral testimony runs parallel to the central project of this book. In "Second-Hand Moral Knowledge,"²⁹ Jones urges us to recognize and cope gracefully with our moral finitude and interdependence. She is impressed with our ongoing interdependence as moral knowers, and argues from such interdependence to the articulation of a moral responsibility—under the right circumstances—to accept another's testimony on a moral matter.

Indeed, moral life can only begin with a phase of moral trust, for better or for worse, in those who teach us. Jones rightly proceeds to argue that the place of trust in our moral lives "is not just a stage we go through on the way to becoming morally virtuous." On the contrary, continued openness to "borrowing moral knowledge" can "enhance our capacity to understand the world of value." She concludes that on some occasions it is wise to accept others' moral testimony, for in certain circumstances such testimony offers us access to moral knowledge that is otherwise inaccessible.

Jones introduces us to the case of Peter, a long-term member of a large household cooperative. In helping to deliberate about new membership applications, he must decide whether—and on what grounds—to accept the moral testimony of his housemates. Although Peter has never wished to grant membership to racist and sexist applicants, he himself tends to notice only the most egregious signs of prejudice. Hence over time, Peter has repeatedly encountered divergence between his own positive response to an applicant and other members' negative appraisal.

At first, he took their claims quite earnestly, struggling to understand the basis on which other members rejected particular applicants as sexist or racist. The women tried to share their evidence of sexism, appealing to subtle perceptions and experiences that Peter did not share. Alas, they did not seem able to provide neutral data that could enable Peter to reach the same conclusion independently.

After much frustration in trying to weigh the evidence himself, Jones tells us that Peter came to handle these claims in a loosely pragmatic way. Despite his belief that he ought to reach his own moral judgments about sexism and racism, he now handles a contentious case by just *going along*

with what others reported. Discouraged about making sense of his own moral conscience, he ceased to participate fully in the process of moral judgment.

Peter's stance has shifted from being earnestly unconvinced to being pragmatically distant from the judgment in question. Jones's point, however, is that both stances are lacking. She concludes, instead, that under certain conditions, "Peter should have been willing to *accept* the women's testimony that these men were sexist . . . to *borrow* moral knowledge."³⁰

On Jones's portrayal, Peter either takes his deliberative responsibility seriously or settles for a bad-faith coping mechanism (not sharing the fact that he remains unconvinced), and his flaw lies in assuming that responsible judgment has to proceed entirely by the lights of his own moral perception. Her argument for a more social account of moral knowledge, then, reinscribes a dichotomy between non-communicative conduct (coping behavior) and fully articulate representations. It is this very dichotomy that obscures the gestural dimension of moral communication.

Responsiveness to Concerns

Certainly Peter *might* have approached his situation by prioritizing either conduct or representation—either "quietly going along" without really listening to the claims, or reaching a considered judgment in light of moral testimony. However, when we step back from the familiar focus on claims and their cross-examination, we recognize that a wise Peter might sometimes "take the matter seriously" in a different way altogether. That is, he may be responsive to his housemates' *concerns* while not throwing his endorsement behind any *judgments* about applicants' traits.

Let us look in further detail. When Peter hears from a female member (I will call her Miriam) that an applicant (whom I will call Hector) had "a way of looking—a way of not quite being present as he answered me,"³¹ Peter might become engaged by her concerns even if he remains agnostic—even if he *disagrees*—on whether Hector is rightly deemed sexist.

It might be argued, here, that Peter's concern, if genuine, entails that he accepts *at least one claim* advanced by Miriam. Does he not at least accept her testimony that "He had a way of looking—a way of not quite being present"? In most plausible variations on Jones's scenario, her hypothetical Peter will indeed find some claim made by Miriam to be plausible, and frame *that* claim as a consideration relevant to the membership decision—regardless of whether the applicant ultimately ought to be judged sexist. We should note, however, that nothing about sharing a concern—or

attending to *what it was that she noticed*—hangs on accepting *any* of the claims Miriam actually makes.³² Perhaps she insists, “He totally discounted me. I was totally welcoming to him and he couldn’t even look me in the eye. He does not belong here because he is a sexist.” Perhaps Peter doubts *each* of the premises embedded in Miriam’s argument, and yet he may take her concern seriously. And this means more than treating *her* in a sympathetic way in light of her sensitivity. So I shall argue.

How Grice’s Dichotomy Distracts Us from Concerns

Jones’s work does anticipate the possibility of Peter’s taking up Miriam’s comments without engaging directly with her claims, as it turns out. This possibility is framed, however, in a way that reinforces the very dichotomy that I shall want to challenge. For when Jones considers attitudes that fall short of “accepting the testimony of another,” she paints the following as the salient contrast: “We can *use* testimony that we do not accept: for example, the movie critic whose rave tells us that we would hate the movie, or the suspect whose answer signals that she has something to hide.”³³ The implicit suggestion is that when we step away from taking someone’s *claims* seriously, we are stepping into the cool stance of calculation and *figuring things out* based on clues that come to us through the others’ speech.

We can recognize that Jones’s contrast here recapitulates the tenor of Strawson’s contrast of attitudes: we treat people warmly, as *participants* in accountable exchange, or coolly, with the *objective* stance of someone gathering behavioral evidence.³⁴ Jones’s suggestion, of course, is not that respect entails accepting testimony. On the contrary, the heat of dissent can also serve as a mark of respect, and Jones does not suggest that adults should accept one another’s moral testimony lightly. Her implication, however, is that when we drop out of the game of considering claims and their reasons, we fall into strategic use of one another’s speech. We fall, in other words, into disregarding their evaluative perspective except insofar as it furnishes us with clues that may prove relevant in the light of our own priorities and purposes.

The strategic attitude, we must note, may take relatively benign forms. Jones’ brief examples of “using testimony” exaggerate the coldness of strategic listening—using what others say *against* their own purposes or in opposition to their perspectives. *Using* others’ utterances without accepting their claims, however, need not involve thinking of the speakers in question as reliably backward, incompetent, or dishonest. Peter could act strategically simply by focusing on Miriam’s testimony as furnishing

him with a clue about the likely consequences of his choices. A shared life with both Miriam and Hector might be strained. What Peter notices, if this is his stance, is not Miriam's moral insight, expertise, or perceptiveness. Instead he gathers—*through* her speech—an *omen* that takes on significance in light of his existing priorities. Peter might take account of the *information* that Miriam strongly objects to Hector as an applicant. And if Peter's use of that information results in his rejecting Hector's application, his response may even reflect some benevolent sensitivity to Miriam's feelings. This would nonetheless amount to a *use* of moral testimony, extracting strategic information from it while remaining unmoved at the level of moral perception. Indeed, his history of "going along" with prior decisions might be understood as a strategic attitude—benignly disengaging from the debate over applicants' putative vices, and acting in parallel with others only because he wishes to preserve peace in the cooperative household.

The contrast here—the difference flagged by Jones's distinction—is between engaging with Miriam *as a claim maker* and treating her claim making as a source of *clues* from which to make savvy practical inferences. What I wish to establish here is that this contrast ought not to be framed as an exhaustive dichotomy. Let us agree that *one* clear alternative to accepting the claims of testimony involves *using* those claims in a strategic way (benign or not). Let us also grant Jones's conclusion: there really are at least some cases in which it is wise to accept moral claims on trust.

Yet we should be careful not to shore up the case for accepting moral testimony by means of a false dilemma. Supposing he fails to accept Miriam's testimony, and supposing even that he ceases to engage her in debate over the matter, Peter need not thereby fall into the strategic attitude of "using" her testimony. A third possibility is for him to take up her moral concern. In that case he is moved by Miriam's communication *neither* as a source of moral claims to trust *nor* as a source of clues from which to reason instrumentally. He takes her to have noticed a moral problem, to have actively *cultivated* attention to a situation that must be recognized as a problem. Henceforth, Peter now regards it as a problem, too, precisely insofar as what to say about it and what to do about it remain indeterminate and in need of further attention.

What might this look like, in practice? How Peter *tracks* this problem will depend entirely upon what he notices *through* his attentive uptake of Miriam's speech and gestures, and in exchanges that follow up on these, whether with her, with others whose concerns apparently align with hers, or with others whose perspectives correspond to neither Miriam's nor his

own. For example, he might come to recognize a connection between Miriam's concern and some patterns of asymmetrically gendered expectations about how best to accord recognition in conversation. Alternately, he might come to think of disrespect as a reasonable characterization of applicants' stance toward the women of the cooperative household, but to trace that disrespect to other sources. Indeed, he might eventually come to agree with Miriam's assessment, as well—but he will have that judgment in ways that empower his own sexist perceptions and interventions more than mere acceptance of testimony might have done.

Crucially, Peter's continued attention to the moral *charge* of Miriam's concern may serve to orient his attention to features of the situation other than the individual character traits of applicants. He need not accept the testimony that Hector is sexist, for example, to take an anxious interest in his own lack of sensitivity to phenomena that register saliently for Miriam and other housemates. If this interest in divergence takes on a merely etiological flavor—one of explaining why *their* judgment varies from his own, presumptively reasonable judgment—then his response does not illustrate an uptake of moral concern. When he takes her to have helped call something important to his attention, however, his uptake of that concern is constrained by a positive regard for her contribution to his moral perspective. His gestures toward articulating that concern, of course, are bound to be somewhat transformed by his own practical and perceptive vantage point.

Let us elaborate on how Peter's uptake of this concern may contribute to the cultivation of significance, now at the level of emergent concepts. If Peter is unsettled by this concern—if he is troubled by the recognition that *something* is wrong, but suspects that “sexism” does not fluently capture the profile of the problem—he may play a role in gradually articulating a distinct angle of morally significant diagnosis. For example, he may take up psychotherapeutic practice, and eventually hypothesize that certain patterns of neurotic insecurity unwittingly *collude with* sexist ideology so as to exacerbate misunderstandings and undermine opportunities for solidarity between self-consciously sexist men and feminist women. While Miriam may or may not wish to insist that men with such insecurities just *are* sexist *in effect*, there are important benefits to articulating a concept of personality factors that can *contribute* to the problems of sexism at an unconscious level. It is in just such a fashion that feminist and anti-racist theorists gradually came to articulate the concept of *internalized oppression* or *psychological oppression* to mark ways in which even activists could be liable to undermining their own liberatory projects.³⁵

A Conversation between Friends

It is clear, then, that people ordinarily develop the skills of handling their own internal flow of perception, attentive arousal, emotion, and resolution with a focus on developing or cultivating the significance of their concern. To set the stage for discussing the communication of concerns as signs under cultivation, then, we might consider communication between friends. For friends can treat one another as somewhat continuous with their selves—to put another gloss on Aristotle's famous remark that a friend is another self.³⁶ A friend is not just a distinct self, but can come to be experienced as “more self,” that is, as not entirely separable from one's individual self. Thus, we would not be surprised by a friendly interaction such as the following scenario.

Clark has been relating the details of a challenging situation at work, and Minerva has been listening and adding observations about similar experiences of her own. At some point after beginning to articulate his resolve about how to handle the problem, Clark realizes that Minerva has fallen silent. He switches gears and asks, “Oh, so you don't think I should do that?” Minerva shrugs. “Mmm, no, what you're saying makes sense . . .” Now Clark falls silent, still weighing her ambivalence. Minerva reassures, “That's a completely understandable reaction for someone in your position.” But her tone is still lukewarm. So Clark follows up. “But no, come on, tell me what you think I should do.” “I have *no* idea,” Minerva says. “But I just feel awkward about the situation you'd be setting up between you and Sully going forward.” After a noncommittal grunt from Clark she adds, “Well I guess that's the kind of thing he'll just have to deal with.” Yet Clark presses for more, “Seriously, but what did you mean about things being awkward?” Minerva hesitates a while before offering: “Well, if I were Sully in a situation like that I might feel like I was being left out of the loop or something.” Clark blurts out, “Well, it's not like I go up and start a conversation with him about this!” “I know,” admits Minerva, “Could you somehow set things up so that conversation will come around to it casually?” “Hmm, dunno,” Clark responds. “But I see what you mean.”

Friends frequently have conversations in which participants—despite staking few claims and issuing few prescriptions and resolutions—are certainly engaged in getting a handle on how to understand the world beyond themselves and what to do about it. For the most part, they approach one another not with an eye toward keeping track of claims and entitlements, but with an ear for what would be *lost* by such a fixation on this or that propositional formulation of concern.

Nonstrategic Disclosure

In noticing what transpired between Clark and Minerva, we err if we structure our understanding around the Gricean distinction between what a *person* can mean and the kind of meaning we can attribute to events that don't have intentions. For Grice's discussion would lead us to think that the *person* is communicating only insofar as there is determinate propositional content that she wants her hearer to realize she intends to get across.

Perhaps some propositional content could be salvaged in a form like this: Minerva wants to send Clark the message that she is worried about Clark's plan and makes herself silent as a way of getting Clark to recognize that there must be some reason for her withdrawal from conversation. In the course of their conversation, Clark does seem to entertain a Gricean inference that Minerva opposes his plan. Yet we need not question Minerva's honesty in disclaiming that position. Her tone and words reveal that her attention is caught up in something, and they serve to draw Clark's attention toward the same matters of concern. She can communicatively bring her ambivalence into view without any intention to send a propositional message (say, *that* she has a worry to share). This possibility, however, is exactly the possibility that Grice's account precludes. As we saw in chapter 2, our participation in the gestural exchange of attention runs deeper and wider than our explicit messages.

As Kukla and Lance put it, *every* speech act includes some degree of pragmatic force in the form of a "Yo!"—a call upon the hearer.³⁷ The function of the "Yo!" is not to send information to the effect that *one wants to secure attention*. It is to secure the attention, to open up the channel of communication. Engaging someone's attention must at some point be something we simply *do*, rather than something we announce an intention to do, much as logical thinking means *applying* the modus ponens rule rather than adding more and more premises about how premises of a certain structure *permit* inference.

Furthermore, there is no need for "Yo!" gestures to be followed by propositionally articulate claims or by the display of clues that are supposed to get a certain determinate message across. The call to attend may be followed by what Kukla and Lance call a "Lo!"—a pointing out of something that matters somehow. Our ability to get a person's attention and redirect it to some other feature of our shared environment is a perfectly competent communicative skill, but one whose propositional content may be nearly vacuous. Whatever the skills are that get us to recognize *that* the Lo!-worthy situation might be significant, and whatever the skills are that get us to recognize the Yo!-worthy hearers as people worth hailing in

connection with it, those skills are not reducible to any set of judgments we could articulate or defend.

5.6 Continuity of Concern Despite Lack of Shared Claims

To close, I will offer an example comparing how the same communicative interactions might be understood from two different angles: first highlighting the juxtaposition of accountable claims (the vertical dimension of significance), and then highlighting the process by which significance emerges through cultivated attention (the horizontal dimension). As should be clear by now, I take these dimensions to play essential and interdependent roles in critical practice. As both moral theory and general philosophical discourse have tended to focus on accountable claims, however, it behooves us to dwell upon cases in which the process of criticism requires not just a contest of claims but the extension of concerned attention as well. The following example may be understood as illustrating a continuous thread—or even a web—of concern, where nearly any of the moral claims pressed by participants undergoes metamorphosis as it is taken up in turn by different people.

Consider the communications among those directly and indirectly alarmed by a particular iatrogenic death. Wayne Jowett was an eighteen-year-old leukemia patient who was undergoing chemotherapy to bolster his remission. Among patients suffering from leukemia, treatment often involves multiple drugs, administered in a variety of ways (oral, intramuscular, spinal, intravenous). Some drugs, such as cytosine, can be prescribed for spinal (intrathecal) administration. Vincristine, meanwhile, requires intravenous injection. In fact, a spinal exposure to vincristine triggers severe irreversible nerve damage and a prolonged painful death. Wayne Jowett's chemotherapy regime involved both spinal injections of cytosine and intravenous injections of vincristine. But on January 4, 2001, the staff treating him at Queens Medical Center proceeded directly from one spinal dose of methotrexate to the spinal administration of the vincristine vial lying alongside it, without regard for the warnings printed on it.

The injection was immediately painful. Hence Jowett was the first to become alarmed by what was in fact the physical shock of toxicity, though only the medical staff was in a position to understand exactly what had happened and to know that his life was at stake. Doctors and nurses initiated an emergency surgical response, but the mistaken injection proved effectively irreversible. Jowett suffered constant devastating pain as his

nervous system and bodily tissues gradually wasted away. He was removed from life support a month later.

Jowett's sustained distress, and that of his family before and after his death, propagated waves of moral shock and concern. What is most philosophically conspicuous about such a case, for our purposes, is that a wide variety of incompatible moral claims were advanced and debated by those who became involved. Nonetheless, we may also discern one continuous process by which concerned attention emerged and developed through social channels. Though the provocative event remains fixed, what to make of the provocation—which details should serve as the focal point for moral claims—continues to acquire complexity as different people become involved.

Those who checked the vials and realized the proximate cause—that is, the toxic spinal injection of vincristine—may well have focused on the failure, liability, and responsibility of the particular junior doctor and registrar who collaborated in the mistaken injection. Their focus—quite within reason—was on the tragic negligence of the two staff members engaged in the injection, and a liability claim against one attending doctor was pressed to a courtroom trial (later suspended because of the defendant's own failing health). For others in the unit, however, the more salient issue was why those relatively inexperienced individuals were performing a procedure in the absence of more experienced staff—in particular one consultant, familiar with Jowett, had specifically asked to be alerted so that he could be present for the treatment.

A further contributing factor in the tragedy was the arrival of both drugs in the same shipment from the hospital pharmacy, which by policy should have refused to dispense both spinal and intravenous anticancer drugs for the same patient on the same day—let alone in the same delivery. And yet in practice pharmacists felt pressured to defer to doctors who sometimes demanded urgent exceptions and who wielded greater institutional authority. (Indeed, Jowett himself had missed his earlier scheduled appointment, contributing quite unwittingly to the two incompatible requests being queued up on the same day.)

Hospital administrators, meanwhile, fielded accusations not only about whether their doctors and pharmacists were vigilant enough and clear enough in their lines of authority, but also whether they had put sufficient procedural safeguards in place. For in fact Jowett's was not the first or second case; it was at least the thirteenth such case in Great Britain within fifteen years, alongside additional cases in the United States and elsewhere.

From the perspective of many who recognized this larger narrative context, the articulation of concern came to revolve around whether the equipment used to administer drugs should be redesigned so that an intravenous dose would arrive in a package that mechanically precludes spinal connection, and vice versa. Luer-style connectors serve as a convenient universal standard by which medical fluids may be dispensed, and yet their very universality and convenience is what permits the administration of an intravenous prescription via a spinal needle. Like the mandating of polarized outlets, which reduced the risk of electrical shock to appliance users, standardized use of incompatible connectors would prevent the particular kind of mistake that was—from a perspective that admits human error as a statistical given—*fated* to cause deaths, among which Jowett's happened to count. Alas, it was only after repeated casualties that the outcry for precautions at this higher regulative level became urgently salient to the governmental and industry regulators, drug companies, and equipment manufacturers who were in a position to change the protocols at this higher level. Conversion to new standardized connectors is now underway, with various levels of institutional and government coordination in different locations.

Evolving Elaborations of the Vincristine Concern

An investigative report by Brian Toft, commissioned by the British Chief Medical Officer,³⁸ listed forty-eight factors contributing to the tragedy—ranging from outright error to procedural negligence, false assumptions, and failures of due precaution. Of course, this case is one that permits us a public overview only because its severity was matched by institutional record-keeping conditions that permitted careful reconstruction of its details. Most of the circumstances that prompt moral concern result in diffuse and dispersed patterns of attention for which nothing like a bird's-eye summary is available. At any rate, the sort of reconstruction now available to us in gaining perspective on Jowett's case should not mislead. At the time and in the thick of things, everyone involved in this case became alerted through different channels; the identifying details can only have been partial and overlapping. While it is appropriate for claim-oriented inquiry to iron out conflicting evidence about the case (where that is feasible), it would be unwise to expect such inquiry to settle on a single ideal profile of concern in response to it. It is appropriate that each person's uptake of the concern should have been informed by a different practical vantage point, a different set of relationships, and hence a somewhat different angle of concern.

What I wish to emphasize about this case is not that there is one claim about “who was at fault” that eventually surfaced as the most appropriate one. Nor is my conclusion that the various responsibility claims along this trajectory of concern were either *all* right or *none* right. My point is not even that different responsibility claims were appropriate to different perspectival demands, though this points us in a helpful direction. Rather, from the standpoint of effective moral communication, what is most striking is how the *continuity* of alarm and concern carried the same provocative event through multiple social vantage points. The fact that concern persisted across multiple descriptions allowed various participants to “change the subject” while continuing to talk about “the same thing”—recognizing aspects of *what* had gone wrong that were locally salient due to their differing grasp of events, protocols, procedures, larger institutional and commercial contexts, and so on. The nurse who points out that the pharmacy *should not have* dispensed the prescriptions together is not thereby (or not thereby *simply*) deflecting blame; she is adding something to the salient contours of what others might recognize to be at issue in this case.³⁹

An orientation toward claims of liability and blame—especially if understood on a “zero-sum” model of fault—would lead us to think of the nurse and pharmacist as irresponsible insofar as they point upstream at the factors that rendered their own errors more likely. Yet the cultivation and communication of concern proves incompatible with the assumption that only *one* claim ought to summarize the nature of the problem at hand. Their awareness of how this case illuminates their own responsibilities—what they will attend to and communicate to their “future selves,” as it were—is neither more nor less important than their uniquely situated recognition of how the concern calls for others’ attention as well. Both of their positions require them, as individuals with distinct perspectives on the problem at hand, to contribute to shaping the concern in light of the factors most salient to them. An exclusive orientation toward what is “one’s own business” in the sense of what pertains to one’s own immediate conduct is a misleading ideal wherever our activity itself requires coordination.

Many individuals’ actions had some bearing on Jowett’s death, and each of their perspectives is naturally marked by a different way of articulating what went wrong and how best to carry on in light of their concerns. For example, the attending nurse, who handed the drugs to the doctors, now attends with greater vigilance to even the most mundane procedures that apply to her own handling of drugs which lend themselves to tragic substitutions. Yet her position also allows her to draw attention to the anomaly

“upstream” from her own activity in this case—that is, the simultaneous delivery of two drugs that hospital policy required keeping separate. In addressing the pharmacist, then, she relays the charge of moral concern, but in a transformed shape compared to that with which she was addressed.

The pharmacist must in turn translate the nurse’s incoming moral address into something that highlights what he must attend to if he takes the gravity of concern into account. He must rethink (and perhaps call others’ attention to) the structural predicaments with which he fills orders submitted by medical staff—staff to which he is institutionally subordinate, and yet against whom he is expected to hold firm on policy. The pharmacist is also in a position to recognize further factors that may be less salient to others—details about how drugs are packaged and labeled, for example—over which he can imagine making changes or exerting leverage.

Staff at a different hospital, meanwhile, reading published accounts of the case, take on concerns revolving around the potential for such errors within other medical settings. Even an official “external” inquiry such as the one conducted by Toft, we can see, yields a summary and analysis that cannot achieve social or practical detachment; it constitutes yet another step—an especially reflective step—in the process by which patterns of attention are changed. Toft is in no position to stand over doctors’ or nurses’ or pharmacists’ shoulders urging them to follow protocols more carefully. But he has the ear of policymakers in a way that medical staff, speaking as institutionally embedded individuals, do not. Thus it is fitting to his particular practical leverage that his attention focuses most dramatically on the physical apparatus used for injections. The concern, as he handles it, is most saliently distinguished by a technological predicament—the interchangeability that makes for convenience is also an invitation to error. Though Toft takes note of many institutional and individual contributions to the tragedy, his concern comes to rest where he is poised—through both information and authority—to exert substantial leverage over a wide swath of similar future cases.

Philosophers who write about moral problems are also moral agents within the same field of interaction. Brian Barry considers this vincristine tragedy in his book *Why Social Justice Matters*,⁴⁰ and concludes that the “climate of blame, acrimony and confrontation” within the National Health Service was itself a face of the problem in this case. For it allowed people to believe that the concerns related to lethal vincristine injection were fully resolved once individual doctors were identified and penalized. A tendency to treat moral concerns as *resolved* by judgments upon individu-

als is itself a thread of concern from the Jowett case, a thread that Barry weaves together with similar threads from superficially very different problems. Without claiming that blame is unwarranted in itself, Barry offers a new permutation on understanding the tragedy of this case—namely, the danger of becoming caught up in the cross-examination of first-order moral judgments at the expense of more creative responses to shared problems.

The moral philosopher in this narrative has carried this concern forward in exactly the same fashion as the nurse, the pharmacist, or the policymakers are poised to do. In articulating a less individualist conception of responsibility, Barry helps to reshape the circumstances under which people respond to provocative events in the future. He does so by drawing attention to the emerging shape of a concern—a concern roughly focused on a distinctly social understanding of responsibility and justice—that he has helped cultivate. This is a concern that we fail to recognize well if we read the conclusions of his book simply as warranted or unwarranted claims. To read with an attention to concerns is to be poised to extend further attention to the problems behind his account, thus resisting the closure that might tempt us in the form of a judgment that summarizes their content.

5.7 Mishandled Concerns

Two broad reservations might be raised in connection with this account of moral concerns. The first has already been mentioned: Too much emphasis on the social communication of moral concerns might distract us from the responsibility to act on concerns at the level of ordinary conduct. This worry is entirely appropriate, and yet serves not as an objection but as a reminder. To carry a concern is to cultivate its significance, and that significance is informed by one's practical and social circumstances. Concerns take shape as we rework their significance for our own ever-emerging selves as well as for others. A specific concern—say, about our handling of natural resources—bears directly upon how we handle opportunities to consume, harvest, pollute, and dispose of things; it is hardly sufficient to evangelize and recruit others to tasks in lieu of taking them up directly. To highlight the importance of communicating concern is thus not an invitation to “pass the buck” hypocritically. What we imply, when we say someone has merely passed the buck, is that a concern has been deflected or hastily offloaded, that it has not been genuinely carried at all. The moral vice here, in other words, lies not in the “passing” of the

buck, in other words, but with figuring a concern as “a buck”—as a single object such that if I bring it to someone else I cease to have it myself. On the contrary, a concern is better likened to a thread whose further elaboration may call for multiple divergent strands, perhaps even a complex network of socially woven attention. None of that attention, however, ought to be disengaged from immediate matters of conduct.

The other reservation is more substantial. How ought we to recognize and guard against the *mishandling* of concern? Even if concerns are not themselves directly warranted or unwarranted, it seems natural to say that our ways of interpreting or reframing concern may be not just more or less competent, but also, on occasion, simply wrong, illegitimate, or unwarranted—and such categories, I have argued, are best applied to claims rather than to concerns. It is difficult to respond to this challenge at a wholesale level. Certainly, a person might intelligibly be taken to task for a clear failure in handling a moral concern. We can be held to account for what we do with a concern as much as for what we do with stray mail, lost puppies, or lent cars. Yet the skills of responding well to a moral concern are multifaceted; no clear line distinguishes proper and improper handling.

Let us return, then, to the Jowett case and imagine ways in which the concern might be purportedly taken up, but now in ways that ought to raise suspicion. Should we be ready to call “foul” if, for example, someone invokes Jowett’s case in the call for cutting public funding for cancer treatment? Might Jowett’s case be interpreted this way by, perhaps, a member of a religious sect that opposes medical intervention in the struggle against diseases—a struggle to which it attributes spiritual significance? “I appreciate the depth of your shock, your grief, and your concern” the speaker might say in addressing survivors of the incident, “but in addressing your distress, I would suggest the central issue here is your sense of entitlement to technological rescue from disease and death—a burden that never belonged on the shoulders of mortal doctors to begin with.” Unlike the situated responses of nurse, the pharmacist, and the policymaker, this response seems unlikely to strike Jowett’s parents, for example, as a form of uptake on the very *same* thread of moral concern to which they have dedicated their efforts at publicity, accountability, and reform.

Can an account of moral concerns draw any helpful line between genuine and spurious elaborations of concern? A survivor who hears such a response may treat it as an outrageous *mishandling* of moral concern—and understandably so. Again, however, the failure takes place at the level of *objectionable claims made* or of *concerns neglected*, rather than the form of

incorrect attention to the concerns at issue here. For our suspicion, here, is most properly focused on the speaker's neglect of—or overt *discounting* of—threads of concern that focus on medical responsibility. To take up Jowett's case in this provocative way, as a case study of the technologically alienated ways in which human beings resist their mortality, is only a mistake insofar as it displaces other facets of the concern to which others have been more responsive. Yet it need not indicate such a failure. A recasting of Jowett's case in light of human medical hubris might be entirely welcome and appropriate in limited socially situated circumstances. Should Jowett's friends seek out new ways of handling their grief, for example, a spiritual guide who offers such a reflection might do so in a way that embraces rather than dismisses their concern. By contrast, the same line of thought might signal little more than a gross failure of uptake if it is offered on the floor of a legislative chamber debating whether to fund leukemia research, or mandate new safety protocols for medical treatment.

Of course, no account of moral concern can eliminate the possibility that the *rhetoric* of “appreciating moral concerns” will be applied insincerely or deceptively. Especially when a speaker's actual claims are not accepted, a flattering acknowledgment of concerns can be easily abused. In egregious cases, important concerns become wholly entrusted to sympathetic-sounding listeners who simply will not or cannot give them further careful attention. In such cases the mishandling of moral concern is bound up with giving false signs of reassurance, soliciting trust for strategic reasons.

Even in less duplicitous cases, the phrase “I understand your concerns, but . . .” signals nothing more than a backhanded form of dismissal. Empty claims to recognize concerns can paper over a hasty foreclosure of attention. The conciliatory significance of acknowledging concerns, however, is not thereby undermined. That is, where a hearer's proclaimed interest in a speaker's concerns reflects neither deceit nor conceit—and in particular, when the implicit promise of further competent attention is a sound one—it heralds a transitional moment in the career of the moral concern itself. It may also serve as a small step in the cultivation of concepts that will afford us—or our cultural descendants—a better cognitive grip on the practically unresolved problems at hand.

6 Contingency beyond Contagion: A Social Geography of Moral Concerns

None of us can access by pure reflection necessary moral precepts or pure moral concepts that are not in fact derived from our socially situated experiences of actual forms of social life or our socially constrained imagination of others.

—Margaret Urban Walker¹

6.1 Tracing Currents of Concern within a Social Field

As much as moral agency entails bringing our moral concerns to others' attention, our moral capacities depend on the incoming communication of moral concerns. Responsiveness begins with receptivity, and our occasions for receptivity are shaped by the moral luck of our social locations. We come to appreciate a wide variety of moral concerns in just the same experiential way we come to appreciate a variety of organic life forms or artistic modalities. There is no shortcut past exposure and local exploration, no scheme for mapping out the logical space of all possible moral concerns. Each of us will be troubled, at some future moment, by concerns whose shape we have not yet imagined. Whatever efforts we might take to anticipate new concerns—to step toward the horizon of our current moral awareness—these will be efforts that extend along social paths.

Hence there is a story to tell about how moral concerns reach us—which concerns come our way, through whom, when, and how. The need for moral explanation of this kind is even more unsettling than the need to explain how moral agency works at a psychological level. For if moral agency depends on the contingencies of cognitive skills, perceptual competence, neurotransmitter ratios, and so on, at least all of those conditions may be counted as an *infrastructure* of agency. Only a few headstrong dualists doubt the intimate connection between a person and the events within her nervous system. But we have now begun considering how much a person's appreciation of moral matters hangs on more than her internal

rigging; it hangs equally on the particular currents of concern that animate her social surroundings. Moral humility is thus doubly in order.

Contingency pervades not just the question of which persons encounter which moral concern, but also how well a person is poised to recognize the social trajectory and depth of ambient concerns. A thread of concern may pass through many articulations and communications as multiple agents take it up, shape it through their particular lens of attention, and direct it along to others. In just the way that Kathryn Pyne Addelson speaks of attending longitudinally to the “moral passages” that shape each person’s “career”² as a moral agent, we can grant that moral concerns merit narratives of their own. Their movement along social and temporal paths is inseparable from a cumulative process of transformation and articulation. To understand the nature of a moral concern is not simply to assess its inner contents, but to recognize the social paths along which it has gathered steam, and to recognize the social directions along which one might usher it further.

There are multiple ways of asking *how* people may be moved by moral concerns. In this chapter I am interested in how such questions take shape from within reflective moral practice: How do I come to be moved by moral concerns? Or, how is it that they come to move me? And we can ask this question not only with attention to our individual psychological workings but also with attention to our social surroundings. This wider angle of inquiry reaches beyond the traditional questions and methods of moral psychology. I will call this kind of inquiry “moral sociology.”

As in prior chapters, we must recognize and respond to a standoff between concepts that are often treated as an exhaustive and exclusive binary. In debates around social explanation, the possibility of rigorous and predictive explanation has been associated with an interest in social *structure*. Against this explanatory demand, many philosophers and some sociologists have sought to carve out a place for agency. I find promise in the recent revival of earlier sociologists’ interest in understanding a social *field* or social topology.³ The invocation of a social field supports discussion of how social patterns both enable and constrain activity, without suggesting that the appearance of agency ought to be explained away as the product of social forces.⁴ Hence, if our interest is not that of systematically predictive science but rather involves reflecting *as* moral agents on the social world of our own and others’ agency, then a promising way to proceed is to characterize the social field within which we meet with and handle moral concerns.

Moral Sociology

It will be worth pausing to consider this notion of moral sociology. Far from introducing itself as a lively, contested, and philosophically compelling cousin of moral psychology, moral sociology may seem awkward and philosophically inert. One reason, surely, is the gravitational pull exerted by what has been called “the sociology of morality” in recent decades. This kind of study involves, as one overview puts it, “the sociological investigation of the nature, causes, and consequences of people’s ideas”—elsewhere paraphrased as “beliefs”—“about the good and the right.”⁵ A moral belief, understood as a determinate bit of mental content, is explained as the product of a person’s “socialization” by means of determining social conditions and structures.

On that positivist account, sociological understanding is morally neutral; it simply illuminates the conduits of contagion and persuasion by which moral beliefs take hold, for better and for worse. It does not aim to say anything how the social dimension of morality might be inhabited more or less well. A person may conform more or less accurately to socially local norms, and she may be more or less effective at converting others. Yet neither of these types of social fit, clearly, correlates reliably with having *correct* or *warranted* moral beliefs. The social structures of moral influence, presumably, operate quite independently of the particular representational content that they carry. Such a model would be consistent with the mainstream of sociology as it took its quantitative turn in the second half of the twentieth century.

When the demand for social understanding arises from within moral practice, however, a different kind of social perspective is needed. We must be interested in social processes that admit of participating more or less *well*, where participating well will not be a matter of moral indifference. It will be worthwhile to consider again the distinctive stance of therapeutically engaged moral psychology, which structures its reflections around evaluative concepts such as health, growth, self-knowledge, authenticity, and the overcoming of neurosis. A reflective moral sociology, similarly, will revolve around social processes whose evaluative charge is built in. Social analogs of ideals such as growth and authenticity include the communication and cultivation of concern. Of course, such concepts must then suggest something far more nuanced than playing a role in the replication and proliferation of beliefs.

Moral sociology, in other words, has a hermeneutic face as well as an empirical one. For it is an exercise of moral responsibility to consider which

models of social interaction best help us recognize and respond to one another *as* moral agents. This aspect of moral sociology—perhaps some will wish to call it “moral social theory”—serves as a social counterpart to the interpretively rich style of moral psychology discussed in chapter 2 and advocated by Christine Swanton.⁶ This interpretive approach abandons the ideal of disengaged observation in favor of a practically directed pattern of attention. Given a variety of ways of making sense of the social world around us, which of those ways orients us well to our own moral engagement within it?

I have argued elsewhere (chapter 5) that Kathryn Pyne Addelson’s early work on moral revolution struggled to make sense of its social continuity. Yet her later work engages in reflective moral sociology in just the sense required here. Animating her suggestion that “philosophers become sociologists (and vice versa),”⁷ she exemplifies a reciprocity between philosophical and empirical stances. On her view, the movement toward sociological competence is motivated by taking a new question seriously, namely, “How are we to study a human world in which meaning and morality, science and truth are all in the process of construction?”⁸ Though philosophers have largely come to acknowledge that contingency and history affect our subject matter, we have barely begun to relinquish the methods proper to an essentialist and individualist account of reason and nature. Meanwhile, she argues, it is sociology—in the form of symbolic interactionism—that has come closest to developing a coherent approach to our quest to understand systems in which we remain always and inextricably participants. While moral sociology does not specifically entail methodological training in symbolic interactionism, it does require tuning moral reflection to socially salient patterns, and countenancing social research with an ear for its moral relevance and implications.

Social Geography, Economy, and Ecology

The central argument of this chapter is that a good moral critic relies on certain kinds of moral-sociological understanding, explicitly or implicitly. Only with such an understanding can we orient our critical responsiveness in two vital ways: First, we may orient our receptivity better, by noticing where, within one’s social horizons, the communication of moral concerns tends not to flow smoothly. Second, we may orient our handling of concerns with attention to the directions in which we can effectively usher concerns, and directions in which we must temper our expectations. In other words, we will recognize our position as *mediators* in the communication of moral concerns. While chapter 7 will consider two normatively

infused ways in which we can approach *doing* the work of mediating moral concerns, this chapter's focus is on recognizing the general patterns within which we might do that work.

I structure the discussion of this chapter and the next—which form a tight pair—by reference to a trio of suggestive metaphors offered by feminist philosopher Margaret Walker. Her reflections on moral responsibility invoke “geographies, economies, and ecologies” of moral responsibility,⁹ and these three angles of understanding may similarly help us recognize and respond to the movement of moral concerns. Such empirical metaphors resonate with seeing morality not as something transcendent that cuts against our natural interactions but as a “disposition of powers.”¹⁰ I shall embrace, adapt, and expand Walker’s suggestive metaphors as ways of conceiving our social field of interaction. In brief, the account will involve the following claims: A social *geography* of moral concerns amounts to something like an orientation to how a social space allows for or affords the movement of concerns. As concerns move through relationships and communicative channels, they illustrate different vectors or directions of influence. Relative to this moral geography, then, we can understand our responsive choices in at least two normatively charged ways. First: a social *economy* of moral concerns highlights our position within the social field, a position which calls upon us to weigh the urgency of concerns and to mediate effectively among local interlocutors. Second: a social *ecology* of moral concerns, by contrast, emphasizes nonpositional differences among us. Our different bodies—with different histories, talents, and sensitivities—suggest ways in which we ought to specialize within the social field, stepping into thematic niches, communicative roles that fit our temperaments, and so on.

As it happens, the three lenses of understanding proposed by Walker line up well alongside what sociologist John Levi Martin calls “three senses of field.”¹¹ First, we find a topological sense—a terrain open to description. Second, we find a field “as an organization of forces”—a matrix within which changes can be explained or accounted for. Third is what Martin calls “a field of contestation, a battlefield”—the necessary backdrop for novel and competing forms of agency.¹² Though I prefer the metaphor of “ecology” to “battlefield,” Martin is right to indicate that a field in this third and richest sense is the world of significance into which we are thrown and within which we struggle to make a distinctive and viable place for our evolving projects. In our many different ways of inhabiting the same social field, we experience tensions—the “contestations” of both play and struggle—as much as interdependencies.

The balance of this chapter explores what might be illuminated by the notion of a moral geography as a social field through which moral agency shapes and directs concerns. Chapter 7 takes up moral economy and moral ecology as two models of *how* we might articulate an ideal of responsiveness within this social field.

6.2 Moral Geography: Moral Address within a Social Field

Margaret Walker employs geographical tropes in several discussions of moral responsibility, and also makes clear that moral responsibility, on her understanding, emerges through and is reshaped by moral address. By offering a “geography of responsibility,” then, she seeks to illuminate how practices of moral address take shape in complex social environments. As we noted in chapter 4, much of the nonfeminist literature devoted to responsibility and moral address has neglected problems of differential access, language, and power, as well as the ways in which critical mediation helps to overcome these challenges. The very idea of moral geography serves as a corrective to this neglect. For it suggests, among other things, a systematic reframing of criticism. Its significance is not reducible to propositional contents, considered without context; instead, its communication occurs always within some network of social relations. Those social relations, in turn, are direct and indirect, formal and informal, more and less inflected by differences of privilege and background expectations.

Walker’s use of these three metaphors is not always explicit about their details and implications. In one passage, however, Walker describes the theoretical project of “moral geography” as follows:

[Moral geography is] meant to tell us something about responsibility as assigned and assumed in actual life. It begins from the premise (or at least after the fact) that we do a great deal of holding each other responsible, and that it is unclear that there is any alternative to doing so. So it tries to map features of our practices of responsibility as they follow, but sometimes sharpen or elevate, the contours of interpersonal life and the trajectories of human activity. It tries to see how this topography of individual action and social life regulates a flow of shared understandings about who is going to be asked to take care of, or to account for, certain situations, outcomes, tasks, or obligations.¹³

To what extent can the geography here be spelled out? In venturing a more explicit model, my aim will be to make clear how a geographical lens on moral concerns is useful, what kinds of questions are central to it, and why the concept of moral concerns makes a moral geography come alive as a

dynamic understanding. For now I will consider Walker's geography as she does, that is, with a focus on "responsibilities." I will subsequently argue that a geography of moral concerns is best suited to illustrating the dynamic social process within which critical responses unfold.

We can begin with a distinction among three relevant levels of "mapping," all evoked by Walker's discussion. One is a *static mapping* of assignments that serves as a representation of "where responsibilities sit." Such a map might be used by someone trying to decide in which direction to take a concern, and it might serve to confirm, for someone who trusts it as authoritative, that she does indeed count as responsible for a certain chore, or is not really due for blame in connection with some injury. To the extent that we are satisfied with a particular systematic moral theory, we may find that it offers an implicit mapping of responsibilities within which moral claims fit more or less neatly.

At the second level we find specific temporally *dynamic mappings*—like the moving radar sequences of meteorological cloud conditions—illustrating where something emerges and how it spreads across a certain terrain. Investigation might in this way chart how various particular responsibilities have shifted in their locations over time: certain burdens and liabilities have gradually shifted, perhaps, from parents to state agencies, while other responsibilities are moving from financial institutions to individuals. Or perhaps a moving map might illustrate how a certain representation of responsibility has spread. For example, the corporate executive may have convinced the legislator, who convinced other legislators, who convinced the courts, that liability for a certain risk belongs with consumers and not with manufacturers.

The third level involves a *general mapping* of patterns of moral communication. Here, we may imagine features of the social terrain that allow for the movement trends at the second level, analogous to maps that illustrate the trajectory of the Gulf Stream. This kind of mapping projects an understanding of how currents of moral responsiveness flow along certain social vectors. This kind of map is only relatively static, of course; a pattern such as the Gulf Stream might function predictably within a person's lifetime, but also can shift dramatically—with dramatic consequences for those beings who have built their lives upon its predictability. Indeed, broad patterns of moral communication, such as the inordinate moral influence of people within certain privileged demographic niches, can themselves become the object of moral concern. Hence, there is no enduring "terra firma" of the social landscape that cannot be problematized and gradually shifted by responsive efforts.

For the purposes of illuminating moral criticism, I take it that moral critics should be especially interested in situating themselves within a social landscape of this last kind. To handle our moral concerns reflectively, we need to be able to “read the wind” around our social locations: from whom do we tend to inherit our concerns, and in which directions do we expect uptake? From whose concerns are we relatively insulated, and from whom do we tend to expect nothing? While systematic moral theories may implicitly embrace an ideal on which we are equally open to complaints from all sides and equally demanding of one another without regard for social strata, such an ideal is worthless unless we actively ask who listens to whom, who addresses whom, and where gulfs of moral misunderstanding or disengagement are most prone to divide the social field. Reflective moral critics are interested not just in how things are at any given moment, or how things have gone in the past with some particular concern, but in how current concerns might best find their way to the attention of practically well-poised others.

Of course, such a grasp of general patterns can only be the cumulative and abstract product of more specific observations—observations about how this and that concern have made their way within the horizon of one’s social world. Hence, moral geography begins with a more concrete interest in the movement of attention to a moral particular matter of moral concern.

In section 6.4 I will discuss a research tradition in sociology that already provides both detailed case studies of the movement of attention to some matters of moral concern, as well as some general hypotheses about what I have called their “career” trajectories. Before discussing those narratives, however, we will need to ask about how best to conceive the object of this inquiry. Walker’s geography takes responsibilities as its object, and we shall see that mainstream sociological mappings take claims or movements as their focal point of interest. In the following section I propose, instead, that the best way of organizing such moral geographical work is around the movement of moral *concern*—the very object of communication according to our account of critical competence. The reason is that a moral concern may be articulated in many forms. We can take up the concern that animates a claim about responsibility, or a grassroots demand for a political objective, without actually taking up the same claim or demand. Only by allowing for such transformation of concern can we recognize ourselves as responding creatively rather than simply propagating some set of available moral representations.

6.3 Dynamic Geography of Moral Concerns

Walker's gloss on a moral geography of responsibilities is a helpful corrective to an overly individualistic literature about moral responsibilities. Yet I would like to emphasize a point that risks being lost when a social-geographical model is built up around the multifaceted philosophical notion of responsibility. For if we ask, as Walker does, about how responsibilities are "assigned and assumed"—and frame our answers in terms of "understandings about who is going to be asked to take care of, or to account for"¹⁴ various tasks or problems—then we risk accepting a conceptual segregation of *representing* responsibilities from *taking up* responsibilities.

Walker, unlike the moral address theorists considered in chapter 3, carefully denies that responsibility is simply a status or an attribute of people that is there to be discovered rather than cultivated and continually reshaped through social interaction. Yet as long as they are conceptually distinct, we might still be puzzled over what it is exactly that "flows" along topographical social gradients: is it representations, or the things being represented?

If we subscribed to a commonsense realism about responsibilities, the primary task of "mapping" responsibilities would seem analogous to the task of mapping natural resources as they are distributed on or near the surface of the earth. Responsibilities are located wherever they are located, we might suppose; their location is not changed by where we *believe* them to be; on the contrary, what we believe about responsibilities must strive to mirror what is independently true about them.

Yet that sort of straightforward realism is not Walker's account. Her account implies that being responsible simply means *counting as* responsible, and who counts as responsible is determined by what claims and forms of address "pass" in social interaction. Although it is possible for people to challenge others' assumptions about who should count as responsible, perhaps in the process shifting what "passes" as permissible moral address, what can be said about actual responsibilities, on Walker's view, rests on nothing other than people's shared understandings—understandings about whom *to count as* responsible.

It would seem to follow, then, that if either of these items (responsibilities, or representations of them) flows through social channels, it is *representations* of responsibility. For responsibility itself seems to be nothing but a sort of holographic projection of social claims given a particular history of contagion. The particular experience of "taking responsibility" would

then be bound up with believing oneself to stand at or near the focal point of such social projections. Perhaps in one sense of “responsibility,” we can say no more than this: that people represent responsibilities as residing in determinate social locations, and that the claims we actively make in practice tend, over time, to shift the location of those responsibilities.

Yet Walker’s choice to discuss “assigning and assuming” can be interpreted more charitably so as to avoid the appearance of equivocation about what is being mapped onto the social terrain. Once we foreground the possibility of mediation, it becomes clear that the same process counts—in different temporal moments and from different perspectives—both as an assumption of responsibility and as an assigning of it.¹⁵ What we might try to trace out is patterns of encounter: where are people responding to one another in the ways that mark moral responsibility?

For example, when Sally actively holds her mother responsible for her brother’s distress, it may seem clear she is not “assuming responsibility” but rather “assigning” it. Yet there is surely much more involved in Sally’s agency than acting on a belief that her mother “is going to be asked . . . to account”—or even a belief that it is legitimate to ask her mother to account. Sally is caught up not only in the activity of representing responsibility vis-à-vis her brother’s condition, but also in the activity of responding to her brother’s distress.

My suggestion here will be that we will get a much richer account of moral geography if we place in the foreground neither *responsibilities* themselves (as things that are ascribed to individuals, albeit through a social construction), nor *claims* about responsibilities, but rather *concerns* understood as social processes of attentive involvement. For making claims about responsibility and taking up responsibility—in the sense that others may press us to do—can be understood as two phases of the same underlying process of handling a moral concern. And indeed that process has other moments and aspects as well, which become clearer if our dynamic map traces the positions and movements of concerns rather than responsibilities.

The commonsense distinction between the representation of responsibility and the having of it can obscure the social dynamics of criticism, making it more difficult to notice that one way of responding to a concern just is urging others to respond to it, and that much of what we hold someone responsible for is how she in turn holds others responsible. It passes muster (in ordinary language) for someone to say that Sally “refuses to assume responsibility,” and instead *assigns* it to her mother; but it would be more illuminating to say that she at least briefly takes on a certain kind

of responsibility—what I am calling moral concern—and that the way she handles it, more or less carefully, is by pressing it upon her mother.

The suggestion, of course, is that representation making is a form of action. This point is one that Walker herself develops well in other contexts, such as when she writes: “Moral philosophizing is itself conduct and practice. Moral philosophers are morally responsible for it.”¹⁶ When moral philosophers encourage readers to conceive responsibility claims in some terms or other, and hence to direct them toward some hearers rather than others, that encouragement on the part of the philosopher is conducted more or less responsibly.

The activity of representing moral responsibility can be more or less morally responsible in two different ways, actually. For one thing, as Walker points out, “we are all of us alert and sensitive to being assigned responsibilities, coming or going, that we find arbitrary, unfair, ill-distributed, disproportionate, or simply not ours.”¹⁷ Such comments highlight the familiar fact that those who hold others responsible may fall short of fairness vis-à-vis those whom they address.

Let us point out the second way: it is not just that we are morally responsible for how we are treating the person we would burden with our concerns. Rather, we have acted more or less well *on the very concern* in question. For example, someone who blames homosexuals for the Al Qaeda attacks of September 11 does an injustice to homosexuals, no doubt; but she or he also fumbles the concern about terrorism, for she has responded to an existentially pressing moral concern by trying to place it into the hands—or perhaps simply at the feet—of individuals who are in no particular position, as agents, to carry or resolve such a burden. Homosexuals have no particular leverage over Al Qaeda, terrorism, or any other variable that plausibly illuminates the distressing events of September 11. If I am indeed taking up terrorism as a concern, my task is to interpret that concern well and to carry it toward the attention of people who might have at least incrementally greater leverage over its conditions. Any representation of responsibility in connection with X is not just accurate or inaccurate by conventional agent-centered standards; it is a way of shifting and shaping the career of concern-in-response-to-X more or less well.

So it is clear that there is no act of assigning or representing responsibility that should not be treated, in this sense, as simultaneously a manifestation of concern. There is no “understanding about who is going to be held responsible for X” that is not at the same time one way of *attending* to matters of X.

Now it may seem odd to say that making a representation of responsibility amounts to a form of concerned attention—for the time, resources, and attention devoted to making such a claim are vastly outweighed by the level of time, resources, and attention being demanded of those on whom such claims pile up. One might insist that the fundamentalist who blames homosexuals for Al Qaeda's actions manages to show no real concern over terrorism at all. To say this amounts to suggesting that scapegoating is not criticism done badly, but something entirely different from an attempt at criticism. We have a better critical handle on such matters, I would suggest, if we can point to how such commentators fail at a task that is worth doing, rather than that they succeed at a task—the scapegoating task—that is vicious at its core.

This frequent asymmetry—between the attention a critic devotes to claim making and the attention she thereby demands of others—should not lead us to the conclusion that it is essentially easier to represent responsibility than to accept it. Instead, the asymmetry in practice should count as itself a matter of concern to be brought into relief. Recognizing concerned attention as the common thread, as it were, joining what we ask others to do and what we ourselves do in the asking, means refusing to reduce moral competence to carrying out various “end point” responsibilities, duties, or virtues. Moral competence also involves careful handling and redirection of whatever *the matter* is—the thing we treat as calling for someone else’s extended attention.

Knowing that something calls for someone else’s attention may seem easy, but at this point we should raise our expectations for the critic herself—for she must ask: Whose attention must be called? Also: how to translate and present the concern so as to afford the hearer a good grasp of what is at stake? To those questions every moral critic devotes more or less competent attention. Even if people do speak *as if* it were possible to “pass the buck” without ever grasping it, we should be careful to dispel such illusions. For the point of philosophical reflection on moral interaction is to refine our practice, not simply to capture familiar intuitions.

Thinking of “concerned attention” as the fluid element in our moral geography can help to dissolve the dichotomy between moral representation and moral action. Attention to a moral concern is what moves along social paths, sometimes through quick contagion and sometimes through laborious efforts. Where moral concern takes the relatively determinate form of a hypothesis about who must ultimately count as responsible, then the relaying of such concerns might neatly gravitate toward and

converge upon one individual, resulting in a resounding chorus of moral address.

Yet moral concern is more than a common currency underlying responsibilities and beliefs about responsibilities. Moral concern does take these forms, but also takes forms of ambivalence, uncertainty, and reflection, all of which come to the surface when claims are missing, unclear, or contested. Those who offer new hypotheses about how to make sense of and act on a concern occupy pivotal roles in the careers of those concerns, as concern might quite genuinely take a new direction following such interventions. By exploring our social geography with an eye out for patterns of moral concern, rather than just for articulate representations of responsibility, we discern continuities rather than substitutions.

6.4 Boundaries or Horizons? (Or, "You Can't Get There from Here")

What should moral critics make of the fact that differently situated people represent responsibilities (and hence engage in and anticipate moral address) differently? Of course, one approach is to insist that only one among rival claims is correct. If we wish to render our practices intelligible in a more fine-grained way, however, we will say our representations of responsibility are always situated and pragmatic; their practical point is to show us—those of us entertaining and making such representations—the direction along which we ourselves might usher our concerns. That two people do this differently is then no clear sign of error. The difference between one and another practical choice is the occasion for questions, yes—but local and ordinary ones. Those questions concern whether and how differently situated agents might wisely handle the same concern by taking it in different directions.

Yet there are two different ways to articulate such a pragmatic differentiation of responsibility claims. One is to appeal to what Marion Smiley calls “the boundaries of moral community”¹⁸—discontinuities upon the social terrain that lead us to identify some people as accessible to us (via moral address) while others are not.

The other option is to emphasize the continuous differentiation of the social field, offering something like the concept of a shifting *horizon* of connections to account for the fact that the very same person might be appropriately subject to and open to moral address from some positions, but not from others.

Indeed, metaphors of social space or geography—though quite familiar and intuitive in one sense—often invite us to choose between emphasizing

continuities or discontinuities. In the following section, I will caution against tropes of social “spaces” and “places” that implicitly structure our social imagination around discontinuities. Despite sharing a similar metaphorical appeal to situatedness, the concept of a space or place—as a discrete and countable region—stands at odds with a field metaphor for social relations.

Oddly enough, there seem to be two rather contrary motivations for emphasizing social discontinuity in the form of bounded spaces. One is the positive motivation of articulating an ideal of mutual recognition and open publicity *within* a well-defined population, and the other is the more cautious motivation of acknowledging real obstacles *between* people in virtue of social differences.

The Paradox of Public Sphere Metaphors

Models of the “public sphere” as they are invoked by political theorists often invoke *presence* as an ideal, and hence invoke discontinuity as a side effect, by relying on concepts of membership and belonging. Parallel rhetoric appears among philosophers interested in responsibility and moral address, where discussions consistently invoke “the moral community.” Either way, membership is implicitly contrasted against nonmembership, belonging or presence against nonbelonging and absence. On an account that privileges such clear concepts, the reach of the public sphere may evolve in certain respects—new heretofore “private” persons and issues may be catapulted into the public space—but “publicity” must still connote the idealized mutual presence of each constituent to every other.

Those who invoke concepts of publicity may not suffer from the illusion that publicity is ever perfect; they may reply that the very point of articulating ideals such as that of the “public sphere” is to orient us toward an ideal. If we are to have a robust public life, the argument goes, then our institutions need to approximate an ideal on which demographic differences—economic, linguistic, sexual, and so forth—correlate less starkly with differences of access and engagement. Theorists of publicity (and of “the moral community”) also tend to acknowledge some gray penumbra of inclusion.

Nevertheless, we cannot know *how* to tackle stark differences of access and engagement until we recognize that publicity’s imperfections supervene on a social field. When marginality is parsed as some *degree* of membership, we easily overlook the fact that being in different marginal places

means having one's presence register "through" certain full members rather than others, and thus that full members have different levels of awareness of "the margins" depending on their location. Hence, the notion that full members are all privy to the same public conversation is misleading. To think in terms of a social field is to set aside the yes-no-maybe concept of "presence" in favor of more nuanced questions, such as *through what channels, in which respects, and with whose support*. Feminist political critics have argued against the dichotomy between public and private spheres, and one reason is that the dichotomy obscures such questions.

Matters such as acquaintance and date rape illustrate the problem well. The question "public or private" forces victims' advocates and legal reformers into an impossible dilemma: either rape is a matter of public concern comparable to, say, burglary, or it is not. Threats to property count paradigmatically as matters of public concern: a very thin description of theft suffices to spark most people's concern. By contrast, when rape is not itself understood as a property crime against a man (or as an offensive violation of masculinity when heterosexual men are its victims), responsiveness to concern about rape is highly varied. Some men have insisted—brazenly if not sincerely—that the main problem in cases of rape is a woman's inability to enjoy what is essentially pleasurable. The point, of course, is not that such an attitude deserves credit, but that it passes for an intelligible claim; a thief's analogous claim about property crimes would gain no traction at all. Some people become attuned to how the threat of rape undermines flourishing *only* through more or less direct personal experience combined with receptive attunement to "thick descriptions" of others' experiences. Most patriarchal cultural settings are far from saturated with a detailed appreciation of how rape functions physically and symbolically to undermine the agency of women (or those somehow figured as feminine). In such settings, concern over rape is shared through limited social channels, and it does not fit the paradigm of public concerns. Part of the problem is the fact that experiences can come to *seem* essentially private insofar as they are not mirrored by a general social responsiveness to their significance.¹⁹

In response to a well-bounded conception of "the public," feminists can offer the continuously differentiated social field as a richer concept underlying both public and private. The social terrain is crosshatched and knit together by more and less ample channels of communication, many of which function asymmetrically. All associations, whether public or private,

are imperfect—indeed one's very self-knowledge is less than perfect. The illusion of perfect familiarity or transparency, whether with oneself or an intimate friend, is buoyed up by the coherent pattern of mediating and supportive associations provided by others.

Emphasizing social continuity amounts to replacing the model of “publicity” as an ideal *sphere* with the model of a spread-out *field*. In particular, a family of critical idioms—such as “staging a demonstration” and “speaking out”—can foster unrealistic expectations, and hence misfires and disappointments, for activist critics. Activists often turn to various forms of expressive protest in order to cope with evidence of widespread indifference. A certain danger, however, attends the sense that one could “make the problem public” as if to have raised the curtain in front of a perfectly assembled public audience. Of course, demonstrations and speak-outs are noticed and witnessed by a crowd’s worth of particular individuals, and attention within the crowd is engaged more or less successfully. Yet it is the degree to which those individuals pay practical attention and the ways in which they in turn engage others—an essentially *social* question—that determines the effectiveness of “public demonstrations” as a form of critical practice.

To be clear: the actual critical activity often described as a “demonstration” or “speak-out” serves as a crucial tool of intervention. Protests, rallies, and marches might efficiently and provocatively broadcast concerns to at least a few receptive persons dispersed within a wide audience. Events such as “Take Back the Night” marches and speak-outs, Gay Pride rallies, and antiwar demonstrations thus help transform experiences of isolation, shame, or inchoate rage into matters for socially extended moral and political attention. They serve also as encouraging environments within which participants recognize shared patterns of oppression, build solidarity, and cultivate the boldness and confidence necessary to overcome intimidation and internalized oppression. Such collectively therapeutic work is accomplished through the very expressive gestures that may manage to attract a wider social network of support and resources. As one form of critical practice, “speaking out” is sometimes truly indispensable. Yet it carries all the mixed baggage that accompanies *expression* as a critical objective in itself. The idiom of “speaking out” reflects low expectations of receptivity, and hence does not orient its participants to the challenges of situated communication. In the act of speaking out as such, we are not troubleshooting misunderstandings or cultivating robust uptake on the part of specific hearers. “Out” may mark a decisive movement away from the experience of inwardness or repression, but only a false idealization of

public space tempts us to imagine that “out” represents a place where one’s speech can land. There is no “out” out there.

The Paradox of Social Boundary Metaphors

Another motive for invoking discontinuity works from a rhetorically opposed direction—the aim is precisely to caution against ideals of mutual presence. Marion Smiley appeals centrally to discontinuous geographical tropes in her work, *Moral Responsibility and the Boundaries of Community*. Practices of moral address, she argues, cannot simply reflect perspective-neutral facts about responsibility. Even judgments about a person’s causal responsibility (leaving culpability aside) are made differently by those inside and outside of the same morally salient community. In discussions of responsibility, Smiley points out, sometimes “we differ openly. . . . Moreover, we do so not only on practical grounds concerning who, say, could have best prevented harm, but on the basis of a variety of other purely social and political phenomena, including both our conception of communal boundaries and our perceptions of political power.²⁰ Smiley’s account helps to explain how different people’s informed judgments of responsibility, even over apparently straightforward matters, often entail apparently incompatible claims. It also helps explain how those who share an oppressed social status are sometimes drawn into finding fault with one another rather than into articulating and addressing the injustices that frame their predicament. Social gulfs and fences can make powerful agents practically inaccessible to our moral address, and hence not responsible (to us) in the sense of being approachable as respondents to our concerns.

Or, to cast Smiley’s lesson from the hearer’s perspective, the social-geographical terrain can effectively insulate *us* from the distress calls of certain others; hence *we* are beyond the reach of moral address from their vantage point. Knowing this might help to inoculate us against a certain moral hubris. Metaphors of social boundaries can thus correct against naïve critical expectations.

An emphasis on “boundaries” of this kind, however, yields a geography of nested (if contested and shifting) regions. It makes communities into things that can be counted, rather than turbulent and shifting subregions that may overlap more and less porously. Boundary metaphors help illustrate how a moral claim may be differently received in different places, but at the same time they inhibit discussion of movement *within* regions. On any account that emphasizes social boundaries, attempts to hold someone responsible seem either intelligible (in-bounds) or not (out-of-bounds).

Such accounts risk reifying cultures as homogenous mentalities, rather than as fields of internal difference.²¹ If, by hypothesis, an understanding of moral boundaries is supposed to help Smiley's readers overcome naïve expectations, those readers must nevertheless eventually approach those very boundaries as open to careful crossing and undermining.

A continuous social field is not smooth or undifferentiated of course. Social fields remain structured by more and less forbidding gulfs and fences, ones whose maintenance or removal are politically fraught. But like real gulfs and fences (sometimes because they *are* real gulfs and fences), "boundaries" of community make it not categorically *impossible* but rather *difficult* to get things across. To yield a rich social account of moral address, we would need to recognize even the locally congested traffic of moral concerns, some of which will turn out to be local traffic within and across border zones.²²

Even when we think of them as ordinary features of continuous fields, boundaries and fences do not come close to giving us an adequate conceptual handle on social differentiation. For many obstacles within a social field are highly asymmetrical. While a fence generally makes traffic equally difficult in both directions, some social channels of communication are more like one-way roads. A boss's concerns, including many that are tangential to business, may be regularly made clear to a secretary; the secretary's very job requires being receptive to these. The secretary's own concerns may not so easily gain the attention of the boss; it is awkward, unseemly, and "unprofessional" for a secretary to seek such attention.

Yet describing some channel exclusively as "one-way" is itself an appeal to discontinuity, and unidirectionality of influence is an extreme that is just as rarely achieved as perfect reciprocity. Geographical metaphors can partially accommodate this fact through metaphors such as *elevation*—and something like this is likely what Walker has in mind when she speaks of a "topography" that "regulates a flow of shared understandings." For just as physical movement more readily takes downhill directions, concerns generally travel more easily in some social directions than others.

Of course, social fields admit of nothing like a consistent scale of elevation; the social field has no analog for sea level. And because social differences have many aspects, there may be relationships where communication seems, as the wisecrack goes, "uphill both ways." Nevertheless, at least when attention is confined to a particular concern, it may be useful to imagine the social field as a terrain that fosters movement of concern along some routes, and in some directions, rather than others.

6.5 Contagion Narratives in Constructivist Sociology

How Do Social Problems Come into View?

A study of something like the movement of moral concern is implicit in sociology's constructivist paradigm of research into social problems. Prominent researchers early in this tradition include John Kitsuse, Malcolm Spector, Stephen Hilgartner, and Charles Bosk.²³ Their investigations center on how social problems become salient—how they are “constructed”—through social interactions. This work offers a clear example of moral sociology in its “empirical” voice: it attempts to describe the shifting social influences on morally freighted attitudes, but to do so without taking interpretively rich interest in those attitudes, and without presupposing any value orientation.

Though I will shortly turn to philosophical reservations about some of the claims and assumptions characteristic of this research tradition, there are two important strengths of this work from which moral philosophers, as well as ordinary critics, might learn. The first strength is that this work is attentive to the deep *contingency* of people's attitudes and priorities. Researchers describe the genealogy and career of specific moral problems, insisting that moral problems are not simply discovered, but rather emerge in virtue of culturally specific, socially complex historical encounters. This is an important corrective to modern moral philosophers' assumption that if some kind of behavior or situation merits moral concern, this fact—or at least the *criteria* by which something should count as a moral problem—is something illuminated by something like reflection on the concept of morality itself.

The second strength of this research tradition is its recognition of something like the dynamic life of a moral concern (without using such terms), showing how it emerges from the social workings of *attention*. For a moral concern to make its way through a social field, it must catch and maintain attention amid distractions and competing claims. Communicative channels—from broadcasts such as the televised evening news to intimate channels such as kitchen-table conversation—are all finite in both their “carrying capacity” and their reach.

Hilgartner and Bosk invoke the grand-narrative trope of “Rise and Fall” in describing the career of social problems, and in doing so rhetorically privilege a temporal axis rather than a horizontal field—as if the life of a social problem occurred within one “public space” as preoccupation with it can dawn, peak, and dissipate. Yet in spite of that surface rhetoric, the actual narratives are of horizontal movement and contagion; a problem is

conceived and focused upon first here and then there, potentially mutating in its significance as it is taken up by different populations.

One of the early studies associated (somewhat controversially) with this tradition is a study by Pfohl on the “discovery” of child abuse.²⁴ This work documents the emergence of concern about child abuse, problematizing the fact that, as Pfohl says, “Despite documentary evidence of child beating throughout the ages, the ‘discovery’ of child abuse as deviance and its subsequent criminalization are recent phenomena.”²⁵ In other words, even while the target of concern (the beating of children) remained more or less constant,²⁶ the perception of it as problematic is recent and not uniform—and thus the very fact that child abuse has come to count as a social problem stands in need of social-historical explanation.

The explanation, as Pfohl retells it, begins with how pediatric radiologists in the 1950s respond to a diagnostic question about evidence of bone fractures in children. The radiologists began with a search for medical disorders of “internal” origin, and progressed through various hypotheses about accidents and neglect until they embraced the provocative hypothesis that many fractures were due to “misconduct and deliberate injury.” From there, other doctors, scholars, journalists, activists, celebrities, and legislatures took up the widening call to recognize and intervene in cases of child abuse—that is, cases that illustrate what both experts and laypersons *now* recognize in such terms.

Since Spector and Kitsuse’s 1977 treatise, *Constructing Social Problems*, a theory and research tradition has formed around offering similar narratives to illuminate social concern over a wide variety of conditions and activities: slavery, pedophilia, drug abuse, factory farming, and so on.²⁷ The tradition has itself been demarcated by various names, including *social constructivism*, *labeling theory*, and the *definitional approach* to social problems. What holds the tradition together is the amplification of certain claims like Pfohl’s: what makes for a social problem is not the presence of some “objective condition” being complained about, but the claim-making behavior itself. After all, the provocation has often been there all along (so the story goes); its being perceived as a problem must then depend on something beyond the presence of “the thing itself” (that is, child abuse, slavery, or whatever critics single out as the object of their concern).

One small friendly amendment to the constructivist model can be made immediately. We need not subscribe to the notion that the phenomena are “exactly the same” before and after being labeled; such a claim ignores the looping effect by which being interpreted or named in a particular way

shifts the human behavior that is named.²⁸ Nevertheless, Pfohl's line of thought should leave us impressed by the radical *underdetermination* of concern by the provocations to which it points. In some places and times, there has been concern about child abuse; at other places and times, there has *not* been such concern—despite the fact ample “cause for concern” might now be discerned there by anyone who has already taken up such worries. Even if the beating of children is not an entirely stable phenomenon resting “beneath” our changing perceptions, we can agree that people's degree of responsive concern over the treatment of children is highly variable across time and place.

Furthermore, we can say that Pfohl's account is an account of *contagion*. The contingent “spark” of concern is not presented as igniting independently in different places and times; that might imply that the phenomenon itself were a sufficient cause of concern. Instead, a process of social communication allows an initially local spark of concern to spread from its initial location through various professionals, institutions, and ordinary people. Cumulatively, they may establish a more or less pervasive presence in public discourse for any given concern.

The Value to Moral Critics of Contagion Narratives

Awareness of the contingent social genealogies of our own moral concerns has a vital role for moral critics. The idea of a socially contagious concern offers an alternative—perhaps a synthesis in a loosely Hegelian sense—to the two familiar caricatures of motivation associated with Kantian dichotomies. Kant's popular *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* distinguishes between “categorical” imperatives and “hypothetical” ones,²⁹ and the canonical status of that distinction has put many philosophers in the habit of applying it so as to obscure any alternative.

Categorical imperatives supposedly represent the practical demands of reason itself. The very structure of will brings any rational being, in the absence of any particular experience, to recognize the self-contradictory nature of various would-be principles of action, and hence the duty to steer clear of them. Kant presents hypothetical imperatives, by contrast, as not only contingent but also selfish and subject to arbitrary adoption and rejection according to individual desire. Concern over child abuse, we should now remark, resists this dichotomy—and indeed many other concerns will do so as well. In taking on a socially contagious moral concern, we do take on a burden that we experience as irreducible to our arbitrary preferences and inclinations. Yet we recognize, at the same time, that its force depends upon our social receptivity; our concern is not neatly

unpacked out of the sublime structure of what Kant calls “the moral law within.” Something like an imperative can emerge in the space of history and culture.

Indeed, this is roughly Adorno’s amendment to Kant in his claim that, in the wake of Auschwitz, humanity is subject to “a new imperative.”³⁰ To dedicate ourselves to the resolution “Never Again!”—where the “again” must be folded into the imperative itself—is to recognize that moral concern cannot be sufficiently sparked by formal reflection. It is always with some degree of hindsight that we awaken to signs of what human beings can do. (In this sense we are catching up with hindsight even if we manage to turn our attention to what we have become poised to do, as in the case of global climate change.) Adorno’s point need not be read as a claim about the Holocaust as an ineffable singularity; it may be read as the insistence that moral concerns become clear only in virtue of our social-historical perspective, and that for that very reason, we urge one another to pay attention, to communicate them vividly, and not to forget them.

Narratives in the social problems genre help to make vivid for us that historical and cultural contingency is not the same as individualistic and arbitrary voluntarism. Taking child abuse—or Auschwitz—seriously is not like having become determined to run a marathon. In the latter case, the sense in which one “has to” train for greater and greater distances each day is as easily revoked as acquired; all that is needed is a change of desire. (One “has to” train in such a way *in order to* realize the goal of running the marathon, but that goal itself—as much inertia as it may have within our psychology—may answer to no broader social need.) The imperative to prevent and intervene in child abuse or genocidal fascism, on the other hand, is hypothetical and contingent with respect to our historical and situated exposure to it, but its source is not in subjectively arbitrary desires. We should say the same about sexual abuse if we want an alternative to portraying those who show little concern over it as simply and inherently morally defective; their being “out of touch” can also reflect local ruptures in social connection. Some concerns, and indeed the very concepts to which they refer, can be conceived and appreciated only through the precarious work of socially amplified communications.

Thus, although socially communicated moral concerns correspond in one sense to hypothetical imperatives, they are unlike paradigmatic Kantian hypothetical imperatives. The adoption of a moral concern carries a burden of responsibility, and it is a burden one recognizes as coming from others and as being carried on behalf of indefinitely many others.

The Dubious Explanatory Glue in Contagion Narratives

Constructivist narratives illuminate that whatever our moral concerns are, we should recognize that they have been brought to life through contingent and variegated social communications. Yet I have allowed two related aspects of these contagion narratives to remain in the shadows. First, the explanatory mechanisms introduced by Pfohl and others attempt a cool reduction of human motives to self-interest. Second, they can only track the contagion of claims, and not their intelligent transformation.

First, the problematic explanatory appeal to self-interest. Pfohl does not just *describe* the social paths through which alarm over child abuse spreads; he attempts to reveal the *mechanism* of its proliferation by unmasking interests that are served by “talking up the problem.” In particular, he points to the role of certain organized medical interests, whose concern in the discovery of the “battered child syndrome” manifestly contributed to the advance of humanitarian pursuits while covertly rewarding the groups themselves.³¹

In this explanation, interests of a narrow kind account for social-historical change, and any “humanitarian” benefit comes along, in cases such as this one, as the lucky byproduct.

Of course it is intriguing and sobering to recognize that postures of righteous indignation might in fact serve rather narrow interests. And it is easy to grant that an explanation of human activity in terms of self-interest is almost always available if we are willing to beg the question persistently enough. What Pfohl succeeds in showing is that a sort of transcendental moral altruism is implausible as the whole story behind the spread of moral concern. Yet anyone willing to believe that the rise of public concern over child abuse was driven entirely by materially selfish interests—even *unconscious* selfish interests—is hardly more credible. Here, a positivist interest in *not* engaging in controversial assumptions about motivation has slipped into assuming the ubiquity of the one motivation, self-interest, whose existence is least controversial.

Instead, we ought to conclude that the phenomena of social change are open to multiple narratives of interpretation and explanation. Moral agents, on my account, necessarily (that is, *as* moral agents) look at the social world with a general readiness to discern genuine moral concern in others’ activity; otherwise we must each count ourselves inexplicably anomalous. We can embrace the lesson of sociological narratives simply by admitting that moral concerns are much more historically contingent, much more fragile, and more subject to social influence than we might have wished to believe.

Social Problems as Memes

What constructivist social problems researchers take themselves to be tracing through social space is usually a determinate attitude or claim. The content of a claim is typically that some kind of behavior is wrong, or that some category of deviance should be stigmatized.

In some ways, the stiffness of “claims”-oriented narratives is offset by sociological work on movements. Movement narratives offer a forward-looking approach, describing the spread of commitment to a specific program or prescription for change. Yet this is a mirror image, rather than a correction. Either way, individuals are assumed to participate in a kind of moral conviction or judgment, and one result is that people “on the ground” drop out of view exactly insofar as they are perplexed, uncertain, or unorthodox in their interpretation of the matter in question. Meanwhile, it is exactly in these indeterminate forms of attention that we can find critical agency in its most exemplary forms.

Though social problems narratives may accept that problems mutate and become transformed along the way, such changes figure primarily as mutations and only coincidentally as (viral) adaptations. The social problem claim is rendered analogous to a gene, and the process being emphasized is mimesis, rather than translation. A social problem, on such a theory, fits the description of what Dawkins and others have called a kind of *meme*.³² For they describe the contagion of an idea-fragment—that this or that is wrong, that this or that resolution (a specific agenda or norm) must be adopted—as it replicates through (or fails to replicate through) a population. It is the history and fate of such memes that social-problems narratives explore.

One awkward result is that we find little room in those narratives for the person who wrestles with concerns in their protean and less-articulate form. Even a skeptic who debunks clumsy claims without offering better ones contributes vital attention to a concern by making room for more subtle interpretations. In effect, both stigmatizing trends (negative-valence attitudes) and change-movements (positive-valence attitudes) are recognized as “successful” only in roughly the way a gene or meme is successful—through proliferation. To read the constructionist work is to imagine social problem memes taking self-interested human beings as their predictable vectors, while we simultaneously deploy them as tools (albeit unconsciously) for the pursuit of our own interests. What is missing is the work accomplished by attention: the reinterpretation, translation, and ferreting out of connections that distinguishes the phenomenon of concern from both passivity and strategic manipulation.

In spite of these shortcomings, moral critics can gain a great deal of perspective from the dynamic and socially textured accounts of social problems narratives. Furthermore, we should note that the researchers themselves—at the end of the day—often are both reflective and practically engaged with the problems they describe. The problem is not with the researchers, but with a paradigm that cannot, without switching gears, *make sense of* a person’s stopping to deliberate, reflectively, about what to do with a problem—to whom to take it, how to understand it. For such deliberations take seriously that there is a difference between a concern’s being directed toward resolution and its simply spreading willy-nilly like a virus until it becomes pervasive or loses its foothold. The constructionists have methodological trouble distinguishing resolutions from “solutions” in scare quotes, and they have trouble putting themselves, as persons with concerns—and complex questions about those concerns—on the same map as the people they interview and investigate.³³

Indeed, publications in this tradition are pockmarked by scare quotes. Such arms'-length skepticism cannot carry over well into our perspective as agents and engaged critics. Yet there is an alternative beyond detached skepticism and the enthusiasm of devotion to a clear cause. To take a concern seriously is not to hope that others repeat one’s very words or imitate one’s emotions and attitudes, but rather to ask others to attend to a concern, to bring it into relation with their own observations and avenues of agency, and to act on it in ways that we are *not* in a position to specify.

In sum, the “construction of social problems” tradition turns out, in its strong points, to offer something very much like a geography—it collects a great deal of observations and insights about its terrain and how one phenomenon or other comes differentially to move through or blanket that terrain. Yet in order to offer maps that usefully put features into relief for embodied and concerned map readers, descriptive geography must acknowledge that the terrain on which we live is to be studied only because it is the site of our projects. Those projects do not just happen to reshape the world; such reshaping is their very point.

A geography of concerns cannot honestly be drawn so as to leave the mapmaker’s position out of it. For each of us there is a horizon beyond which we know, only vaguely, that in such directions people’s attention may be turned to matters of concern about which we know little—and in coming to know those concerns, we inevitably also amplify our understanding of various concerns closer to home. Like cartoon maps that detail the nooks and crannies of a neighborhood while compressing distant

continents to a point—or like the homuncular mapping of the body upon our sensory cortex that renders a lip or fingertip larger than a forearm—anyone's social map of moral concerns is bound to magnify local and familiar detail. A broad-minded critic, then, is not one who acts on an objective survey of the whole field, but rather one who *recognizes* some concerns as well-traveled and carefully handled artifacts with recognizable roots stretching this way or that into the distance.

6.6 Connective Agency: An Example

While geography as such is a descriptive field, and I have considered the word “geography” as it translates onto social terrain, no one is more sensitive to the interdependence of geography with other modes of understanding than geographers themselves. For they are aware that an array of geographical observations, if it were somehow made to stand without any links of connection to practical interests, would be opaque (if not, as Kant claims, “blind”). I will thus close our discussion of moral geography by recognizing one geographer’s particular insights about moral criticism as the self-conscious facilitation of a social-geographical movement of moral concern.

The geographer Rachel Silvey recognizes the geographical dimension of critical agency in her reflections on sweatshop labor.³⁴ In seeking to bring her concerns about exploitative labor practices to the attention of decision makers in her university community, she travels, bodily, between the global northwest and the global southeast, covering not just geographical distance, but also differences of language, perspective, and affect.

Relative to the women laborers with whom she conducted her fieldwork in Thailand, on the one hand, she recognizes her privileged position and comes to understand herself as responsible—in what she calls a *political* sense (following Iris Marion Young³⁵)—for their exploitation. In the interactionist language of gesture, she recognizes herself as called into responsiveness by her encounters with them. Relative to university administrators back on her academic campus, on the other hand, she recognizes herself as an unwelcome intruder in the relatively masculinized and elite world of finances, stockholdings, trustees, and multimillion-dollar contracts. Yet she is better placed than most to show how distress in one place can be understood as a demand for agency in another. She thus devotes her efforts to promoting an understanding of the moral concerns informed by her experience in Thailand. As someone familiar with both the ordinary lives

of sweatshop laborers *and* the bureaucratic culture of university policymaking, she describes her experience through appeal to Maria Lugones's account of "world"-travelling³⁶ and sees her communicative task as bridging "the opposing worlds of transnational feminist labor activists . . . and . . . professional academia."³⁷

Silvey initially deliberates over a translation challenge: "how best to frame the issue" of worker's rights in confronting university administrators about athletic contracts. In the course of struggling with this communicative task, however, she finds herself experiencing intimidation over apparently "siding with students" against administrators in confrontations about sweatshop exploitation. Her very status as a faculty member, and hence someone with a privileged voice in campus discussion, seemed implicitly threatened. Such intimidation presented itself, at first, as a straightforward obstacle to the success of her communicative project. Yet this situated experience—of intimidation—became the occasion for a pivotal transformation of Silvey's concern. For her intimidation was itself a kind of distress that demanded recognition, interpretation, and concern. Silvey responded by broadening her concern to cover not just the remote experiences of sweatshop labor activists, but also the systematically intimidating and alienating effects of her university's dependence—and indeed of other universities' dependence—on relations with corporate capitalists. This "corporatization" of the university represents a new facet—a "perspectival transform"³⁸ of the concerns voiced by exploited laborers abroad.

Over the course of her experience, Silvey has taken her concern over sweatshop labor in directions that the workers themselves, as well as other mediators such as NGO activists, would have been in a poor position to anticipate. Hers is a pivotal kind of moral agency not just because it brings new insight to bear on her concern, but also because her newly articulated concern itself drives her to turn to a different audience—namely, people who have potential leverage not just over this or that athletic contract, but over the "corporatization" of the university itself.³⁹ To raise this concern, she addresses not the same campus activists and decision makers with whom she has previously communicated, but a journal of academic geography—one which reaches a broader audience (albeit still a modest one) of people who may be responsive both to problems of university organization and to questions about the conditions under which moral recognition might overcome international obstacles.

Silvey's narrative shows that she does not simply serve as a vector for the propagation of a claim-like social meme framing sweatshop labor practices as bad. She recognizes that what subsistence laborers in Thailand's

apparel-export industry need is not a mouthpiece in the United States who will reproduce their demands with minimal translation, but critics who will draw out new connections and recognize the relevance of new audiences. Silvey thus participates in the Janus-faced economy of socially critical agency, taking up concerns precisely because she is well placed to communicate them, reinterpreting those concerns so that they can make sense as demands upon hearers whose response would make a difference, carrying those concerns across the world in a full bodily sense, and reframing the agency of academic and administrative hearers so that they can recognize their relation to her concern. At the same time, she nudges her hearers to reinterpret her concerns in light of their own different positions, thus making clear that her communication of concern is not narrowly prescriptive but is both an invitation and a demand for further reflection and action.

The gulf of disconnection between distress and relevant agency may be more or less successfully closed by extended paths and networks of moral address. Taking a concern seriously does not require possessing criteria by which to decide when and how the concern might count as resolved, but it does depend on attaching significance to the possibility of resolution, and having some tentative and situated understanding of the kinds of response that might be called for. When someone takes on a concern that she expects to pass along to others, she undertakes something like a mediating or distributing role analogous to economic mediation and transportation. Moral concerns cannot simply be posted in some perfectly transparent public forum, just as the ideal public market is a fiction. Instead, we each participate in the social process by being uniquely poised to bridge certain gaps between signs of a problem “upstream” and leverage over it “downstream.” We must be willing to retain a vivid sense not only of the urgency of our concern vis-à-vis those from whom we inherit it, but also of the ways in which those to whom we pass the concern might come to an enhanced appreciation of themselves as agents in virtue of taking the concern on board, and that the concern itself may not remain unchanged in the process.

Obviously one individual's careful participation in moral criticism does not have magical powers to solve problems instantly, completely, or without risk of complication. By recognizing features of the social world around us as calling for our situated intervention in the ways that Silvey illustrates, however, we have a chance of exercising a distinctly significant form of moral agency, and doing so even if we have nothing like a systematic perspective on moral value. Instead, Silvey acts with a careful regard

for something like what we can call the *economy* and *ecology* of moral concerns, synthesizing Walker's metaphors with the potentially fluid and inchoate language of concern. In the next chapter, we shall turn first to some of the concepts that play a role in economic interpretation and explanation, and then to concepts of ecological dynamics and possibilities. Neither of these should be understood as *independent* of a descriptive geography, but rather as adding interpretive and evaluative layers to the world of moving concerns.

7 The Transformation of Concerns: Economic and Ecological Models

A geography of moral concerns, as described in chapter 6, tracks the social movement of moral concerns against the fabric of our social relationships, allowing us to consider both the paths by which concerns tend to come into our field of attention and the paths they may take in the wake of our handling of them. Yet a geographical description yields at best a very loose orientation—nothing like a prescriptive direction for optimally inhabiting the social space of moral concerns. Nonetheless, it is only when we recognize ourselves as embedded in a geography of concerns that we can begin to raise evaluative questions about how our handling of concerns relates to that larger field.

If we think about good critical attention as the handling of concerns that circulate through a surrounding context, we should not expect critics to accept or reject concerns, one by one, based on intrinsic features of each one. Instead, responsiveness requires prioritizing well among the concerns that come into earshot. Certainly critics can take up concerns that bear the imprint of systematic reflection within philosophical and religious traditions—and these concerns may themselves amplify our recognition of remote concerns. Yet even the salience of general and theoretically framed concerns (such as preoccupation with suffering, with rights, or with virtues) depends on broad historical and cultural context, further waxing and waning with local social interaction. We can turn our attention and communicative energies—more or less perceptively and effectively—to only a small number of concerns at a time. What does it mean for a socially situated moral agent to prioritize well among concerns, and to handle them well?

This chapter sets the stage for an answer by following through on the series of three modes of understanding to the social field—modes articulated independently by feminist philosopher Margaret Walker (as geographies, economies, and ecologies) and by sociologist John Levi Martin (as

topology, organization of forces, and field of contestation). Their triads are not identical, but we can see them as congruent: the first component abstracts away from agency, explanation, and function so as to focus on describing the field of phenomena; the second asks us to understand the field in light of forces that dynamically constrain and facilitate movements at each position on it; and the third emphasizes factors that resist the unifying lens of the second, expecting individual differences of embodiment to yield an interplay of very different profiles of responsiveness even in facing the same positional circumstances.

Spelling out the metaphors of “economy” and “ecology” gives us two different moral-sociological ways of understanding, and hence of beginning to evaluate, our critical engagement with the surrounding field of moral concerns. Both words draw from the Greek *oikos*, or household; so both emphasize our having a *place* from which we engage with a larger world. Both might be seen as forms of “standpoint theory” applied to our engaged awareness of moral concerns. Yet they differ in the level of closure and systematicity they anticipate—and hence in the practical stances they recommend to us.¹ According to an economic mode of understanding, agents live upon a field of potentially commensurable powers and demands, reading and responding to those forces more or less fluidly. When we see with an economist’s eye, we implicitly set up a single conception of agency according to which any given situation (so long as it is fully specified) calls upon any agent to react in similar ways.

An ecological mode, by contrast, can attach positive significance to the fact that different individuals react differently to similar situations. Different moral sensibilities can be evidence not just of varying competence or lack of information, but also of qualitatively divergent ways of inhabiting the same field. A particular environment, objectively described, does not have the same force for all biological organisms; it does not evince the same response from a bumblebee and a salamander. If observations of this kind have analogs within the social field of our moral interactions, then we should expect that different habits of response may enrich the social field. Furthermore, those differences may not be open to synthesis; they may participate in fragile interdependencies (think again of the bumblebee and the salamander). For example, the patterns of concern that are cultivated by deontological, consequentialist, virtue-ethical, religious, and care-ethical discourses (and by variants within these patterns, and yet others entirely) can be compared to multiple forms of life within the same ecology. Though such concerns may compete at a local level for a person’s attention, an ecological understanding suggests that within the larger field they

are not so much competitors as interdependent patterns; the field functions well not when the “right” pattern wins out, but when a certain interdependence—however precarious and shifting—is achieved. On this mode of understanding, no single profile of moral responsiveness should be endorsed as optimal.² This appreciation of difference, however, requires relinquishing uniform expectations for the communication and exchange of concerns; there is no way to “add diversity and stir” so as to improve on an economic approach to moral concerns.

The concepts of “economy” and “ecology” are apt here because they correspond not to rival theories within the same discipline, but to different modes of understanding and evaluating our practical social situations. Economic and ecological social stances are both ways of discerning moral agency in human activity, a project vindicated in chapter 5 only through a kind of pragmatic argument, rather than by refuting skeptical challenges. The idea that we participate in an economy of moral concerns is not a straightforwardly empirical hypothesis. Nor is the idea that we participate in an ecology of moral concerns. Either mode renders some questions intelligible, while affording no traction on others. As a mode of understanding each must remain open-textured; a skeptic could confidently pronounce either idea to be question-begging. Yet our stance toward the human world must at least tentatively project some interpretations ahead of their evidence; and the very stance we try on, as interpreters, leaves its mark on our evidence. So, my aim is not to hold the ideas of “moral economy” and “moral ecology” up against the world to see which, if either, is adequate. Rather, it is to draw attention to their differences, and to articulate some concerns about letting either mode of understanding claim exclusive relevance.

Unlike previous chapters, this one is not concerned with deconstructing pernicious and entrenched dichotomies so as to make room for socially responsive communication. Having cleared some conceptual room for such an account, we must begin to consider the difficulties endemic to a communicative understanding. To that end, the first half of this chapter develops the notion of an *economy* of moral concerns, showing how the social field of moral concerns might be understood as something like a force field of charged demands to be ranked and redirected more or less effectively. This economic ideal places the exchangeability of moral concerns in the foreground, casting the variation among moral agents mainly as differences of social positioning. To handle moral concerns well is to perceive one’s social position as a potentially vital node in surrounding currents of concern, and to prioritize among moral concerns with a stance

approaching the impartiality of a switchboard operator. The second half entertains an ecological ideal for our social handling of concerns. This latter ideal emphasizes much of what economics tends to leave in its margins: differences of embodiment, affect, creativity, narrative coherence, and history. As a mode of understanding, the ecological will not turn out to compete *empirically* with an economic mode; there is no neutral way to weigh a relative emphasis on difference against a relative emphasis on similarity and exchangeability. Nonetheless, a choice between these two ideals does make a *practical* difference; each ideal brings different expectations, problems, and possibilities into relief.

7.1 The Economic Stance toward a Field of Concerns

The family of concepts that I will call “economic” corresponds to John Levi Martin’s second kind of lens on a social field—one that studies the interaction of forces on a field. And indeed, economics is a friendly home for metaphors of pushing and pulling, gravity, gradients, efficiency, and liquidity. Routine allusions to “market forces” illustrate this feature of economic thinking. Of course, economists recognize nonmarket forces at work in the phenomena they study, but these represent shadowy forms of recalcitrance that economics itself cannot illuminate: ignorance, friction, violation, unresponsiveness, irrationality, or inefficiency. (While positive or empirical economics cares very much about such matters, such work still tends to be construed as highlighting obstacles to economic functioning, a necessary step if obstacles are to be overcome.) An economic analysis, unlike other field theories involving mechanistic “forces,” simultaneously constructs a field of forces and a notion of the agent for whom these forces are practically salient, and who consequently responds fluidly to them. So, the fact that actual people do not respond to certain “economic forces” does not show that those forces do not exist; economists happily conclude that people instantiate economic agency imperfectly. The proper description of an economic field is one that summarizes what is salient to *competent* economic agents as they are variously positioned on that field.

An economic lens on moral concerns would thus involve constructing the surrounding social field of moral concerns as *pulling* with some intensity on the attention and agency of each situated agent, while moral competence would reciprocally be defined in terms of due and proportionate responsiveness to those demands. Instead of recognizing a field of options and pressures to acquire, to transform, and to offer up this or that

commodity to someone, we would be alive to a field of options and pressures with respect to moral concerns: to listen to such-and-such, to reflect on this or that matter, and to get our concern taken up by so-and-so. With economic spectacles on, we would see each critic as occupying a position on a terrain of social agency and communication, and we would ask how well the critic reads the net moral force of that situation. We might think of the social field of concerns, in other words, as a network of demand and supply—not for material goods, but for concerned attention. Within such a network, not just the intensity of demands, but also their social proximity, necessarily shapes our respective circumstances.

Certain familiar observations fit well with such metaphors. A heavy moral burden rests on a person who is uniquely poised to grasp and interpret some otherwise unheeded distress or alarm. As long as I am the only person aware of my neighbor's distress, concerns growing out of that distress tend to trump many other potential concerns. Insofar as I take this concern seriously and do not take it to be hopelessly unresolvable, I must either act upon it directly (so as to meet my neighbor's need in some way) or bring it to others' attention. A complementary kind of urgency ought to come along with being uniquely poised to wield relevant practical leverage in some way or other. As long as I am the only person to whom a certain powerful and volatile person will listen, I must have my ear to the ground for incoming alerts, erring on the side of concern over false alarms. There may also be bottlenecks of urgency at other social locations: concerns from both sides of a linguistic divide pull pointedly on the attention of a single translator, sometimes requiring a very deliberate rationing of attention. If each person's social position sits at the intersection of various potential vectors of concern, then different people do experience the force of different moral concerns at any one time; but the movements of concern, overall, form a coordinated pattern or network that facilitates moral exchange more or less well.

7.2 Economy as Transformation, Transportation, and Exchange

The idea of an “economy” carries some distracting connotations; some will take the very concept to stand at odds with moral agency. To think of the social field of moral concerns as an “economy” will seem wrongheaded if an economy, by definition, is like a game in which instrumentally rational agents, assembled in an ideal market, maximize their individual and determinate interests. Indeed, one recent philosophical gloss on economy—a sketch of an “economy of esteem”—preserves the assumptions that

something counts as an economy insofar as it is characterized by “competition and exchange *in pursuit of* [some commodity or service].”³ This section will clear the ground by indicating a more suitable way of conceiving economic systems and economic agency. What is required is a sense of “economy” enacted by beings capable of taking on projects that have no *essential* connection to self-interest—projects that can be described in terms of the difference they make to the social world around them.

A promising articulation of “economy” appears in John Dewey’s non-reductively naturalistic account of “the economic process,” a process he frames as a development of organic activity.⁴ On the view Dewey develops in his *Lectures on Social and Political Ethics*, economic agents direct their energy so as to coordinate potential energy around them. They must be engaged in discerning both resources and needs, but it is not necessary to assume that such a thing as “full information,” in the traditional economist’s sense, is conceivable. Dewey makes no quick gesture toward “full information” because he takes agents to be contributing nontrivial efforts in *recognizing* resources and needs as such, which means recognizing the practical gap between them. Resources are things that can fill needs, but only once they are transported or worked upon, and imagination makes a difference to our projection of such possibilities. Similarly, needs come to count as needs (rather than abject sufferings) only when we can begin to conceive of meeting them. To interpret distress as need, rather than simply as irremediable suffering, means having a sense of what kind of thing, near or far, might be made accessible and put into such a form as to make the right kind of difference. The world is quite literally made of energy, but seeing *how* some kind of energy can be rendered useful, along with seeing *what the use might be* to which we can put available energy, is a work of intelligence, communication, and coordination. (Our perception of both resources and needs involves hypothetical projection, since the material possibilities in question are neither obvious nor under our control.) Economic activity, on this view, can only be understood against a geographical backdrop, and an economic agent is one who adeptly recognizes how specific goods and needs can be brought into the right kind of contact with one another.

Most crucially, Dewey’s conception pries economic competence away from the idea of serving interests that are “one’s own” in any essential sense, just as Socrates argues that shepherding is not essentially bound up with profiting from the sheep, or ruling with profiting from one’s subjects.⁵ Economic agents do tend to be particularly well placed to recognize needs that bear directly on their own survival, well-being, and agency—and one’s

overall capacity to act eventually declines if those needs go unmet—but even an agent's own needs may not be subjectively transparent to the agent, nor need an economic agent place primary priority on them insofar as they are perceived. (For example, Alf may be especially attuned to Bert's nutritional and medical needs, while Bert is nearly oblivious to such matters even in his own case, attuned instead to both Alf's and his own needs for home maintenance and fuel provisions.) We can say that economic agents "have their own interests" insofar as do they take up some particular economic projects or concerns rather than others, but this sort of "having" of interests does not imply the substantively self-interested drive to which conventional economic models appeal. Furthermore, on Dewey's account, being oblivious to nearby unattended needs, whether one's own or others, represents a failure of economic agency as much as being oblivious to resources and opportunities; we discern others' needs not just as their subjective demands but also as vital factors for the possibility of further coordination.

One further point about this conception of economy may be worth spelling out, namely that economic agency is not directly bound up with conceiving trade or exchange as neatly and locally closed transactions. No economic agent can afford to do work without securing support for her own health, and on the whole over time, we should expect that energy expended by an agent requires a counterbalance in the form of resources coming in to sustain that agency. Yet the activity of a sustainable economic system need not necessarily involve locally "tit-for-tat" transactions. Thus, the kinds of coordination involved when members of a household are alive to one another's needs—and move through the world with an eye and ear for ways to meet them—count robustly as economic interaction even if there is no direct accounting for each contribution made. Those who attentively gather, cultivate, and cook food for their kin and companions thus count as economic agents, while the fact that someone "plays the market" for optimal profits does not (by itself, absent further details) illuminate the sense of their being economic agents. Likewise, a prisoner faced with a punishment/reward dilemma—an iconic figure in some economists' illustrations of rational choice making—is not an economic agent (or at least, is not such simply in virtue of facing that predicament).

We have digressed from a direct discussion of moral concerns, but a promising concept of economy helps us avoid privileging a noxious paradigm of economic competence. What this conception of economy suggests is that the social-geographical field is rich with relations between supply

and demand that can be more or less salient to agents. Those who are situated so as to recognize a resource as such (say, one who lives at the source of a fresh spring) and those who are situated so as to recognize a need vividly (say, one who recognizes a symptom as the need for a certain kind of medicine) occupy pivotal positions in a Deweyan economy. Whole arcs or circuits of economic activity may hinge upon one individual's calling attention to the resource or need that could anchor economic projects at one end or the other. Yet most of our economic agency consists of social mediation—relaying not just material goods, but also the very awareness of needs and resources as such. As we consider people whose social-geographical position is removed from particular resources and needs, the intensity of their economic engagement is thereby attenuated—reaching an entirely negligible degree only for people so far removed as not to be aware of a particular economic circuit at all.

Economists who invoke ideal models of market exchange—where the market is distilled into a single meeting point for producers and consumers—may contribute to people's commonsense scorn for what they call “the middle man.” But such scorn would be apt only in a world that is informationally transparent, frictionless, and inhabited by effectively interchangeable agents. When our work and trade is embedded within a geographical terrain that we each understand and navigate imperfectly, the role of an economic mediator becomes essential. To be an economic mediator is to recognize that one person's predicament *over here* should be construed as demand relative to resources he or she recognizes as accessible *over there*. Something's counting as demand, or as resource, is often not obvious; each of these comes into view along with the very possibility of mediation and transformation. That such work has often been done in exploitative ways does not undermine the centrality of such mediating work; rather, it makes its centrality all the more evident.

7.3 Critical Mediation through an Economic Lens

How does this economic stance translate into thinking about our agency as participants in moral criticism? Just as the economic agent occupies a social-geographical terrain marked by the displacement of resources from needs, moral critics occupy a social terrain characterized by social-geographical displacement between distress and relevant forms of agency. Thus moral critics make possible a kind of social coordination, simultaneously recognizing concerns on one hand—as demands for agency—and agency on the other hand as that which is potentially responsive to con-

cerns. Moral critics employ situated understandings of where (and through whom) relevant agency might be found, and how it might be brought to bear on some matter of concern. They direct their energy, in the form of perception, reflection, and communication, toward the social coordination of attention, and hence, in some sense, to the overall amplification of agency's potential.⁶

Indeed, in this sense, an economy of moral concerns is not simply analogous to the material economy, but is a particular facet of the familiar economy of needs and resources. Distress and responsive agency correspond to a specific kind of need and resource—the need for concerned attention and the furnishing of it. Yet again we must resist the mainstream economists' assumption that needs are antecedently given matters localized within individuals. While what we recognize as a need must be socially intelligible as such (and we may expend energy to render intelligible how something should be seen as necessary), we need not think of needs as boiling down to claims made on behalf of determinate individuals. Needs are not always needs for well-being in any straightforward sense. Needs for educational and cultural institutions, or for environmental improvement, for example, are not always straightforwardly traceable to particular individuals whose well-being (on more reductive measures) is clearly at stake. Of course, the physical distresses of individuals may serve as icon and touchstone in our ability to conceive something *as* need. Still, we may rightly speak of other needs: for respect, community, flexibility, diversity, and so forth. Because the precise nature of needs is not transparent, we may even focus attention on the problem of *something needed there*, as it were, without having reached a satisfactory conclusion about where exactly the need resides, or what its nature might be. Having a concern amounts, roughly, to having such an incompletely specified awareness of need—and simultaneously of its path of resolution.

On an economic view, it *makes sense* that I take up one of your concerns—supposing I am not preoccupied by other matters—insofar as it promises to gain some kind of specificity, direction, or force in my hands that it had not realized in your hands alone. The sense in which it is valuable to the hearer is the same sense discussed in chapter 5—that is, it illuminates the significance of the hearer's or receiver's agency. The matter is subsequently ripe for passing into yet another person's sphere of concern insofar as it may be further developed through such communication.

A simple example of economic agency takes the form of mediation. When there is a misunderstanding between two of my friends, I may facilitate the communication of concerns between them. The result is an

extended path of interaction, where one person's concern may be bridged over to another, becoming more vivid and more conceivably tractable than it would have been without mediation. Suppose Exaspera has failed to engage the attention of Oblivia, and their communication has become polarized and bitter. Her concern may gain more leverage value if I can both interpret it well (perhaps in light of my own perspective on the background conditions of the misunderstanding), and then translate it well (perhaps recognizing and fielding gestures of reactance). The concern may thus be transformed into one that *appeals* to her responsive agency, not just as an unwelcome plea, but as an occasion for self-cultivation. Of course, it is not the cause—not by a long shot—that all of the concerns we handle can achieve resolution through our action or mediation. Yet to take on a moral concern is to take on something that might, in the right circumstances, demand to be shared or passed along.

Of course a moral concern is more socially elastic and fragile than typical material goods; a thread of concern might evaporate altogether, or it might expand its social presence, coming to occupy all of a group's attention for a while. But concern usually does not simply spread—for each person's capacity for concern (unlike for beliefs or desires) is stubbornly finite. So concern is often effectively *open to exchange*. It will tend to happen that as soon as I succeed in communicating a concern to others who can act better on it than I, the undiminished urgency of other concerns—ones to which I might now turn to do new interpretive and communicative work—means a change in the local dynamics of the field for me. If I am responsive to the field, I recognize that the old concern is no longer the most pressing. So, fluidly engaged agents often release some hold on a particular concern as it is taken up (well) by others (who are well placed to attend to it). Thus the communication of concern can illustrate the “handing-over” pattern of joint attention illustrated in chapter 4.

To inhabit a moral field economically means making good use of one's finite attention in order to prioritize concerns to reflect upon, act upon, and communicate to others. Critical competence, on an economic approach, is a function not simply of the correctness of the critic's beliefs, or of the persuasiveness of the critic's communications with arbitrarily chosen hearers, but of functioning as an effective “hub” of attention, making incoming and outgoing connections so as to facilitate a socially distributed process of problem solving.⁷ Critical moral agency is largely a matter of recognizing that distress in some place ought to be understood as a demand upon agency that sits in some other place—and that the social

distance between others is the occasion for interpretation and communication. Those moral philosophers who have recognized the centrality of moral address to our lives as moral agents have recognized the need for a certain kind of moral “exchange,” but they have effectively portrayed individuals as participants in an ideal marketplace of moral confrontation. Most moral address does not take the form of a direct confrontation between, as it were, plaintiff and accused. The mediation of concerns—the extension of threads of concern that may even be traced back and forth from us into the social and temporal distance—accounts for much of our traffic in moral concerns.

7.4 Positional Evaluation of Our Moral Concerns

Thinking in terms of an economy of moral concerns gives us one way to acknowledge our “thrown-ness” and lack of access to final and firm criteria for what is worthy of our concern, but without thereby suggesting that any pattern of handling moral concerns is as good as any other. Economists have long recognized that any “view from nowhere” criterion of value, such as the labor criterion emphasized by Marx, fails to offer a plausibly complete account of value. The economic world is a social one within which goods and services have only situated value; we participate in that world of value more or less well by cultivating, transporting, transforming, and exchanging the things with which we come into contact.

Amartya Sen’s economic work in response to famine⁸ may well serve as an illustration of both the economic model I intend and its more specific moral aspect. For Sen has devoted most of his work to highlighting what happens in the gap between material resources and the dire needs that could be met if only those resources could be made available—through transportation, transformation, communication, and exchange. Rather than search for factors that suddenly reduce the supply of food in a region, Sen’s analysis emphasizes the fact that in various notorious famines, masses of people facing starvation lacked effective entitlement⁹ to food that was, in a crude geographical sense, perfectly plentiful and available. With Sen’s analysis in mind, agencies can respond to famines not only with attempts to bolster food production and relief shipments, but also by recognizing the need to forge paths of access between hungry people and potentially available nutrition. Forging those paths may involve many kinds of effort: access to transportation (to move beyond zones of

scarcity), access to tools (for cultivation, preservation, and cooking), education and outreach (about how to claim entitlements effectively, or how to make good use of available foodstuff that is culturally unfamiliar), and changes in social and legal entitlements (a share of control in local land, or in the fruits of one's labor, etc.).

We might be tempted to think of Sen simply as an economic theorist—commenting, analyzing, and encouraging *others* to build, on the ground, the kinds of material and social-structural connections he envisions. With the Deweyan lens in mind, however, we see that Sen himself is part of the fray of economic activity, transforming the material world by changing how people recognize resources and needs in relation to one another. Furthermore, in this case, Sen's economic work is not just *analogous* to participation in an economy of moral concerns; it exemplifies morally critical agency at the same time, by calling broad attention to the fact that the distresses of starvation should be understood as moral demands upon all of us who can help to transform the economic conditions under which it occurs. Moral intervention, within an economic perspective, involves a geographically situated form of problem solving.

Economic understandings of value, unlike most philosophical accounts, make no pretense of transcending position. In bringing an economic attitude toward moral values, Amartya Sen insists that "positionality of moral valuation is perfectly consistent with objectivity of moral values." In other words, a rigorous approach to value does not require claiming that people in different positions ought to value the same things similarly:

Moral valuation can be position-relative in the same way as such statements as 'The sun is setting.' The truth of that statement varies with the position of the person, but it cannot vary from person to person among those standing in the same position.¹⁰

An economic understanding of moral concerns offers moral critics something like a *positional* (and time-sensitive) index of the value of a prospective concern relative to other potential concerns. Given one's horizons of communication and action, a concern tends to carry more weight according to one's situated opportunities to make a difference to it. Such opportunities will tend to increase according to one's social proximity either to distress or to the agency by which distresses might be resolved.

Ordinary economic agency is a matter of getting along, or making ends meet; an economic agent need not "know" the value of anything except in a local, comparative, and pragmatic sense. An economic agent may mediate and bridge resource-demand gaps without having any grasp of

where materials and resources originate, or what their final destination might be. One may assemble and transport circuit boards, for example, without understanding anything like where the raw materials came from or what might count as an “end” use to which those circuit boards are put. The moral critic may be similarly awash in a field of concerns, bridging gaps of communication this way and that without knowing from where and out of what experiences a concern has developed, or in whose hands a concern achieves some closure.

Still, competent economic agency is objective in a certain sense; agents know more or less well how to look for and interpret signal features of their surroundings. An economic mode of understanding need not involve expecting competent agents to act identically; there may be options with equal value, or value that is close enough not to reward the investment of attention needed to rank them in a more fine-grained fashion. What an economic mode of understanding must expect, however, is that responsiveness to relevant features of the terrain is, in theory, subject to a well-ordered ranking. Or, in terms Amartya Sen offers, it is to think of competent responsiveness as “author invariant;” position in the social field may matter, but who it is that occupies that position must not.

7.5 The Challenge of Ecology

The tension between the economic and ecological modes of understanding can be brought out in connection with the philosophical literature on moral perception and salience. These themes have been drawn out through work in care ethics, virtue ethics, and particularist ethics; but they have also been cast by a significant cadre of Kantians as important challenges for “judgment” in the specialized Kantian sense of recognizing how concepts of reason become manifest to us in our experience. Despite great differences in other theoretical priorities, all of these thinkers have turned their attention to the importance of a normatively laden “seeing-as” within the field of moral interactions. There are many variations on this theme, and each may involve insights that cannot be brought into focus here. But we can usefully contrast John McDowell’s early treatment of *univocally* action-guiding perception against Lawrence Blum’s emphasis on different varieties or aspects of moral perceptiveness. The ecological approach will be one that emphasizes the variability in Blum’s account, but makes it the basis for a more radical understanding of difference.

In “Virtue and Reason” McDowell argues that virtuous agents perceive their situations in ways that already integrate implications for appropriate

response.¹¹ "Occasion by occasion, one knows what to do, if one does, not by applying universal principles but by being a certain kind of person: one who sees situations in a certain distinctive way."¹² In "Moral Perception and Particularity," Blum argues that McDowell's belief in the unity of the virtues distracts him from people's tendency to be morally perceptive along some lines but not others.¹³ For example, Blum lists "temptations to compromise one's moral integrity, suffering, racism, dishonesty, violations of someone's rights"¹⁴ as matters to which different people might be differently attuned. Further, given some sensitivity to some particular one of these concerns, we may be differentially responsive to it depending on factors that we would explicitly deny to be relevant, such as *whose* suffering or *whose* integrity is at issue.

Although Blum insists that dimensions of moral perceptiveness *may* come apart in practice (indeed perhaps they *always* do in practice), he does not challenge the presumption that these sensibilities are, at least, all compatible in the sense of being potentially synthesized into one Gestalt moral scenario. Only on such an assumption would it make sense to retain the language of "accurate moral perception," as set off against "obstacles" to such perception. The ecological mode of understanding raises its challenge here: Is it possible to think of individuals' sensibilities—that is, their openness to moral concerns—as not only *incomplete* in various ways, but *divergent*?

In its broadest sense, the economic mode of understanding involves expecting that the total moral "force" of one's circumstance is "there" to be taken in and handled well according to one's capacity and social connections. A "positional objectivity" of the kind Sen describes, and Blum implicitly invokes, emphasizes the optimal responsiveness to the world surrounding the agent. It implicitly reduces an agent's identity to a point by focusing only on differences of location—different coordinates on the social-geographical terrain of resources and demands. What the agent must perceive with the right kind of practical attention is, as Blum says, "what an agent is faced with,"¹⁵ and this suggests something like Sen's notion of the *position* each person occupies. But in privileging the metaphor of position, we bracket the *internal* complexity or nature of the individual whose body inhabits a position, or we misleadingly cast people's bodies as things they encounter, as if contingently. Someone might be said to *have* such-and-such talents and capacities, to *face* such-and-such limitations, and so on. But the way in which one "has" talents is unlike the way in which one "has" an economic good. One's history, one's character, and one's body

are not themselves the resources mobilized to meet needs; these are aspects of the person who responds more or less well.

7.6 Embodiment, Creativity, and Identity

An ecological approach foregrounds qualitative variations in our handling of moral concerns, displacing one-size-fits-all questions of efficiency or accuracy.¹⁶ We can illuminate the contrast between economic and ecological modes of responsiveness not just by reference to Walker and Martin (see chapter 6), but also by considering two additional sources. First is Lorraine Code's conception of ecology, developed in the context of epistemology, which involves a conception of ecological agents that is equally relevant to the moral project here. Ecological agents, on her account, are characterized by "the burdens and blessings of place, identity, materiality, and history."¹⁷ Second is the social theory of Hans Joas, whose vital connection between embodiment and creativity resonates with ecological themes, despite not invoking the concept directly.¹⁸

We reflected, earlier, on the common Greek root "oikos" (household) from which emerge both "ecology" and "economy." Though these modes cannot be reduced to their etymology, the difference between "nomos" and "logos" is also suggestive. While *nomos* indicates a system of human conventions for holding, measuring, distributing, and exchanging things, *logos* suggests a different kind of law, order, or meaning—one that is not the product of human convention, and which thus is not *designed* to be manageable from an ordinary practical perspective.

Ecology begins with skepticism about the very idea of an optimal and "all things considered" response to one's surroundings. When we adopt an ecological stance, we see agents as taking up different concerns not simply because we are and have been in different *positions*—and not just because we have varying degrees of efficiency or competence—but also because we are embodied beings who differ, qualitatively, in other ways.

We might begin by contrasting a person with Trisomy-21 (Down syndrome) against a cognitively sophisticated autistic person. Both may well hear, attend to, and communicate moral concerns. Yet one is likely to be viscerally attentive to the gravity of emotions and to the dynamics of responsive gestures within an unfolding communicative encounter. The other, by contrast, struggles to simulate fluency in such interactions. Yet she may take up and sustain attention to moral concerns in very different modes of presentation—through pattern perception, formal reasoning, or

complex calculations of consequence, perhaps. While the sensibilities of some people are so strikingly divergent from most others that we notice their embodiment and mark them with medical diagnoses, there is no single profile of moral sensibility worthy of the shallow praise “Normal.”

On an ecological view, there is no complete variable encompassing “what a situation calls for” on the part of “someone” facing that situation; the world has its variegated and meaningful complexity precisely because the same situation calls forth very different responses on the part of different organisms.¹⁹ To gesture toward a norm on which *one* of these (or some unrealized single alternative) is optimal is to refuse to see that the field of life could not count as a field of life at all if it were a monoculture. The ecologist recognizes the qualitative richness of the biosphere in virtue of the interdependent and complementary patterns of activity that different organisms bring to every stretch of geographical terrain.

7.7 Bodily Difference: Dangerously Essentialist or Simply Essential?

Let us pause here for an objection. An economically oriented thinker can grant that economy and ecology are both valuable disciplines, but will not grant that they are alternative lenses on the same domain. A being is either *capable* of choosing between alternate patterns of response to the field, or it is not.²⁰ Ecology in the biological sense, after all, implies the presence of multiple kinds of organisms, and never an ability to choose *which* to be. Economy shows how awareness of one’s own and others’ options and constraints prompts better or worse choice among strategies of response; ecology illuminates the complementary “strategies” of beings who cannot, from any subjective standpoint, recognize them *as* strategies—for their patterns of response are not chosen as set against available alternatives, let alone with awareness of how others are likely to weigh *their* options. If the ecological differences between agents are clear differences in bodily kind—if ecology involves essential and enduring differences such as that between a bumblebee and a salamander—then no organism faces a situation in which multiple patterns of perception might be appropriate to it. Although smart bumblebees could face strategic choices about their flight routes, they do not face the question whether to swim instead. Economy investigates how activity unfolds among social beings who must be conceived as choosers who recognize one another as such; ecology investigates the interaction of beings who need not be conceived as choosers, let alone as capable of recognizing other beings as choosers.

Let us note two points, however, in defense of seeing these two modes of understanding as applicable to the same social field. Let us grant that most interspecies interactions are characterized *both* by divergence of responsive capacities *and* by mutual opacity, so that no participant in an interaction models or represents anything like how other participants understand their strategic options. It is likely, after all, that only a human being—indeed, a human who has matured a few years—is capable not only of keeping track of others' situations, but of doing so with careful attention to ways in which those others think, perceive, and respond differently from herself. So, there is little need for ecology—when it focuses on the nonhuman world and our interaction with nonhumans—to model all organisms as economic agents.

Nevertheless, divergence of capacities may not bring opacity with it; it may be possible for us to recognize one another's different sensibilities and capacities as such—to act with appreciation of *the gist of the difference*—without in fact being sensible to the *particulars* that are sensible to the other. A *purely* economic coordination would aim for an efficient network of connections bridging the resources and needs at each positional node, settling upon a pattern of work that is satisfactory enough all around. Yet we might also engage in a less uniform and public kind of coordination—one in which any participant may be recognized as qualitatively different from others in her abilities to perceive and choose in relevant ways.

To return to dramatically clear differences of sensibility: autism inhibits the capacity for affective recognition that allows most people to register one another's emotions in an instant. Individuals with high-functioning autism are keenly aware of this difference and can coordinate with others so as to handle and contribute to social tasks for which they would otherwise lack confidence or competence. Trisomy-21 affects certain cognitively complex tasks, but it does not prevent affected people from being highly attuned to their social environment and coordinating with people who can apparently handle cognitive tasks that they themselves cannot. Even for such bodily differences that are stubbornly “given,” we may cope with those differences through better or worse coordination. In a friendship between individuals, one with autism and the other with Trisomy-21, most concerns would not be equally salient to both. Yet they may each place some second-hand confidence in the importance of the other's concerns. Neither would be equipped to assess whether their coordination of sensibilities is *optimal*—because neither has a perfect appreciation of the details that are salient to the other.

Nevertheless, they may get the hang of handling their differences of sensibility well.

The second point is one I draw from Hans Joas. Embodied social beings may do something more complex than cope with their surrounding fields in ways determined by their given capacities. On Joas's view, as on Anthony Giddens's,²¹ differentiation can emerge and develop over time—not only on an evolutionary timescale, but also on the timescale of human social interaction. When we devote our attention and action to one concern rather than another, we do not just change the world in one direction rather than another; we change ourselves—ever so slightly, but with great cumulative impact. Though we might imagine a person's situation at one moment to be like that of Buridan's Ass—equipoised between equally compelling alternatives—each movement of attention and action changes what becomes salient to her at the next moment. This is not just because our eyes and ears and nose are now pointed one way rather than another, but also because the social world is continually responding to the slightest signs of our responsiveness.

For example, we may imagine the details of a conversation between someone who bears a hidden history of suffering and a new acquaintance. The hearer who does not purse her lips in appreciation of some provocative incidental detail may not draw her new friend out fully—and hence may not be entrusted with the bigger story that will change how the world looks *from there*. Having appreciated the force of such a story, the hearer is affected in more than one way. She now carries an awareness that will affect her in the future, and she may also become more attuned, consciously or unconsciously, to how vitally important the gestures of listening are. Even if her lip pursing was on that occasion little more than a chance gesture, she may find herself developing greater embodied receptivity within social communications.

As Joas remarks, "the body does not appear explicitly in most theories of action."²² And yet the possibility of "play" or of "entertaining" multiple responses to an environment depends upon having a body that is not rigidly set off against the world, but which "breathes"—not only in its vital exchange of gases with the atmosphere, but in its tentatively absorbing, identifying with, and then perhaps disidentifying with or rearranging ideas, projects, perceptions, and so forth. "Thus play, as the elemental form of human action, instills in human beings the ability to set goals in a creative way."²³ The body, in other words, ought not to be seen as the instrument by which we first gather the data for and then discharge our

plans, but rather as the very possibility of our having room to sit with multiple threads of possibility and sift through them.

7.8 Continuity and Synthesis?

If we are aware of a dynamic interaction between how things go *within* our bodies and what *can* be salient to us as we inhabit our surroundings, then our minor choices of self-cultivation have an exploratory character. For we do not fully understand in advance what is at stake when we begin to focus on some detail that others seem to overlook. While we may have an economically informed sense of *greater* sensibility, we may reasonably suspect that our perceptiveness must choose a direction for expansion, and not simply a generic kind of improvement.

By thinking in terms of an ecology of moral concerns, we invite ourselves and others not just to *have* bodily differences, but also to recognize how our different sensibilities may evolve so as to occupy potentially unoccupied “niches” of moral sensibility. Examples include a Nietzschean sensitivity to the corrosive effects of resentment, Claudia Card’s and Lisa Tessman’s sensitivity to the unique moral challenges that accompany the experience of oppression,²⁴ Milgram and Zimbardo’s sensitivity to authority’s effect on conscience,²⁵ and so forth. Indeed, innovations in moral theory would not be conceivable if it were not possible for a person to carry the weight of ambient moral concerns in a novel way. Moral theorists do not just reflect or assess the field of concerns they inhabit; they shape it by introducing new patterns of sensibility.

The concerns we develop in virtue of embracing and developing our subtly distinctive perceptions may be the products of different sensibilities. Yet if they are concerns that we *cannot* get across to others—not even to an attentive translator—then not only has the moral innovator failed to inhabit an economic field of concerns; such a radical critic even fails to contribute to an ecology of moral concerns. For an ecology of moral concerns is not a field of incommensurable values, but one in which concerns that are *cultivated* in different embodied niches still have some chance to be taken up by others whose agency is thereby illuminated by them. Standpoint epistemologists are persuasive in arguing that certain kinds of moral realizations tend to emerge from the perspective of socially disempowered vantage points, for example. Yet the value of such standpoints depends crucially on the concerns of the “margin” *not* remaining incomprehensible to those whose presuppositions are being challenged. What is salient to a

person must not be something entirely determined by *either* our bodies *or* our positioning within a network of social relations; our sensitivities must themselves be dynamically reshaped as we respond to ambient concerns.

For now, let us recognize that economic and ecological modes of understanding present us with an impossible choice if we were forced to choose decisively between them. What the economic mode of understanding leaves out is qualitative development, surprisingly novel perspectives, and appreciation of differences that cannot be traced back to other factors on the same field of explanation. The ecological lens has its weaknesses as well, however, if it weakens the sense in which the sharing and uptake of moral concerns is something we can expect and demand of each other. To engage in moral address is to insist that a concern be taken up by a hearer. If we inhabit the same social field of concerns, it must remain possible to present our concerns as *commanding* attention as much as inviting response from all and only those who are inclined to appreciate it.

The fragility of our ecology of moral concerns itself gives rise to needs. When someone is caught at the intersection of radically divergent and poorly communicating moral sensibilities, this predicament may be transformed from an abject tragic situation into an occasion for responsive agency. Good moral critics can be especially sensitive to the ways in which concerns may become stuck in ecological niches, lost in translation, or systematically misunderstood. There may be no optimal way to be sensitive to such problems, yet we clearly can become more alive to them through practice, reflection, and receptivity to unconventional concerns.

An ecosystem of concerns will not be tidy. We may find it appropriate that concerns circulate differently through different social connections. For one thing, as we argued in chapter 6, there is no such thing as a perfectly public space in which to publish concerns in a lingua franca; so the salience of different concerns to differently situated people is inevitable. But it is also desirable that people in the same social neighborhood remain somewhat differently attuned to moral concerns. This is not so much because, as liberals say, we must facilitate debate and choice in the marketplace of ideas—but rather because moral concerns may be interdependent in ways we cannot simply second guess, much as we should not hastily manipulate ecosystems so as to remove apparently inconvenient species.

We should doubt, meanwhile, that any ecology has found a recipe for stability or equilibrium. As Lorraine Code remarks, “ecosystems—both metaphorical and literal—are as cruel as they are kind, as unpredictable and overwhelming as they are orderly and nurturant.”²⁶ An ecologically

embedded agent is precariously poised between happily *occupying* her niche, and being anxiously aware of its limitations. The stability of her ecological neighborhood is a fragile matter to which no one is reliably attuned. When she does perceive signs of trouble for the larger system, she must conceive that concern as an impersonal demand upon the agency of anyone so positioned as to recognize the problem.

Chapter 8 will ask about the skills of moral criticism against this terrain of social interaction, one on which we are neither interchangeable vessels of moral competence nor autonomous moral agents free from the demands of the social field around us.

8 Critical Engagement with Virtue Ethics: An Unconventional Fit

This last substantive chapter takes up the question whether, how, and with what complications we might appeal to virtue ethics in illuminating critical engagement. Virtue ethics is often cited as a third major moral framework worth setting in contrast to consequentialist and deontological theories. I argued in chapter 1 that the philosophical obstacles to thinking clearly about higher-order responsiveness would require arguments and concepts that virtue ethics itself could not supply. Yet the relation between virtue ethics and critical practice remains to be explored; it is both promising and unsettling.

Overview

The first section of this chapter sets out reasons for thinking of virtue ethics as a promising resource for discussions of critical communication. While neither consequentialist nor deontological theories tend to dwell centrally upon skillful activity or interpersonal coordination and interpretation, such themes do figure centrally in virtue ethics. Further points of promise in virtue ethics include its basically pluralist orientation to moral concerns, its interest in social and cultural contingency, and its temporally extended conception of agency according to which the significance of activity may be construed as relational and incompletely determinate at the moment of any concrete act.

After considering these generally positive omens, I proceed to nominate critical engagement as a specific virtue, sketching its profile in the manner suggested by Christine Swanton. The discussion of the second section highlights how this virtue might be compared and contrasted against familiar ones such as courage, patience, generosity, and so on.

Yet there are several interrelated reasons to be wary of simply seeking to make a comfortable “home” for critical engagement within the generously rambling mansion that virtue ethicists have built. The third section

of this chapter considers recurring themes in virtue ethics that should raise concerns in the context of critical practice. These include gestures toward portraying individual perception and expertise as inscrutable; the idealization of fixity, whether of individual character or of tradition; and an interest in conceptualizing singularly optimal exemplars of flourishing and virtue. If critical engagement is a virtue, it is one that requires a shift in the center of gravity of virtue ethics itself—a shift away from ideal individual traits and exemplars and toward open-ended and adaptive practices that are realized at both individual and social levels of complexity.

An Aside about Competing Moral Theories

My interest, in this concluding chapter, is not to take sides in an existing dispute over which potentially systematic philosophical approach—consequentialist, deontological, virtue-ethical, or care-ethical—best grounds moral life or explains moral intuitions at a wholesale level. On the contrary, I am skeptical about such priority debates as well as the neatness with which theoretical options are individuated and juxtaposed as competitors. The fact that moral concerns take a wide variety of forms leads me toward a nonfoundationalist understanding of morality. There is no a priori pattern into which we should hope to fit the vast array of moral concerns that might be raised about what goes on.

Competition among moral theories tends to take the form of attempts to show that one systematic theory can “swallow whole” all that is worthwhile about its alternatives. For example, both systematic modern theory types include some acknowledgment of virtue, but only by assigning indirect value to those character traits and habitual motives that promote or express theoretically primary values (consequences or principles). Proponents of virtue ethics insist that something vital is lost in any assimilation of virtue to other theoretical priorities. Some virtue ethicists, in turn, have ambitiously sought to show that virtue can lead us to perfectly adequate accounts of anything that matters—or anything that *should* matter—to consequentialist and deontological ethicists.

While it makes sense to become skilled at seeing how concerns articulated in one theory might be translated into the terms of another theory, we should be wary of any aspiration, on the part of any one moral theory, to swallow all its rivals. Bernard Williams nudges us in the right direction with his oft-quoted challenge: “If there is such a thing as the truth about the subject matter of ethics . . . why should it be conceptually simple, using only one or two ethical concepts, such as *duty* or *good state of affairs*, rather than many?”¹ Alas, we should doubt that a conceptual focus on *traits of*

character fares better than the others at grounding the whole of moral philosophy. Ultimately, the virtue ethics that I would find most promising is one that takes a broader focus on excellences of practice rather than traits of character. Even a practice-oriented virtue ethics, however, should not embrace the agenda of explaining other concerns away.

In affirming Williams's skepticism about the sufficiency of any one theory, meanwhile, I do not mean to embrace the attitude suggested by "anti-theory" either. Moral theorizing both expresses and answers to an important need—that of organizing our understanding of a range of concerns. The bottomless task of writing, reading, challenging, refining, and applying moral theories informs the moral perception of those who do it, and ripples more or less subtly through wider social and cultural populations. Moral theorizing is a particularly broad genre of critical practice, and critical practice at any given time cannot pretend to stand free of the conceptual scaffolding built up through both ordinary and theoretical uses of language.

If pressed to name a single systematic theoretical stance best suited to accommodate the practice of communicating moral concern, I might appeal to the philosophical tradition of pragmatism. But that is to say that I recognize no foundational concept *deeper* than practices—not consequences, not reason or intention or will, and not qualities of individual character. Shall we say, then, that "practice is primary"? I am happy to say so—and yet when we talk about practices, we get much of our grip on them by means of all these other conceptual handles—and each one is worthy of theoretical development. So, the theoretical stance I favor steps back from certain common conceits of moral theory building without denigrating the work itself. My interest, here, is simply to put my reflections about critical practice into conversation with some existing philosophical resources, noting how all parties to the conversation might benefit from the encounter.

8.1 Promising Aspects of Virtue Ethics

Embracing the Plurality of Moral Concerns

Virtue ethics embraces pluralism more than other systematic ethical approaches.² That there are many moral virtues, and that they are qualitatively distinct, is a natural default assumption until and unless the plurality can be shown, by philosophical argument, to be a mere illusion. Such an argument for the unity of virtue does appear in the broadly Socratic, Platonic, and Stoic tradition. Even Aristotle embraces the position, though

much of his actual discussion might suggest otherwise. Nevertheless, even these thinkers admit that our conceptual *handles* on virtue—at least as long as our awareness falls short of a divine or sage-like perfection—are plural. Furthermore, versions of the unity of virtue argument generally establish something quite short of unity (such as interdependence) *except* when they appeal to some other concept, such as reason, to offer a systematic way of harnessing apparently plural virtues to the same overarching moral end. Stoic arguments, for example, boil virtue down fairly neatly to acting in accord with reason.

To think of any other concept as offering a criterion of virtue, however, is to assign to virtue a subordinate role within moral theory. To give what Julia Driver calls a “virtue theory” is—according to thoroughly virtue-oriented thinkers such as Christine Swanton—doing something other than “virtue ethics” proper.³ The plurality of the virtues themselves is honored in the self-conscious pluralism throughout Swanton’s description of virtue ethics, which will serve as a reference point for much of my discussion. Virtue ethics, unlike more reductive approaches to right action, can spur us to appreciate that moral concerns in general (not just concerns about virtue) are *perennially plural* and heterogeneous.

Nor does any enumeration of virtues lend itself to a structural rubric that guarantees completeness. Aristotle, for example, does not attempt to lay his virtues out in the fashion, say, of Kant’s matrix of the twelve concepts of pure understanding. And although Aristotle issues a promissory note when he raises the question of how many virtues there are, there seems not to be any clear answer in the offing.⁴ When we speak of plurality rather than a logically exhaustive enumeration, we implicitly resist the pull to systematicity and completeness. If virtues are plural in this sense, we should not be surprised, when we look from unfamiliar angles, to discern the profiles of previously neglected virtues. Is there any limit to the number of virtues we might unearth if we continue to dig beneath our feet? Recent published work in ethics announces an apparent menagerie of newly articulated virtues—civility, reflection, trustworthiness, reverence, and so on.⁵

The concerns of virtue ethics are like the multiple overlapping aspects of health; indeed, virtue may be conceived as either an analog or an extension of health. And aspects of health resist systematization. While we can be fairly certain by now that there is no location on the human body that has not been mapped into anatomy textbooks, we can never be certain that we have a comprehensive understanding of the *processes* by which health is maintained, for these are overlapping and distributed phenom-

ena. Just as the notion of an “immune system” was foreign to the early grave-digging pioneers of systematic anatomy, we should not be surprised if medical, biological, and psychological inquiry offers us new ways to recognize integrated processes at work alongside familiar ones.

The pluralistic stance of virtue ethics, despite having ancient origins, holds up particularly well in the light of a post-Darwinian understanding of living processes. The paradigmatic moral agents are human beings, and if other beings participate in moral life, they too must approach it as complex organisms with a complex set of interacting adaptive capacities. If evolved organisms live well only by managing a fragile equilibrium of environmentally sensitive responses and adaptations, then we should expect moral life, too, to be subject to the constant refinement and integration of diverse parallel processes. The morally important aspects of a person’s practical activity cannot be reduced to one demand—say, the consistency of will, or the causal contribution our activity makes to the summed value of subjective experiences. Guarding against hypocrisy in our intentions does matter, as does sensitivity to how others experience the world. Moral competence means becoming adept at these things, and others, without allowing any systematic concern to trump all others.

Some critics have taken virtue ethicists to be offering a single trumping concern in a new form: the quality of one’s character. Yet even a systematic virtue ethics can resist suggesting that character serves as a systematic and unifying concern. For one thing, it is clear that the virtuous person need not *attend* to his own character as the primary focal point of moral concern. The virtuous person’s attention focuses on the particular concerns that distinguish various morally significant aspects of the world.⁶ Furthermore, as I shall argue later, virtue ethics need not even think of the quality of individuals’ character as the only *criterion* of moral value. Virtues themselves might be understood broadly—as excellences of practice—so as to allow that virtues may take shape at the level of relationships, institutions, and other interactive formations. This broad and unorthodox extension of the concept of virtue will be further explored later in this chapter.

Skill, Practice, and Active Perception

Human agency is animated by deliberate decisions, but not saturated by them. Through the intervals that separate our deliberate decisions we are not simply adrift; we are following through or pausing, taking stock, scanning the horizon, enjoying and suffering, resting, playing, reflecting, steeling ourselves or opening to the next moment. Moral theories that prioritize

decisions tend to subordinate the importance of these other phases of experience. Grasping decision as the crux of moral agency, they can easily become puzzled over matters such as how much to hold people accountable for omissions and habitual activity—given that these cannot always be traced to any deliberation or specific moment of choice. Virtue ethics, by contrast, embraces human activity as a continuous current. Moral life, through a virtue-ethical lens, is no more reducible to a set of deliberate choices than is musical activity.

Further, we should not simply say that decision making is *among* the things moral agents do well, and that additional kinds of activity *also* matter. Rather, good decision making cannot be separated out except by artificial analysis. Given any deliberate decision that might seem worthy of moral endorsement, virtue ethicists remain sensitive to ways of enacting that decision that would undermine its rightness. As much as it is right to offer condolences, the value is lost if one's tone sounds sarcastic or insincere. As much as it might be right to reprimand a toddler who has struck another, the value of the action is lost if one's gestures fail to draw attention to the cause for one's sternness. These are not simply *reasons* or *motives* that betray a decision's flawed origins in the will. Nor is the problem simply about factors that undermine the presumptively beneficial consequences of an action; the difference lies in the embodied movements that imbue an action with significance for others. Further, it is not simply that moral agency divides into a decision-making phase followed by skilled follow-through. Often, knowledge of the nature and limits of one's own skills integrally shapes the content of moral deliberation—as when, for example, we must decide whether to step into a political role, whether to undertake an obligation of care, or whether to agree to complete a difficult task under a firm deadline.

The intuition that deliberate choice has a pivotal role in moral life, however, might be rehabilitated in the context of critical engagement. Regardless of how much or how little someone's activity has been *hitherto* shaped by deliberation, the demand that she attend and respond to a moral concern is a demand for a relatively deliberate kind of intervention in the stream of ongoing activity. In this way, critical engagement is distinct from forms of training or conditioning that do not require deliberate attention on the part of a learner. What we could call *mere* training can bypass learners' awareness of the very fact that their activity is being reshaped—let alone how and why. Criticism—including the internalized process of self-scrutiny—introduces the especially deliberate element in moral agency. (This point about criticism holds by analogy, too, with other forms of

engaged activity. Musicians are engaged in much more than decision making, but habitually shaped performance may reach a plateau, or impasse of improvement, until and unless the performer becomes receptive to criticism and capable of conscious intervention in any or all of the phases of her activity: perceptions, feelings, and patterns of attention.)

While Aristotle and other virtue ethicists have emphasized that only voluntary action is subject to moral evaluation, it is clear from their focus on extended projects—extended even to encompass an entire life or tradition—that the emphasis on the voluntary is not meant to isolate deliberate decisions as individual units of scrutiny. When some bodily movements resist voluntary guidance—say, sneezing and coughing, shifting or speaking while we sleep, experiencing seizures and reflexes—then their occurrence or lack thereof does not reflect on our virtue. Yet the vast remaining flow of our lives is the stuff of moral interest—including the many ways, besides decision making, that we direct our attention. Virtue ethics, in recognizing all this, provides the best existing springboard for thinking in greater detail about the details of moral criticism as a practice and how it fits within the rest of our moral lives.

Have Virtue Ethicists Already Reflected on Critical Agency?

Virtue in the activities of critical engagement does not correspond well to any virtue actually named in either Western or Chinese discourse in virtue ethics. Thus an account of this virtue must in certain respects start from scratch. Of course, a philosopher's failure to articulate such a virtue does not by itself prove any lack of concern with the very matters at stake in it. It is possible, for example, that whatever Aristotle would say about critical engagement—if he could have been asked—turns up in the discussion of other particular virtues, such as anger. Alternately, his implicit answers might be built into structural features of his general account of ethics, such as the ways in which he conceives the other-regarding aspect of virtues, or the role of friendship. Each of these hopes bears some fruit, or at least some promising buds.

Considering virtue-ethical thinkers in a broad and global way, we will find evidence that something like critical engagement has been central to some Eastern strands of ethical reflection. It is evident that both Confucius and Gautama (the Buddha) attended carefully to various demands of critical engagement despite not providing a philosophically articulated analysis or survey of virtues. Confucian practices of criticism, insofar as they are revealed through his followers' aphorisms and anecdotes, clearly embed a greater interest in communication, interdependence, and context than

what Aristotle's account offers, though general claims about critical practice are hard to distill.

At any rate, it would strain credibility to announce a new and undiscovered virtue—one that is vital to moral life and yet hitherto entirely unrecognized. The question, then, is which elements of critical engagement have been helpfully framed or foreshadowed by virtue ethicists, and what more might be gained by getting all of these elements into view at once.

8.2 The Profile of Critical Engagement as a Virtue

Is there a moral virtue corresponding to excellence in responsive engagement—an excellence that I have previously described by reference to practices of communicating moral concern? I will frame the positive proposal of this chapter—that critical engagement should be counted as a virtue—with Christine Swanton's wide and pluralistic conception of virtues. Though I will ultimately suggest some amendments and reservations, her account of virtue offers us a systematic and helpful starting point. Swanton's specification of what a virtue is can serve as a template for thinking through the many parameters that both distinguish virtues from one another and distinguish multiple accounts of the same virtue. A virtue, on her account, fits the following definition:

A good quality of character, more specifically a disposition to respond to, or acknowledge, items within its field or fields in an excellent or good enough way.⁷

I will speak of the “virtue of critical engagement” to indicate a person's higher-order responsiveness in the context of encounters between and among moral agents as such. Many of its features can be illuminated by reflecting on questions and distinctions within Swanton's account.

Field or Sphere: What Is this Virtue about?

Let us turn to Swanton's suggestion that virtues involve responsiveness to what she calls “items in its field.” Like Martha Nussbaum, Swanton admires Aristotle for reasons other than his particular catalogue of the virtues; his list is at best incomplete and at worst unsound. Rather, Swanton embraces Aristotle's interest in articulating a range of important and challenging moral domains, each of which serves as a focal point for reflection on and refinement of our habits and choices. Where Swanton prioritizes *fields*, Nussbaum makes the same point in terms of *spheres*: “What [Aristotle] does, in each [virtue's] case, is to isolate a sphere of human experience that

figures in more or less any human life, and in which more or less any human being will have to make *some* choices rather than others, and act in *some* way rather than some other.⁸ Because I have staked out the metaphor of “fields” in discussing our social relations, I will sidestep Swanton’s preferred metaphor in favor of Nussbaum’s “spheres,” even while following through on Swanton’s basic template for specifying a virtue.

This book, then, has been concerned with the activity I have described as the communication of moral concern. I have claimed that such communication represents the morally salient *point* of critical engagement, though we should name the virtue in a way that does not beg the question about whether that argument is correct. Philosophers along the spectrum of attitudes toward criticism—from regulation-emphasizing consequentialists through expression-emphasizing neo-Kantians—recognize that we experience and respond to critical impulses in ourselves and others. That our responses to such situations *matter*, and that they matter in a *morally* vital way, has been crucial to the argument of this book. How we handle these is as crucial to our moral lives as how we handle matters such as appetite, fear, material resources, and so forth. Thus, this sphere is ripe for consideration under the umbrella of virtue ethics.

The sphere of this virtue—what Swanton calls its “field”—is our *social* engagement with moral concerns. It might be tempting, and it would certainly be simpler, to say that we exercise virtue in being sufficiently responsive to moral concerns themselves; and I have sometimes alluded to our “handling” of moral concerns in summarizing what is at stake in critical engagement. When we think of “moral concerns” as the items to which we respond, however, our net is suddenly cast over the whole of ethics. *All* moral agency is responsiveness to moral concerns. Thus, if there is a meaningfully distinct virtue of critical engagement, we should think of it as a refined responsiveness to occasions in which we might participate in the communication of moral concern.

We should recognize here that critical engagement is systematically *interdependent* with other virtues in at least one straightforward way. If I have a typically virtue-ethical moral concern—the call for courage, say, or the need for benevolence, or the demands of what Confucius calls *ren*—then taking that concern seriously in my practical life cannot mean being satisfied merely to exhibit it in my own individual conduct. Part of acting on a concern is acting *communicatively* on a concern. And yet many discussions of virtue proceed as if one could illustrate courage in an entirely individual fashion without giving any regard to whether others are responsive to its demands. On the contrary, if a virtue is a moral virtue, we should

insist upon its including a communicative dimension. I need not take the *impersonally managerial* view on which taking courage seriously means causally maximizing the courageous activity in the world, as if this task could be approached as a cool calculative orchestration of human actions. Yet I also cannot take the fully *morally solipsistic* view on which taking courage seriously hangs loose from communicating the distinctive kind of concern associated with courage.

Meanwhile, our effectiveness in communicating moral concern is not independent of our ability to convert our concern into noncommunicative practice. While this book is not centrally concerned with noncommunicative practice (what I have termed “conduct”), it is vital to acknowledge that there is no clear line between acting on a concern in a communicative way and acting on a concern in a noncommunicative way. For there is a vast gray area in which our conduct serves to *signal* our concerns within social interaction. In carefully arguing that expressivism is a problematic paradigm of critical engagement, I do not mean to deny the importance of the many ways in which our concerns are expressed in action; I mean rather to point out that the concept of expression is neither identical to communication, nor a simple additive ingredient of it. Thus, the two concepts should not be allowed to stand in for one another. Still, communication and expression both function well, when they do, by inviting joint attention. And there are limits to how well I can engage others’ attention to something that I fail to prioritize within my own conduct.

It is right to note that one way of taking courage seriously (for example) is communicating one’s recognition of occasions for it—and of what value-laden features of those occasions should be salient. When Plato has Socrates suggest in the *Meno* that the virtue of a hero like Themistocles fell short insofar as he could not communicate it to others,⁹ we need not read the argument as dramatically ironic. Indeed, the Confucian tradition in ethics goes further, imagining that complete virtue almost mystically draws others into harmony—as if mere presence of a true sage would undermine the need for ordinary critical confrontations. While the notion of instantly magnetic virtue has only rhetorical and mythological value, both ancient traditions are right to insist that anyone who takes a moral concern seriously—be it Kantian respect, Christian virtue, Confucian *ren*, or Buddhist compassion—cannot but be interested in bringing it to the attention of others.

Nevertheless, the virtue of critical engagement should not simply be counted as an artificial clustering of the communicative facets of *other* virtues (or of whatever concerns figure centrally in a systematic moral

theory). To recognize that critical responsiveness has its own profile, the following observation should suffice. At the initial moment when our attention is called to an incoming moral concern, we do not yet know its nature. While taking congruent concerns seriously may be necessary to the exercise of this or that moral virtue, our receptivity to concerns related to courage, for example, cannot helpfully be reduced to the first stage of courageous responsiveness, since the relevance of courage may emerge only as we attend to a concern over time. The process of hearing a new concern entails some uncertainty and some translational flexibility in discerning exactly what this concern might imply for our own attention, conduct, and communication.

Why a Single Sphere for Incoming and Outgoing Concerns?

One might doubt that the communication of moral concerns should count as a *single* sphere of morally vital activity. Why not recognize two separate kinds of activities or dispositions—one of *addressing others* with concerns, and another of *responding* with appropriate receptivity when others bring a concern to our attention? From an Aristotelian perspective, surely the first of these activities seems more central to a life of virtue; it articulates the expectation that someone with wisdom in moral matters would participate fully in the moral education of others. Meanwhile, the other “face” of communication—receptivity to incoming moral concerns—seems to be dismissed by Aristotle as irrelevant to the adult life of a person who has already been educated in virtue. While a virtuous person might welcome factual information relevant to practical reasoning, she would not stand in need of having moral concerns *as such* brought to her attention. At least, one might read Aristotle’s discussion of shame—a “quasi-virtue”—as indicating developmental *closure* on the need to be called to account by others.

Aristotle’s anger and shame, together, might seem to canvass roughly the territory of critical engagement. In fact, his own discussions of both of these emotions would need radical remodeling before they could make room for robust handling of moral concerns.¹⁰ Nevertheless, we could try setting Aristotle’s account aside in favor of improved accounts of parallel virtues in the sphere of anger (on one hand) and in the sphere of shame or guilt (on the other).

There are deeper reasons, though, not to split the virtue of critical engagement into two virtues—one for proper receptivity and another for effectively engaging others’ moral attention. As chapters 5 through 7 have shown, each thread of moral concern emerges and *circulates* through social, historical, and cultural contexts. Furthermore, an individual’s handling of

a concern is not neatly separable into two phases. Rather, there is an arc of involvement, including receptivity, recognition, interpretation, and translation of incoming concerns according to our situated perspectives; attentive maintenance and transformation of moral concerns; and ability to draw appropriate others into recognizing, interpreting, and further translating those same concerns. This pattern of continuity is lost when we think of criticism as isolated corrections or claims, ones for which we are on any occasion either the receiver or the passer. The moral concerns with which I address someone are largely those I have *taken up* from others, but I take it up and carry it well partly by *anticipating* how I might best pass it along to others.

I shall also argue, shortly, that the intake and passing along of concerns may be equally affected by similar underlying patterns of style. The two patterns I will describe as vices—excessively expressivist and regulative stances—have interrelated implications for both the initiation and reception phases of communication. It is of course a broadly empirical question whether excellence in hearing incoming moral concerns would tend to go hand in hand with excellence in drawing others' attention to moral concerns. I find it plausible to expect considerable correlation there.

Target: What Is the Aim of This Virtue

The argument of chapter 3 directly addresses Swanton's question as to the *target* of this virtue. The target of critical engagement is the communication of moral concern: the problem that has animated one person's concern is made to become the focal point of perceptual and practical attention for another. Because a moral concern marks the *need* for attention rather than the kind of claim that might be distilled *through* conclusive reflection on a problem, it is neither a backward-looking representation nor a forward-looking prescription. In attending to the very same problem, different individuals appropriately focus on different details, offering different descriptions of both what they perceive and what responses they might set in motion.

Hence the communication of concern is a difficult target. Indeed, Swanton's very metaphor of a "target" may distract us from the temporally extended coordination required for speaker and hearer to recognize that what a speaker has absorbed as signs of trouble *has* indeed been taken up and interpreted in ways that can meaningfully inform how hearers proceed.

As Swanton, Aristotle, and others insist, it still may sometimes happen that a person "hits the target" of a virtue through something like coincidence or by clumsy and blunt efforts. On Swanton's account, a virtuous

person hits the target reliably because she is in “the state of virtue.” But the invocation of a “state” may be misleading; virtuous activity, compared to the efforts of the lucky beginner, is relatively continuous. A person who is learning to swing a bat is surprised and delighted to find out that she has made contact with the ball. The more skillfully one swings a bat, the more continually one’s execution involves adjusting readily for various potentially shifting factors: the wind, the spin on the ball, the variable signs of fatigue and tremor in one’s muscles. If a virtuous person’s activity reliably hits the target, it is not like the way in which a finely crafted watch reliably keeps ticking. In the case of virtue, activity is constantly and effortlessly recalibrated in accord with perception, while perception itself is active and coordinated in accord with the possibilities and demands of action.

While it is an exaggeration to assume that all virtuous activity is effortless, we come close to effortlessness in an activity insofar as we discover something like a flow of continual readjustment. The more continual our readjustment, the less we are struck by the jarring experiences of relative resistance and effort, and the less likely we are to experience our actions as clearly distinct from their outcome or consequence.

Nevertheless, different occasions for critical engagement do not all require the same level of attentive and continuous vigilance. Some situations require finely tuned and careful engagement, where others require little more than offhanded actions. Between good friends, for example, it is often sufficient for one to lob an expressive gesture in the other’s direction, trusting that a background of familiarity and shared understanding will facilitate the right interpretation. With a student or employee, it is sometimes sufficient for one person to issue advice or prescription and for another to follow—people in such roles may learn well by subordinating some of their autonomy while tuning in, over time, to the factors that make such advice reasonable.

The important variable, of course, is not just whether a given communicative situation is structured by a relationship such as friendship or supervision. Responsiveness to occasions for critical engagement involves being sensitive to situational background factors that affect how much communication we can hope for, and how it might best be initiated. In some familiar situations, moral concern can be adequately communicated through a single speech act and its responsive uptake.

In other words, this book’s argument against taking prescription or expression as the *point* of moral criticism is not intended to rule these out as *ways* in which moral concerns may in fact be effectively communicated.

Nor of course, as was argued in chapter 3, is the argument intended to deny that we may shift our aim to the exercise of influence or the expression of attitude on occasions when the point of critical practice—communication of concern—cannot be realized.

Modes: Attitudes and Responses that Mark the Virtue

Swanton is right to argue that different virtues—each of which correlates with our response to distinctive items—call for different modes of responsiveness. In this way, Swanton makes room for many consequentialist concerns by arguing that some virtues—such as beneficence—call for *promoting* a good. When what a virtue requires is the promotion of a good, we must say the virtue is lacking when someone is inept at securing results. By contrast, a virtue such as reverence fits poorly with a focus on promotion; the responsiveness associated with reverence takes other forms entirely. The reverent person responds to appropriate items with something quite different from promotion—recognition, gestures of honor or deference, attention in the form of sustained respect.

The model of communication advanced in chapter 4 implies that critical engagement requires more than one mode of responsiveness. However, it would be misleading to appeal simply to a *constellation* of relevant modes of acknowledgment implicated in critical engagement. Rather, this virtue is marked by certain fluid transitions *between* modes. In relation to a given concern, the appropriate forms of response follow a continual arc of phases. Receptivity and attentive perception are demanded as a concern comes into awareness; interpretation and translation are required as we begin to take up a concern and orient ourselves to it; attention calling and advocacy are required when we recognize the concern as calling for others' involvement; and dialogical reinterpretation is required as we entrust a concern to others whose relation to the concern differs from our own.

Bases: What Aspect of the Items Grounds Our Response?

The basis of a virtue, on Swanton's account, is what it is *about* the relevant items (in the sphere or field of a virtue) that makes our response more or less finely appropriate. Her illustrative examples include value, status, and bonds. It is because something has value that it is worth promoting, because of its status that it is worth honoring, because of our bonds that love and nurturance are fitting.

Parallel to my argument that the primary *mode* of critical engagement is communication (rather than promoting or expressing or honoring), I argue that the *basis* of critical engagement, as a virtue, is one that does not

appear on Swanton's list. It is neither because of the truth of critical concerns that they must be communicated (for as concerns they are not claims subject to truth conditions), nor because of the net positive consequence of communicating them. Rather, it is directly in virtue of their *significance*. Their significance is a measure of their gravity or charge, and that significance is in turn relative to the embodied social location of a concern.

A concern is more meaningful the more it points to provocations that are hitherto unrecognized or forgotten within a given milieu; it is also more meaningful the more it appeals to the actual agency of potential hearers (including hearers of hearers, in dissipating circles of influence). Significance might be conceived as the product of a concern's nonredundancy and its relevance to agency. For if a concern is either already fully saturating the attention of one's audience *or* entirely without practical bearing for them as agents—even as translated and extended into the communicative future—then its significance, for the purposes of critical engagement, declines to the limit of nullity.

While value, in Swanton's sense, is a property had by an item, significance is different from value. For it clearly cannot be isolated from the web of interpretive relationships within which an item appears. A concern's significance is not an attribute that it has "at large" in the universe, but a relevance that it bears for those who are poised to play a role in its communication.

Threshold: An Optional Way of Framing a Virtue

Swanton's account urges us to think of virtues as threshold concepts, where the threshold in question is context sensitive. This is a point at which her trademark pluralism may fall somewhat short, however. For purposes of picking out admirable examples, we may indeed speak as if a quality were present in some and absent in others. Yet nothing about virtue demands that we conceive it relative to a threshold, and there are many situations in which we can do no better than to speak of a loose spectrum along which better and worse examples lie. While the English word "excellent" does not lend itself fully to discussion of degrees—one never speaks of someone being "a little bit excellent" (or indeed "a little bit virtuous")—this is surely more of a linguistic quirk than a theoretical insight. In invoking a threshold, Swanton is already gesturing toward a reality that admits of degrees; a threshold can only exist somewhere along a manifest continuum. With many virtues, including the virtue of critical engagement, we may speak comfortably of degrees without the need for articulating a threshold at all.

On the other hand, we may well expect that something like a threshold sometimes makes itself clear in practice. Supposing virtue is a matter of attunement, we can begin by acknowledging that *how well tuned* something happens to be, at any given moment, can only be a matter of degree. Nevertheless, the activity of fine-tuning is something that some people get the hang of, while others do not. If a violinist produces a sound that is out of tune more than a tiny bit, she is quite likely *either* to notice and correct it immediately—seamlessly and to within the margin of most people's perception of pitch difference—or to fail to notice altogether. It is difficult to imagine a musician who tunes attentively and meticulously—and yet consistently to a pitch that falls 10 MHz flat of her ensemble. The activity of tuning is effectively inseparable from really perceiving its target.

The talent of “locking in” with one’s pitch, including a constant recognition of how well one is in tune, may in practice be as straightforward as our ability to make eye contact. For in making eye contact, we experience a striking qualitative difference between *really* locking eyes and *not really* making eye contact. Though the angle of our eyes is a matter of continuous degree, eye contact, like musical tuning, is partly constituted by a kind of self-corrective monitoring. In that case, we might be tempted to say for a *different* reason that “getting it right” is *not* a threshold concept—this time because a continuum is not acknowledged at all. Yet this would also be a mistake. We can often tell when someone *gets the point* of eye contact despite having trouble with the skills of maintaining it. In this way we can speak of greater and lesser capacity for eye contact among infants, those recovering from eye surgery or suffering from weak ocular muscles, those affected by profound disturbances of thought or emotion, and so on. The process of self-corrective attunement is not absent, but it may be slow or jerky or approximate rather than apparently decisive in its initiation and continuous in its maintenance.

In this respect, naming and articulating a virtue can serve not just to describe moral phenomena, but to shape them as well. As Aristotle remarks, we are much more likely to hit a target if we have it clearly in view.¹¹ If we respond to others’ morally provocative actions with an unreflective combination of attitude expression and prescription, then we are not so likely to succeed at communicating concern in difficult cases. Likewise if we *hear* others’ moral address either as attitude expression or as prescriptive pressure, we are less likely to participate well in the communicative reception of moral concerns.

We might say, then, that something like a natural threshold may distinguish those whose critical engagement is undertaken with some interest

in the communication of moral concern. For our attention to that project—whether it is consciously articulated or not—is likely to make the most sustained and self-reinforcing difference to whether communication in fact occurs in hard cases.

Vices: Patterns of Failure in Critical Engagement

Vice does not appear explicitly among the parameters of Swanton's virtue ethics framework, but it's worth asking whether this concept of virtue's *contraries* can helpfully be brought to bear on critical engagement. Aristotle saw each virtue flanked by exactly two vices—one of excess and another of deficiency. Each virtue's very aim was defined dialectically as a "mean" between these vices. Surely this view betrays a naïve formalism; we can have no a priori confidence about the number of patterned ways people may have of "missing the mark" of a virtue. Further, the metaphor of the "mean" cannot be taken too seriously; the cowardly person does not approach courage by adding a bit of rashness, nor does the profligate giver approach proper generosity by moving toward stinginess.

The formulaic Aristotelian hypothesis would be that one may be inclined toward *too much* or toward *too little* critical engagement. Yet this would be too simple. Certainly some people's lives illustrate a pushy obsession with engaging in criticism. I think we shall find, however, that what is most problematic about such cases is not their *degree* of communicating moral concern, but their manner—some lack of fluency in both reception and initiation of critical encounters. And there are people we might be tempted to describe in terms of dismal failure to engage with critical concerns. Yet such would not be the best diagnosis in the familiar case of someone who seems closed to incoming concerns but who is still inclined to press outgoing demands for moral regard in certain narrow ways. Lacking an openness to moral communication altogether is more like a departure from the familiar social condition of human life, not a vice within the sphere of critical engagement.

Nevertheless, within the sphere of critical engagement, it still may be right to discern two alternate kinds of aim that may exert something like a gravitational pull on our habits. Within both moral theory and common discourse, as we found in chapter 3, we find some settled patterns of expressivist responsiveness on one hand and some settled patterns of prescriptive responsiveness on the other. And in accord with a more subtle understanding of vices and virtues, we should say that these are each qualitatively distinct from virtue, not simply aligned as the two opposite extremes of a linear continuum.

8.3 Engaging Critically with Virtue Ethics

From the vantage point of valuing the critical and communicative aspects of moral practice, at least three aspects of virtue ethics prompt reservations. One cluster of reservations focuses on the notion that virtuous people must be taken to possess an apparently inscrutable and epistemically opaque kind of inner expertise.

Another cluster begins with doubts about the value of fixity, stability, or givenness associated either with virtuous traits themselves, or with traditions within which ideals are embedded. A third revolves around whether and how a virtue-ethical ideal can be fully reconciled with real differences of embodiment and social location. Can we retain a healthy appreciation for our situated participation in social diversity while still invoking the figure of a singularly wise person in whom all virtues optimally coalesce? A final and related reservation about virtue ethics is its focus on individuals as the logical and natural locus of excellences. Could virtue ethics make room for excellences that take root not at the level of individual character, but in socially extended patterns of interaction?

In each of these three problem areas, there has been some work within virtue ethics that offers some kind of response, solution, or alternative approach. For each of the four general challenges, then, I will consider an existing virtue-ethical line of response, and then return to evaluate whether that response leaves a troubling remainder which might be deeply—if not essentially—embedded in virtue ethics as a paradigm.

The Apparent Inscrutability of Expertise

Virtue ethics rightly insists on the moral importance of temporally extended skills and other non-rule-bound aspects of agency. It has been vital for virtue ethics to emphasize aspects of our moral competence that lie beyond our explicit and articulate reasoning, yet a potential weakness emerges from certain ways of conceiving this terrain. For virtue ethics has sometimes won its subtlety and complexity by invoking something like inscrutable individual expertise. Once moral education is complete, the virtuous agent apparently “just gets it” about what needs doing, fluently navigating a stream of value-laden perceptions.

An influential account that prompts such worries is John McDowell’s essay, “Virtue and Reason.”¹² McDowell defends the Socratic view that virtue is knowledge—and that the virtuous person’s perception just *is* a perception of what is called for, and that nothing beyond such perception is required to explain the action undertaken for reasons of the kind embed-

ded in such perception. To have a refined moral sensitivity, on McDowell's view, is to experience the force of a situation's demand for some kind of response—its demand, for example, that we respond with kindness or anger, honesty or courage. To perceive in such a way, on his view, is to be moved; no further motivation is required. Hence, his position becomes "committed to denying that a virtuous person's perception of a situation can be precisely matched in someone who, in that situation, acts otherwise than virtuously."¹³

McDowell's target, on this account, is the assumption that action cannot be explained by any perception of *how the world is* until and unless a distinctly desire-like ingredient is added. Reasons for action, on McDowell's view, can take the form of what Ruth Millikan calls "pushmi-pullyu representations";¹⁴ they can harness action to ways of recognizing what is the case—as in "It's dinnertime" or "Shoes go on the mat." What virtuous people perceive includes demands on their own responsiveness, not just facts that might prove relevant to the pursuit of their desires. Moreover, McDowell insists, those demands do not lack in objectivity or cognitive content simply in virtue of having action-guiding force.

As an argument that virtuous perception can be both value laden and reason giving, his account succeeds. Unfortunately, the account also—despite his own protests—lends itself to conceiving each virtuous individual as a sort of walking yardstick of value, responsive to the deliverances of his or her own sensibility, and locked into a potentially inarticulate world of reasons. If reasons are tightly embedded in perceptions whose content can only be shared with others who share the same evaluative priorities, then moral disagreements necessarily involve talking past one another. Indeed, McDowell sketches just such a predicament: "Consider, for instance, a concept whose application gives rise to hard cases, in this sense: there are disagreements that resist resolution by argument, as to whether or not the concept applies. Convinced that one is in the right on a hard case, one will find oneself saying, as one's arguments tail off without securing assent, 'You simply aren't seeing it,' or 'But don't you see?'"¹⁵ On this view, what is salient to a virtuous person—the practically wise *phronimos* idealized by Aristotle—is necessarily *not* salient to anyone who would respond differently. Indeed, seeing a demand as salient means "seeing [it] as a reason for acting that *silences* all others."¹⁶ What is salient does not merely "upstage" other considerations that remain in view; what is salient "comes out" while the rest recedes entirely from consideration.

Can *nonvirtuous* persons ever perceive some aspect of a situation as a salient demand upon their actions? If so, then *nonvirtuous* people *also*

may take it that some one consideration silences others—but among the things silenced is the very consideration that the virtuous person embraces as salient. Assuming that neither person recognizes the other as more virtuous, it seems agents whose moral perceptions diverge must be locked into *not hearing* one another's reasons as such; exactly such nonhearing is exactly what “silencing” most directly connotes.

At least on first reading, McDowell's stance apparently threatens to make moral criticism a difficult enterprise indeed. Even for the sake of someone who admires her and seeks to emulate her virtue, the virtuous person can't be expected to give a satisfactory account of her reasons. But consider the even less enviable predicament of those who challenge the virtuous person's response to a situation. They might be told, quite sincerely, that the moral reasons in question, though quite clear to the agent herself, simply cannot be *made* clear to those who disagree, owing precisely to their lack of virtue. Should two individuals *disagree* over how to respond to a given case, and should both of them fancy themselves to be virtuous, the conversational impasse would surely be comical, tragic, or both.

The reservation we have here about McDowell's position is not the objection he anticipates—namely, that surely one's moral perception either ultimately admits of articulate justification through the application of clear criteria that will make sense to any and all questioners *or else* there is nothing objectively being perceived after all. McDowell can hold, consistently, that moral reasons may be both objective *and* resistant to formulaic or precise criteria; that view is a cornerstone of virtue-ethical thinking.

Rather, the concern is that he has implicitly presented patterns of non-communicative *conduct* as fully constitutive of the domain in which virtuous perception sparks our responsiveness to moral reasons. McDowell has not extended his account to show that the virtuous person's perception includes sensitivity to how to engage in communication. In particular, the fact that no *general* justification can be given for her response—a justification that places the situation and one's response within the bounds of articulate criteria—does not entail that one fails to find the common ground on which to discuss one's perceptions with this and that interlocutor. Communicative responses, like all other action for a virtue ethicist, must be contextual rather than wholesale.

But then, once communicative activity is integrated into the world of ongoing moral perception and action, there is no reason to restrict its role to that of justifying and answering to challenges. If communication is part of the terrain of action, we can expect some communicative interactions

to unfold *prior to* the crystallization of what is salient, prior to the “deliverances” of the otherwise inscrutable sensibility of the *phronimos*.

To make this point clearer, consider that perception at the bodily and sensory level is itself active. For example, one can often parse a complex scene *only* by doing more than just “taking it in” as a camera does. Good vision does not happen all at once, but rather follows up on each moment’s visual perception with the seeking out of adjusted perspectives. Good vision requires coordinated movements not only of the eye, but also of the head and torso. And in the absence of obstacles, one who *knows how to see* will spontaneously move through a space so as to compile a complex visual composite and to integrate vision with other senses.

Returning to moral perception, the analogous line of thought is this: perception of the social environment requires being responsive to what we learn through other people, including what they say. Just as with vision, there is no reason to think that the virtuous person “just gets” what is salient without interacting further in the social space being perceived—in other words, without eliciting further continuous rounds of perception beyond the sparse signs that impinge, unsolicited, on her senses.

In other words, *pace* McDowell’s sketch of what to say in “hard cases,” it should be unlikely that the virtuous person will be “convinced that one is in the right” *in advance of* communicative interaction. We can expect it to be rare that the virtuous person finds some consideration salient—in the sense of silencing other considerations—*despite* an encounter with disagreement. And when in spite of controversy she finds one consideration salient (in the robust sense McDowell has in mind), it is implausible that her verbal response will ever take the form, “You simply aren’t seeing it.” For that is surely not a generally virtuous response to disagreement.

Swanton’s Virtues of Practice: An Antidote to Inscrutability?

Virtue ethics has a reputation, as Christine Swanton notes, for a monological moral epistemology. Clearly, it is not at all McDowell’s intent to endorse such a view; he insists that it must be possible to criticize the ways in which we explain value-laden perceptions,¹⁷ and that matters of taste “should be capable of being argued about.”¹⁸ How such an argument can achieve more traction than the most arbitrary disputes of taste, however, remains unclear.

To correct for this tendency in virtue ethics and to help fill in “an adequate epistemology for virtue ethics,”¹⁹ Swanton draws attention to what she calls “the virtues of practice.” These are the virtues that are missing from the archetype of the inscrutably sensitive individual, or what she calls “the virtuous agent as oracle.”²⁰ Virtues of practice, Swanton

argues, are necessary because we never achieve complete and self-sufficient objectivity of perspective on right action. Virtues of practice revolve around responding well to the need for consultation and integration of multiple perspectives. So while it will still be true in a sense that a fully virtuous person “just gets it” about what needs to be done, part of what certain virtues require a person to recognize is when “what needs to be done” is inquiry and dialogue. It is not just the person who is “practicing to be perfect” who must check in with others along the way; even at the highest conceivable levels of human perfection, a virtuous person must attend to others’ perspectives.

Swanton names various sets of virtues demanded by the challenges of practice. She names virtues of focus (recognition that one has encountered a problem demanding coordination and integration of social demands and perspectives); virtues of analysis and creativity, and virtues of facilitating dialogue.²¹ All of these are required to help the virtuous person engage in “constraint integration”—the process of recognizing the factors of a problem as open to redescription and subtle modifications so as to preserve the point of each initial constraint even while rendering it flexible in the face of new difficulties. Indeed, the activity of “constraint integration” in Swanton’s work overlaps significantly with the activity that I have described as “translation of concerns” in chapter 5, and makes similar appeal to Dewey’s account of problematic situations.

In describing these virtues of practice, Swanton seems to be articulating something original in contrast to the tradition. Yet although the classic texts in Western virtue ethics do not dwell explicitly on these virtues of practice, the theme of *consultation* and constant self-improvement does play a considerable role in Confucian accounts of virtue. In endorsing Swanton’s interest in the virtues of practice, Stephen Angle notes that it is no paradox that *even* Confucius asks questions. Despite being recognized as an expert in ritual, he inquires “at every stage” when he visits a new shrine. This questioning signals not the limitation of his moral expertise, but its richest manifestation.²²

It may be objected that Confucius’s questions seem to serve as little more than a ritual gesture of recognition and deference—going through the motions of getting others to speak and hence to partake in something like an interactive call and response. Yet there is no room, on Confucius’s view, for empty ritual. The solicitation of input or information presumably *acquires* ritual significance precisely because it signals interest in others’ perspectives, and hence brings a dynamic kind of social permeability to Confucius’s way of proceeding. An inquiry serves to focus interpersonal

attention on matters at hand, to monitor for tensions or difficulties, and to add familiarity and spontaneity to otherwise impersonal-feeling interactions. Though a Confucian sage would hardly approach major questions of value as open to majority vote, the right process itself includes seeking out and weighing various inputs. Dialogue, as Angle argues, “is critical to non-sages not just as a developmental tool, but also as a means of arriving at the best, most harmony-enhancing reaction to a given situation. [Even] for sages . . . listening, questioning, openness, and humility are all still important.”²³

All of that is correct so far as it goes; Aristotle’s rhetoric of self-sufficiency—especially as amplified by McDowell’s portrayal of moral perception—makes virtue look quite aloof from the ordinary world of scrutiny, doubt, tension, and compromise. Yet nothing about virtue as such requires a supercilious attitude toward social scrutiny. Virtuous people cultivate their interest in what MacIntyre calls the “internal goods”²⁴ of practices, and among these practices we must count communicative ones such as consultation (as in Confucius) and imaginatively animating multiple perspectives and narratives (as in Nietzsche, whom Swanton recommends as an exemplar in this respect).

If communication is conceived as an integral thread in moral practice rather than as a retreat or hesitation relative to fully realized conduct, then one of the things a virtuous person will “immediately perceive,” in McDowell’s sense, is the call to engage others in conversation. From here, the worry about inscrutability begins to fade away and transform itself. It is conceivable—nay, plausible—that virtue is incompatible with a stance of “silencing” contrary considerations, even when they come from less virtuous quarters. We need only recognize that certain communicative virtues—those Swanton calls “virtues of dialogue”—are as important as other virtues that might come across, if practiced in rigid isolation, as the inscrutable exercise of expertise.

Broadening Swanton’s “Virtues of Practice”

Swanton’s call for what she dubs “virtues of practice” dispels most of the specter of inscrutable expertise. It illustrates how “expressing a fine inner state” need not mean acting alone or acting arrogantly. Yet as the trope of expression suggests, her account continues to present virtue as an “inside-out” project. A virtue-ethical account will need to stretch even further to embrace the kind of dialogical receptivity that critical practice requires.

In her attempt to build a strong ladder from virtue ethics to a theory of right action, Swanton tends to speak as though social communication

is something the virtuous person *initiates* in order to handle problems that are, in some sense, *generated* by her own virtuous projects. She points approvingly to Nickles's definition of a problem as a "demand that a certain goal be achieved, plus constraints on the manner in which the goal is achieved, i.e. conditions of adequacy on the problem solution."²⁵ Those problems, however, come across as problems of individual action: "The *aim* in exercising virtues of practice is to get things right (act virtuously overall) in solving problems ranging from the relatively mundane, such as how do I get my kids to rugby football training, to a life and death medical problem. All such problems implicate the virtues."²⁶

Moral dilemmas present paradigmatic practical *problems* in this narrow sense, as their salient feature is the apparent impossibility of fully respecting two or more constraints—ones to which one is already committed, but which are suddenly brought into apparent conflict in a novel circumstance. It is in the confrontation of such problems that Swanton recommends opening oneself to others' relevant perspectives and values. In such a process, as Swanton elegantly argues, we recognize how our constellation of goals and constraints might be understood differently while preserving their point. The virtuous person doesn't *just* know how to act; faced with a situation that calls for a response, one of the things she recognizes is whether and how to draw others into discussion.

Swanton's emphasis on collaboration broadens virtue ethics considerably. Still, her virtues of practice emphasize what I will call *narrow collaboration* in our responsiveness to moral problems. Robust forms of critical engagement, by contrast, require participation in what I will call *wide collaboration*.

By narrow collaboration I mean responsiveness to occasions on which one's course of conduct calls for coordination and consultation with others. Though the narrow collaborator may well be responding to *moral* problems—problems of how best to act according to virtue—they are conceived fundamentally as *one's own* moral problems. That is, they appear on the radar of our attention as problems about *how we shall act*.

By wide collaboration I mean responsiveness to moral problems that may be brought to one's attention by others, whose significance needs to be illuminated by the lights of others, and whose process of resolution may not fit within any given individual's moral understanding. What one contributes to the resolution of *wide* problems is not "the solution"; it is not "right action" in the sense of conduct that optimally harmonizes conflicting demands. At least, one's responsiveness to wide problems is rendered clumsy and confused when it is conceived in Swanton's language of con-

straint integration. For the critically engaged person may need to respond to a wide problem by helping it *toward* resolution (or some degree of resolution), where that resolution is understood to require others' situated and perceptive agency. The virtuous person's finitude is more than the need to tap others' perspectives before deciding; it is the need to be responsive to concerns that seem to originate with others, and the need to help others grasp concerns that we are in a poor position to resolve directly.

We need to challenge moral individualism more radically than does Swanton in her discussion of virtues of practice. First, let us reflect on the *occasions* for communicative practice within moral activity. Some problems may not even come into view in the form of an apparent tension among apparently well-defined elements of our ongoing projects. There is a residual agent-centeredness in emphasizing an individual's refined perception of when to *consult* with others or to *study* alternative points of view. For both of those strategies implicitly mark the occasion for social inquiry as resting with the virtuous agent herself; consultation and study might be scheduled and planned in advance; receptivity and responsiveness as such may not. A fully interdependent account of moral communication must recommend, instead, an ongoing openness even to moral concerns that come to us *without* our invitation, concerns whose ultimate relevance to our own pending conduct may not be clear at the outset.

We must also think more broadly about the point of communicative activity. On Swanton's account, its point is bound up with its role in helping the virtuous person decide "what to do"—what the right action is, for her, in a difficult case. The activities of communicating moral concern, however, have a broader point. Addressing someone with concerns about their own habits or choices, for example, is not something we do because such communication paves the way toward our own pending right action. Nor is it the case, when entirely unexpected concerns intrude on our attention, that our reason for listening is in order to decide how to handle a problem already known to us. When moral dialogue is animated only by the desire to act rightly, it makes room for a certain kind of "moral selfishness"—not at all a failure to care about others' well-being, but a failure to care about one's own role in shaping others' paths of moral learning.

In contrast to Swanton, then, I would have us emphasize that moral problems require wide collaboration—collaboration that does not pivot upon a wise person's solicitation and synthesis of perspectives. Some people become distressed or alarmed over a problem over which they have only the vaguest responsive handle; others may occupy positions and

capacities of agency that prove highly relevant to problems that only contingently come into view. Yet others are in a position to help facilitate connections *between* disempowered perceivers and unaware agents. A virtuous person may find herself in any of these positions. A problem in John Dewey's sense is an indeterminate situation with which we are entangled. Hence even our most tentative articulation of its variables may reshape its contours for better and worse. Moral problems are more than matters of collective deliberation; they play out in temporally and geographically distributed fashion, such that often no individual is in a position to see the whole: to recognize the problem, to seek out input, and then to resolve it fully through action. The arc of the moral universe is long²⁷—as Martin Luther King, Jr. puts it—and thus sometimes the narrative of problem discovery, reinterpretation, and transformation is not entirely within the grasp of any individual.

Fixed Traits, Static Ideals, and the Wisdom of Traditions

Aristotle stipulates that virtue is manifest only in character traits that are “fixed and unchangeable.”²⁸ Recent writers in virtue ethics steer clear of such rigid-sounding rhetoric, but any systematic virtue ethics constructs virtue as some phenomenon that accounts for the consistency that might characterize one person’s actions and distinguish them from another’s. Furthermore, virtue ethicists have been especially concerned to explain how a virtuous person comes to be capable of resisting influences (fear, scorn, pain, or discomfort) that otherwise play a dominant role in explaining action. From there, it is a short step to assume that virtue ethics must appeal to fixed aspects of character that resist ordinary pressures—the keel of one’s active life, as it were.

Meanwhile, however, the practice of critical engagement requires participants to understand both themselves and others as *not* fixed in their perceptions, priorities, dispositions, and concerns. But perceptions, priorities, dispositions, and concerns are the very stuff of character in the sense virtue ethics cares about. So it seems virtue ethics and critical engagement require conflicting assumptions about morally significant traits and their fixity, at least among adults.

Plasticity as Immaturity, Maturity as Fixity

The power of critical engagement is particularly limited if morally significant aspects of character tend to become fixed in adults *whether or not* they are virtuous. Some of Aristotle’s comments imply that the process of development “sets” certain aspects of character during one’s formative and

dependent years. Let us assume, for the moment, that both good and bad character traits alike meet with developmental closure; the plasticity of temperament simply fades to a negligible level with adulthood. Each person possesses, by then, something like a stable "second nature." Someone who reaches adulthood without virtue, then, can never achieve virtue through diligent attention to critical communication. There is something worse than having an undeveloped compass of moral sensitivity: adults who fall short of virtue are stuck with a defectively manufactured compass. If they trust in the deliverances of their sensibility such as it is, they will embrace their vices confidently and will respond to criticism only as a form of pressure with which to cope.

Aristotle himself clearly expresses such a low expectation of nonvirtuous adults. Most people, he observes, "do not abstain from bad acts because of their baseness but through fear of punishment; living by passion they pursue their own pleasures and the means to them, and the opposite pains, and have not even a conception of what is noble and truly pleasant, since they have never tasted it . . . a bad man . . . is corrected by pain like a beast of burden."²⁹

Even when people with fixed nonvirtuous characters can be convinced of their defects, however, their available options no longer include the achievement of virtue. Thus they must settle for the second-best option of acting *as* virtuous people act. Hence the nonvirtuous must remain somewhat dependent upon virtuous people as external models and monitors for their conduct. The problem is not just that they are liable to temptation; rather, they cannot fully *understand* the demands of virtue. Because their emotions and immediate perceptions regularly fail to guide them well, they remain dependent upon the presence of virtuous people to demonstrate exemplary acts and provide effective incentives. Even when their choices do achieve gross conformity to the demands of justice and decency, their actions are the product of a jerky sort of effort. One who lacks virtue, no matter how conscientious, misses the precise center of the target, as virtue itself fine-tunes our responsiveness in ways that defy perfect imitation.

A more gentle variation on this Aristotelian account is one that counts virtue as a sort of developmental finish line, but allows that moral plasticity can extend into adult years. Virtuous traits can be *more* fixed than their alternatives if the flexibility of character tends to diminish not just because of developmental years passed, but also because of the achievement of virtue itself. On this gentler assumption, we can emphasize that there is something inherently unsettling about states that fall short of virtue, while

virtue has a magnetic or self-sealing quality such that once it is found it is not easily lost. The virtuous person, after all, loves what is truly pleasant, what is not bound to meet with conflict; hence a certain restlessness is resolved when and only when virtue blossoms. Anyone lacking in virtue might thus chime in with Iago: "I am not who I am." As long as characters are not entirely fixed, however, there is hope that adults, no matter how advanced in age, may evolve toward virtue.

Nevertheless, even the gentler model of fixation creates a discontinuity between individuals who achieve moral virtues and those who don't. The conception of virtue as a developmental threshold leads to a social world that is essentially hierarchical. On one hand there are full members of the moral community—adults who possess virtue—and on the other there are marginal participants who lack virtue, either temporarily or permanently. Even if the difference between the virtuous and others is a matter of degree, it seems that achieving virtue means reaching a stage of being "out of reach"—critically—from the vantage point of those who lack virtue. Indeed, one might be presumed to have overcome the need for criticism entirely, except perhaps for mild reminders from equally virtuous friends.

That leaves us with patterns of critical engagement that descend developmentally downward between virtuous adults and those whom they educate. And even while immature individuals are subject to character shaping at the hands of the virtuous, that guidance could not actually require *entrusting* the not-yet-virtuous with moral concerns. By hypothesis, the immature are unable to appreciate what is at stake in their own improvement. Hence it is no surprise that Aristotle and many of his followers tend to refer to training or inculcation as the engine of moral education.

Confucius and Lifelong Learning

Virtue ethicists differ here, however. Rather than as a preparation for virtue, moral learning may be conceived as an integral part of virtue itself. If critical engagement is to play a central role in moral life, it is because participation in moral learning matters—not just as the contingent *means* to a morally robust life, but as a constitutive element. Thus, critical engagement demands a virtue-ethical framework on which the processes of change are invested with significance and not cast as mere preparation for a career of expressing fixed virtuous traits.

Yet if undergoing the right kinds of transformation is *part* of virtue, then virtue ethics will require us to take a longitudinal view and to discern some element that does not change even while learning takes place. This would

be some trait that distinguishes admirable and worthy learners from others. Perhaps a deeper character trait is fully manifest throughout any more superficial process of change. On this view, something like one's *style* or *capacity* for learning is a deep and enduring trait.

Just this stance might be implicit in some Confucian thought, as when Confucius is reported to have invoked four *classes* of people:

Those who are born with the possession of knowledge are the highest class of men. Those who learn, and so readily get possession of knowledge, are the next. Those who are dull and stupid, and yet compass the learning are another class next to these. As to those who are dull and stupid and yet do not learn—they are the lowest of the people.³⁰

Is membership in one of these classes essentially fixed for life? Given these four categories—natural sages, virtuous learners, dull imitators, and nonlearners—movement among them is *almost* entirely ruled out. Clearly, one cannot *become* a born sage, nor begin life incapable of learning and yet improve from there. Nor does it seem that dullness and stupidity easily give way to robust and intelligent learning; the metaphor of dullness suggests enduring recalcitrance rather than contingent lack of progress. Movement backward among these categories is also absurd, unless one's character is subjected to some kind of deterioration from brute causes such as illness or trauma. Even toddlers, then, can be classified within this set of possibilities, though the consequences of such a fit are naturally manifest only at later stages of life.

Yet how should we understand Confucius's reference to those "born with knowledge," where this is explicitly distinguished from the category of those who are born with the proper capacity for learning? Such a possibility might be introduced with a hint of irony, invoking such a class just to prompt a humble recognition of our distance from it. This ironic interpretation seems apt for another passage with the same theme: "There are only the wise of the highest class, and the stupid of the lowest class, who cannot be changed."³¹ The irony here would not consist in meaning the opposite of what is said; rather, in imagining the ways in which the claim might be true, we are to recognize that they are not what we might have hoped. An exemplar of the "born sage" variety might indeed appear in our midst someday, but if learning is *part* of our moral task, then no such exemplar could serve a model for the rest of us. After all, a born sage could not provide a model of virtuous learning, and hence could not possibly be a full model for anyone who sought to learn *from* the sage. What is compelling about Confucius is that his own life story is one of development;

it is a narrative of learning, rather than an account of supernatural immunity from familiar human weaknesses. Furthermore, among his cultivated insights are those that pertain to the nature of learning; one must be open to refining one's understanding of *how* to learn.

Thus even casting something like readiness to learn as a lifelong *character trait*—as a virtue in the sense both Aristotle and Swanton would suggest—seems not to capture the spirit of Confucian ethics. Clearly Confucius admires some styles and paths of learning more than others. His favorite disciple Yan Hui, in particular, comes in for high praise: “if [he] hears one thing, he can find out ten.”³² Still, Confucius need not portray Yan Hui’s capacity for learning as itself a fixed or static trait. Yan Hui has chosen his teacher carefully, and would surely credit his teacher not just with gratifying his appetite for knowledge but also with cultivating his capacities for learning. As his growth does not simply unfurl from within, it is idle to speak of an essentially *internal* quality that has put him on the path of securing the right social influences and responding optimally to them. The capacity for learning must bundle its strength and its vulnerability together, for it renders one’s character permeable and open to influence.

Whether Confucius himself placed emphasis on character traits is hard to say; the aforementioned allusion to four types of lifelong disposition to learning can be juxtaposed with passages that de-emphasize the notion of lifelong and fixed traits. Human beings, he says, are “by nature . . . near each other; by habitual action they become farther apart.”³³ Such passages reinforce his distance from the likelihood of “born sages” but also imply that any distinction between perceptive learners and dull imitators is graduated and mutable, not a fixed difference between classes of character. The acuity of one’s capacity for learning may consolidate itself, under the right circumstances, into a kind of stability in cleaving to good influences and resisting improper ones. Virtue, however, need not be construed as an inner *possession* of a substantial self. Confucian virtues might just as well be conceived as organized social patterns of activity in which people come to participate more or less well. Some lives grow clearly toward virtue while some do not, or do so much less.

In stark contrast to Aristotle’s allusions to a class of citizens who are well enough brought up to reflect on the nature of the virtue that they already possess, Confucius portrays virtue as nearly unattainable. Despite the steps he has taken toward virtue in the course of his lifelong learning, neither he nor any of his contemporaries have arrived. And Confucius explicitly embraces something like the claim only briefly entertained in

Plato's *Meno* and *Apology*—that if virtue *had* ever been fully achieved, one sign of that fact would be a profoundly corrective influence on all those who might have lived within the reach of the virtuous one's practical influence. There cannot be true virtue without the power to draw others clearly in its direction.

But then, virtue is something that becomes available *to* a person and then *through* a person extends to others. Virtue, in the Confucian tradition, might thus be conceived as an ideal pattern *into which* an individual's life unfolds and emerges, rather than a sort of possession or explanatory cause of the fixed quality of a life. Such a conception would dovetail with A. C. Graham's discussion of stability: "It is . . . through the directive unit [concepts such as the Way] that the Chinese tradition seeks the constant (ch'ang) behind the changing. The West tends to seek it through the subject, as eternal substance . . . but for China there is nothing unchanging except the paths which things follow."³⁴

In a well-lived Confucian life, then, we can point to something deeper than the set of actions a person performs, but we need not think of this as an inner virtue that is fixed in such a way as to make critical engagement futile. Even Confucius's most prominent follower Mencius, recognized for having a more elaborate account of the moral aspects of each person's "nature," presents that nature as always subject to *growth* rather than mere *expression*.³⁵ But growth proceeds in interaction with an environment; thus moral capacities are *drawn out* as much as they are willfully unfurled from within. The self is not a monad but an internally complex node in a shifting network of relationships. Nothing about the path of virtue precludes others' continuing role in helping to define, direct, and clear the way. On the contrary, the pattern of moral education is essentially bound up with both receptivity to learning and the transmission of understanding to others.

Vertical Models of Moral Learning

Even without fixed inner character traits, however, Confucian varieties of virtue ethics reify fixity in a different form, namely, that of tradition. While traditions may not be immune from change, significant changes in tradition are largely perceived by Confucius as devolution away from the ideal social order of the past. Only relatively contingent details of tradition and ritual are open to pragmatic adaptation, on his view. Confucius saw his own social surroundings as mired in moral failures, taking nothing like Aristotle's complacent attitude toward the availability of sufficiently exemplary role models. But the change necessary in his own age, he thought, was not

a profound change *of* tradition, but a recovery of its core. Thus, Confucius shares with Aristotle the assumption that virtue involves inhabiting an ideal that must be learned, in some form, from one's elders, whether these be parents, teachers, community leaders, or ancestral figures. They share, in other words, a pervasively *vertical* model of moral learning.

Yet the Confucian conception of moral learning is distinctive in two ways. The first we have discussed already: moral education is understood as having an entirely *integral* role in moral life. Hence, the fact that our first steps in a good life occur in the form of respecting parents and following their guidance is no mere contingent fact about how virtue is achieved. Filial piety, as the developmental foundation of virtue, is also its enduring model. The second difference is Confucius's conviction that many generations have passed since the "Golden Age" of the sage kings, when heaven and earthly human life were in harmony. Hence though each person's moral education *begins* with filial piety at home—deference to parents and elder brothers—it must continue through arduous education and reflection so as to recover a level of understanding that has been lost.

The vertical nature of moral education is particularly evident in Confucius's profound interest in ancient rites, musical forms, and literary texts. His point is not simply that good moral education includes a refined aesthetic sensibility, for which he happens to turn to certain classics as good models. (Such a stance might be attributed to Plato, but not to Confucius.) Rather, for Confucius, it would be naïve to hope that *new* literary, artistic, or ritual forms could possibly be invented to serve the same uplifting function as ancient ones. It is not some independently intelligible formal feature that makes these aesthetically rich practices uplift one's character; rather, it seems they endure as a precious link between the imperfect present and an idealized past. Full appreciation and enactment of those traditional forms paves the way toward reviving the very forms of life out of which they emerged.

Given his emphasis on the lack of adequate contemporary role models, Confucius necessarily saw more of a need for active and perpetual self-cultivation than did Aristotle. Still, both associate moral learning with doing (and feeling, and perceiving) what select others have done (and felt, and perceived) before us.³⁶ The powerful imagery of the *dao* or "the way" also lends itself to conceiving people as either more or less advanced in their moral progress, but not as qualitatively different except where qualitative difference means multiple ways of *straying* from the path of virtue. Parents and teachers are "ahead of" their offspring and students, and ancestors can be conceived as having long ago found their way, but little of

moral importance—on Confucius’s account—attaches to relationships *not* characterized by what we might call *vertical* difference, one person being understood as a moral leader, another as a moral follower. To be sure, there are conflicted cases in which, say, a son understands something that his father does not. Still, this does not make them moral equals. According to Confucius, a good son tries to “remonstrate” with a father who acts unjustly or mistakenly, but falls back into a position of subordination if that remonstration is unsuccessful.

Can Virtue Ethics Embrace a Horizontal Model of Moral Learning?

A superficial reading of my concern here would be that Confucianism, like Aristotelianism, happens to be associated with a morally conservative ideology. In that case, we could expect progressive variants of Confucianism and Aristotelianism to be as coherent and workable as the classic theories on which they are built.

Yet the issue is not so simple if we consider *how* virtues might develop in nonconservative directions. Both Aristotle and Confucius make more or less integral appeal to the imitation of role models, the learning of complex traditional practices, and a reverent attitude toward things that one’s mentors do that the learner does not (*not yet?*) appreciate as justified. While Aristotle spoke extensively about friendships between moral equals, their moral role seems confined to *reinforcing* the virtue of such friends, not to prompting one another toward previously unrealized virtues. Even relatively recent reflections on virtue-ethical moral education tend to emphasize processes that might *reproduce* one person’s robust competence in another person rather than processes that might provoke new patterns of competence. For example, neural-network models of moral competence still presume that moral concepts and skills rely on what they call “prototypes,” whose multidimensional outlines are instilled in learners by those who already possess the concepts and skills in question.

How, then, can we breathe life into new forms—as-yet-unrealized “prototypes”—of virtue? Taking feminist concerns as an obvious example, we might ask how our responsiveness to such concerns might be intelligible within virtue ethics. For we must grant that our role models—and also the historical role models to whom we have access—fail to embody feminist ideals fully. (Even supposing for the sake of argument that some feminist *can* claim to follow in the path of clear exemplars, clearly the opposite predicament is salient in many feminists’ lives.)

What feminists and other radical critics share with virtue ethics is an appreciation of just how intertwined our many social norms and practices

are. Virtue ethics acknowledges that even if virtues are plural, they are not neatly individuated, and the realization of each ideal depends on the buttressing support of others. Feminists have learned similar lessons, on the negative side, about the difficulty of making “surgical corrections” to problematic norms. For example, a concern over the norms of feminine deference may lead to concerns about the norms and practices of heterosexual marriage. For although heterosexual marriage norms might have seemed unproblematic to many feminists, further discussion draws attention to how this practice pairs each woman with an intimate partner whose reactions—ranging from hurt feelings and withdrawal of solicitude to overt anger and exercise of physical and legally sanctioned powers—may serve effectively to enforce such deference. Thus, it may be difficult to change a vice (such as servility) without changing what even many mild sympathizers would still uphold as a virtue (structuring public life around heterosexual bonds and penalizing their absence).

In response to the question of whether feminists might be inspired by Confucian reflections to “creatively adopt new, not previously heard of, roles and invent new rituals,” Joel Kupperman finds a profound tension: “This question comes close, as it were, to the bone of classical Confucian philosophy. It seems clear that the answer that goes along with the major Confucian texts would be ‘No.’ It is equally clear that feminism requires an answer of ‘Yes.’”³⁷ Indeed, a holistic resistance to cultural innovation will haunt any virtue ethics unless it unifies its moral demands by way of some thin criterion (a priori consistency of will, for example, or systematic promotion of happiness) that is presumed applicable at a granular level to each human choice.

Indeed, when feminist ideals are not reduced to formal or quantitative criteria (such as equality of respect or equality of income), it is hard to *articulate* what a feminist ideal is. For, as Sandra Bartky illustrates, feminist concerns often emerge from the experience of “contradictions”—dissatisfactions that manifest as alienation and restlessness rather than as fully articulate demands.³⁸ Feminists struggle with the *absence* of a clear destination and even with the absence of a method to find the most promising path forward. Critical processes, unlike imitative ones, require responsiveness to problems whose existence becomes manifest far in advance of their solutions. The idealization of harmony among Confucians and Neo-Confucians does serve to prioritize the resolution of cultural conflicts once they are well-recognized. Yet there is a cost to associating wisdom and harmony. The character of a dissident, a whistleblower, or a Sarah Grimké — anyone who

urges others to recognize and engage with new problems — can hardly be admired as a clear moral exemplar within an ethic of harmony.

Critical engagement, then, requires a model of moral learning that does not depend upon enduring role relations between learners and their teachers. Those who draw attention to problems as such—who “teach” us what to notice—are each more perceptive about some things than others, and they need not have systematic moral lessons to offer. Opportunities for critical learning are democratically distributed and episodic. Embracing critical engagement means embracing the *horizontal* dimension of moral development—our social and temporal handling of indeterminacy.

Indeed, on my account, the need for such horizontal learning is the larger and systematic “problem” that gives moral life its deeply social structure. The impetus for my moral development will often come from someone who is not more virtuous than I am. But to expect such complexity is to reject an assumption that runs deeply through most virtue ethics. Without its vertical model of moral learning, virtue ethics may be stretched beyond the comfort zone of many of its adherents.

Singular Exemplars, Idealization of Singularity

The third cluster of reservations I wish to raise about virtue ethics—as a broad and deep collection of texts, concepts, and claims—is its tendency to proceed as if moral character admits of a singular ideal. Even among those who deny the “unity of virtue” doctrine, any *given* virtue is generally described as something like *the* ideal kind of responsiveness to a particular sphere of moral demands. And even in her pluralistic refusal to think of all virtues as aspects of one virtue, Christine Swanton, for example, wishes to hold that it is possible for a single person to possess all virtues “to a high degree.”³⁹ Many texts in virtue ethics go so far as to name and describe an ideal person—the ideal person—as informed by their account of virtues. Aristotle makes frequent reference to the *phronimos* or “wise man” who embodies the single (if somewhat imprecise) standard of reason in all practical matters. Confucius makes reference to “the sage” whose harmonious influence would exert almost magical transformative powers.

Virtue ethicists’ interest in a singularly ideal character type should not be misinterpreted as failing to allow for anything like differences of personality. The moral ideals of various rigorous theories occasionally strike naïve students as threatening to strip away our personalities and individual

idiosyncrasies. And that worry is hardly ever justified. So long as there are traits of character that are morally neutral, or ways in which two or more alternative dispositions have equally strong value, virtue ethicists (just like Kantians, utilitarians, and so on) can embrace such differences. However, virtue theory has been *nearly* as guilty as these others theories of failing to shed sufficient light on how and why—supposing we can find one person who is a sufficiently good moral example—it yet might be a *morally good* thing for another person's moral profile to *diverge* from the model set by that first example.

Burdened Virtues

Lisa Tessman's book *Burdened Virtues* may be read as an extended reflection on one reason to resist the image of a singularly ideal virtuous agent. She describes her work as "critical virtue ethics,"⁴⁰ taking the presence of systematic injustices as a deep but not fatal challenge to the tradition of virtue ethics. In particular, systematic social injustice undermines the plausibility of Aristotelian *eudaimonism*—the presumption that in the absence of unpredictable misfortunes we can expect individuals' virtue to lead to, or correlate with, their flourishing (*eudaimonia*). Because reality is actually structured by pervasive social injustices, virtue is not only much more difficult to achieve; once achieved it also is hard to reconcile with full flourishing. Oppression causes its sufferers to face the most dramatic tensions *among* the elements that Aristotle treated as fitting harmoniously into the admirable life. Justice demands efforts to resist and transform oppressive conditions, and yet the qualities necessary to participate in political transformation include humility about the moral damage one has suffered and an openness to experience what Jaggar calls "outlaw emotions"—ones that seem unreasonable precisely because they bring problems to light and disrupt temptations toward comfort and complacency. Ultimately, the traits most vital for political resistance—or even broadly humanitarian decency—look quite different from those that foster harmonious and balanced lives within an ideal community.

The force of this tension, perversely if not surprisingly, is experienced most directly by those who suffer under oppressive social arrangements. For while oppressors must be held responsible for their participation in injustices, the practical work of resistance and criticism is more readily recognized and shouldered by those already burdened by oppression. Hence, an unjust world forces all but the most privileged and oblivious into a predicament where "the good life" is more or less out of reach. They can respond either through struggle and self-sacrifice or through individual

patterns of coping with actual conditions. But the latter path means essentially relinquishing the self-respecting conviction that they—and others in current and future oppressed positions—deserve better.⁴¹

Among those who embark on projects of political resistance to injustice, Tessman finds a class of virtues unimagined by Aristotle. Her notion of “burdened virtues” is productively ambiguous. It suggests both that some virtues are burdened or encumbered, and that there are virtues specific to “the burdened” among us. For only some people find that their lives inseparable from the work of struggling against systemic oppression, and practices of resistance demand a different moral profile from harmonious participation in an existing social order. For example, Tessman approves of feminist arguments for “the kind of anger that would normally be quite wrong but [which] under the extraordinary conditions [is] actually morally recommended.”⁴¹ Yet burdened virtues may also be described as virtues that cannot sustain or justify themselves as ideals, and hence cannot be considered *straightforwardly* as virtues. Their status *as* virtues is burdened. Extreme anger, for example, has “corrosive effects”—not only on the happiness of those who experience it, but also on other morally salient aspects of character, such as participation in friendships.

An additional and related way in which traits may be burdened is by being liable to *misreading* when they appear among oppressed persons. For example, a particular liability toward anger might have impressed Aristotle (and many contemporary Americans also) as appropriately righteous *if* enacted by a man, but a woman who becomes angry in similar ways in similar circumstances may meet with the response Marilyn Frye describes as a “failure of uptake.” This failure of uptake here means not just failure of responsiveness to the context of her actual concerns, but also the failure to recognize a woman’s anger (when it occurs outside of her “proper sphere” of feminine concerns) *as* anger. She may be laughed off as a “crazy bitch,” as having “lost it,” even when the same words and tone would have secured respect in the body of an angry man. Her embodiment leads others to have different expectations about what competences, entitlements, and emotions *make sense* within such a person.

On my account, a liability toward anger is virtuous only to the extent that it unfolds with responsiveness to the emerging signs of immediate or eventual uptake. Thus, there is something problematic about a one-time *expression* of anger on an occasion when the outburst by itself is bound to remain misunderstood; such an approach to moral provocation marks settling for something short of communicating concerns. Nevertheless the burden of having to follow through, clarify, and second-guess how

one will be “read” is a burden that is heavier for some than for others. Privileged people may habitually expect that their anger need only be *expressed* in order to have profound effects on others’ concerted attention. Thus “the right kind of anger”—if we can conceive such an ideal—may be burdened in a third, temporal, way.

Tessman is surely right that real-world conditions make it difficult to idealize a particular kind of character and life as the kind of ideal toward which we can all afford to aim. If there’s something still troubling about the amended virtue ethics that she offers, it is that she ends up effectively offering two tiers of character ideals. First-order ideals are appropriate to lives in a basically just world, while a second-order quasi-ideal must be envisioned to make sense of the moral shape of the life thrown into circumstances of oppression, moral damage, and disproportionate burdens. Tessman is still tempted to ask, in circumstances of oppression, what “one” ought to do—what levels of anger, loyalty, and anguish might be appropriate for this underspecified “one.” And although she ends with the aporetic admission that all proposals partake of the non-ideal, there is another possible approach.

Embodied Ecology, Multiple Models, and Virtue

The additional possible approach to real-world imperfect conditions is to embrace their particularities in a more radical fashion. The resolution of systemic injustices requires not simply a *single* different character ideal, but also the communicative interaction of individuals whose responsive dispositions *vary*. For example, feminists may acknowledge the oddly altruistic value of *bitter* temperaments—ones that discern injustices acutely and do not easily forget them—without believing that it would be ideal for bitterness to reign among all those who face oppression. Temperaments of resilience, optimism, and charitable interpretation also play an invaluable role within communities of resistance. For they do the necessary work of galvanizing hope, cooperation, and creativity. A variety of temperaments play roles in the social process of resistance; we need not think that there is precisely one or another way in which *everyone* should respond to a given injustice.

Virtue ethics may tempt us into cultivating character along the model that is known in agriculture as a “monoculture”—even if theorists agree that different societies have cultivated distinct viable strains of moral virtue. If a set of dispositions and capabilities is even entertained as a candidate for the ideal kind of responsiveness to the demands of a social environment, then we overlook the value of a diversity of dispositions in

interaction with one another. To value a pattern of diversity is not to affirm all dispositions as equally valuable, or equally responsive to moral demands. It is to suggest, rather, that the level at which we evaluate virtue is not necessarily individual; what matters ultimately is the coordinated interaction through which moral problems are recognized and addressed. Whether an individual is virtuous can only be asked, intelligibly, by treating the array of surrounding dispositions as fixed; however, that is to say that virtue is not an inner state after all, but a kind of excellence in relational context.

My residual reservation about even Tessman's virtue ethics, then, brings us back to the central thesis of chapter 7. The notion of virtue—*ideal* responsiveness to whatever is *outside* the self—obscures the ecological and embodied interaction of individuals who are differently attuned to concerns within the same social space. That differential attunement can be traced neither exclusively to social location nor exclusively to differences of "mere" bodily capacity; these in practice are deeply intertwined. My responsiveness is the emergent product of my receptive and attentive capacities *and* the concerns to which my circumstances allow me to become attuned.

The importance of *both* aspects of situated embodiment is vital. For there have indeed been efforts, within a virtue-ethics tradition, of affirming distinct virtue ideals for different persons. For example, there have been numerous attempts to differentiate masculine and feminine virtues, as well as the virtues appropriate to different ages, and different economic or caste statuses. Yet such accounts appeal to morally relevant "types" through a static and essentialized conception of bodily difference, and the concerns of each class are thus locked in rather than disclosed through such differences of standpoint. The kind of differences of embodiment I mean to highlight are neither static nor reducible to simple categories. In fact all differences of sensibility correspond—at any given moment—to differences of embodiment, but we take on certain sensitivities and relinquish others largely in virtue of our complex social positions. And our sensitivities may shift over time partly in response to the patterns of social uptake we experience.

Oppression certainly affects *both* what resonances and capacities there are in my body *and* which concerns come to my attention. Indeed, one of the things that may become a concern for an oppressed person—as it has for Tessman—is how one's characteristic patterns of attention and affect may themselves be cause for concern. Skewed moral sensibilities are one form of moral damage that oppression may inflict.

The distinction between basically just and systematically unjust conditions structures Tessman's account. Thus she allows us to imagine that there could be ideal circumstances in which something like a flourishing *phronimos* might live, in good conscience. Relatively ideal circumstances, by her hypothesis, do not create the anxiously dilemmatic problems of burdened virtues. Yet it is not clear that we should countenance simple and *unburdened* virtues. This is not because we could not possibly have a world without systematic oppression, but because the various ways in which virtues may be "burdened" can arise even under relatively benign political conditions. Moral damage to character may be systematically inflicted by oppression, but it can also take place in local and idiosyncratic forms, and indeed in the absence of moral injustice. It can arise, for example, when one's developmental years are marred by the compounded grief, hopelessness, and posttraumatic distress of a natural disaster. Naturally difficult circumstances might also cast various virtues into conflict with a person's chances of flourishing. Meanwhile no social order could prevent particular vital projects (such as defense and immediate disaster-response) from falling disproportionately on some individuals. Differences of embodiment, too, entail that some individuals will find common social, physical, or cognitive tasks to be especially burdensome. With respect to virtues in general, then, it seems that they admit of *degrees* of burdening. Systematic injustice does not create burdened virtues, but it multiplies them and casts them into relief.

Critical engagement, in particular, is a virtue whose burdened and unevenly burdening status would persist to some degree under any condition of ongoing and dynamic social interaction. Just as Rawls argues that justice must be understood in relation to background circumstances—those of conflict of interest, in the case of justice—I hope that the arguments of this book illustrate that critical engagement is rendered necessary by the fact that anyone's activity can affect others in unforeseen or underappreciated ways. Our predicament involves being potentially oblivious to at least some troubling effects of our actions *until and unless* charged communication brings those implications to light. The burden of initiating such communication tends to fall disproportionately on those for whom concern takes the form of alarm, distress, and the anxiety to bear witness.

Our social terrain is criss-crossed by injustices great and small, and to be capable of moral concern is to occupy a particular situated position with an eye toward ushering moral concerns "home" toward those who wield the best leverage in addressing them. But of course we are not simply either powerful or not within this social landscape. As intersectional feminist

analyses have pointed out, everyone has been either oppressed or at the mercy of others at some point, and everyone is at some point the beneficiary (willing or not) of at least some practices that marginalize or cause suffering to others. Thus our moral predicaments involve qualitative and evolving social differences, not a well-ordered gradient of privileged and oppressed roles within a stable public order.

Fine Inner States, Relationships, and Practices

Given that robustly social moral interaction is characterized by diversity of social positions and temperaments, and hence a textured and shifting distribution of concerns, we are in a position to question the degree to which the virtue of critical engagement should be conceived as a “fine inner state.”

What Swanton seems to be most concerned to fend off, in choosing such language, is Julia Driver’s notion that virtue might supervene simply upon good consequences, ungrounded in anything like a psychological attunement to the considerations that make a trait a virtue. Having the right trait, on such a consequentialist “virtue theory” might be a kind of coincidence.

On the account I would offer, responsiveness to the demands of critical engagement could hardly come about through coincidence in the ways that Driver envisions as possible. For she, like most consequentialists, conceives of action mostly as discrete moves rather than as interactive movement that is continuously adjusted in accord with signs of its effects. Among ballistic actions, the possibility of “hitting the mark”—in her case, the mark of being beneficial on the whole—might indeed be achieved more or less by coincidence.

Swanton’s appeal to fine inner states is designed to undermine the notion of merely coincidental virtue; virtue can be no mere “effect” of an oblivious or ignorant disposition. Yet there is a third alternative beyond one’s own *inner* state being sufficiently fine to account for fairly reliable success, on one hand, and mere external coincidence on the other. That third alternative is our participation in relationships.

Attunement is essentially a relational matter. Skills of attunement certainly require certain qualities in the individuals who participate in attuned interactions. However, those qualities do not exhaust the attunement. Consider, for example, the mutual attunement that is most readily experienced in intimate relations. A relationship may achieve a high degree of attunement, and certain distinctive forms of attention are thus brought out in each participant. Each person, we should suppose, helps to maintain

attunement by attending to subtle signs of strain or threat to that attunement. Relationships do not take shape without the directed participation of each individual. However, the individual abilities that become manifest in a particular relationship may transplant poorly into other relationships. What those abilities guarantee, at most, is a fine sensitivity to *failures* of attunement. Individuals who have experienced relationships of fine attunement may be able to cultivate and troubleshoot close relationships better than those who have not had such experiences. Nevertheless, the attunement that marks good communication takes place within the sphere of the relationship; it is not the sum of individual traits.

Hence, the most radical challenge I bring to the tradition of virtue ethics is to suggest that virtues need not be indexed solely to individuals. In particular, we might think that what Aristotle calls *friendships*—meaning bonds of extended and mutually invested engagement with one another's lives—may exhibit virtues that participants in a friendship do not exhibit individually. We may take Aristotle's claim—that a friend is another self—one step further: a *friendship* is something like another self. That is, a coordinated interaction is the locus of certain patterns of attention, communication, and responsiveness to the demands of the world. The virtue of critical engagement, too, may be manifest in particular relations and not just in each individual participant. The formation of such relationships is not simply a tool for developing our individual virtues; it yields another level at which virtue can come about.

8.4 Conclusion: Communication and Continuity

In several ways, virtue ethics is well poised to illuminate the practice of critical engagement compared to more modern act-oriented moral theories. Of particular interest is virtue ethics' invitation to explore diachronic processes—both at the microlevel of perceptively responsive skills and at the macrolevel of long-term development and projects. Equally important is its compatibility with a natural and unsystematic pluralism about the variety of concerns that demand our responsive attention.

To make better conceptual room for the importance of critical practice, virtue ethics needs to be engaged and drawn out in at least three ways. First, the *fluency* of virtuous activity must be applied beyond noncommunicative conduct, and the projects associated with virtuous activity must be understood as communicatively shaped from the start, not just in their implementation. Second, moral learning must be reconceived to allow for improvement in the absence of any ideal trainer or already-coherent tradi-

tion. Third, virtue ethics needs to forge social models of practical excellence; such a model will treat interpersonal or group activity as more than a function of how well each participant approximates the same individual ideal.

For virtue ethics to speak to our predicament as socially engaged moral critics, it must move toward emphasizing excellence in communicative as well as conduct-level practices, eschewing fixed or antecedently given character-trait ideals. Whether those who identify themselves as virtue ethicists can recognize these recommendations as friendly amendments is not for me to say. However, I suspect that virtue ethics will speak better to the complexity of moral life if they can. Meanwhile, for social and political critics who already embrace nonvertical modes of critical engagement, I hope it is clear that virtue ethics has a particularly strong suit of insights with which critical practice can be reflectively honed.

Concluding Reflections

The issue is therefore not truth or falsity, but the interpretation and evaluation of what should be said and why.

—David H. Hoy¹

Recapitulation

The central claim running through this book has been that critical engagement with one another's activity is a morally essential and pervasive dimension of agency. Overt articulations of moral judgment represent only the most obvious face of critical engagement, and even such articulations figure pivotally in moral life not so much in virtue of the claims they stake out but rather in virtue of their practical and gestural role in social encounters. If critical responsiveness marks our capacity for genuinely social moral engagement, we should conceive its central aim as the communication of moral concern.

To reflect in any sustained way on such communication, however, we need to focus on considerations and possibilities that have been obscured or left unacknowledged by systematic moral theorists. Indeed, we could not expect to find more than a marginal interest in communication within modern moral theory given the intellectual background against which it has taken shape. Beginning with an argument for recognizing a generally neglected gestural dimension to agency, the chapters of this book have each added conceptual tools for reflecting on critical responsiveness as a moral practice. We have needed to unsettle speech act theory with a temporally continuous model of dynamically shared activity (including communication), and we have needed to illuminate moral concerns as neither passive natural clues nor articulate representational claims. The role of psychological and sociological variables in explaining agency, meanwhile, has been displaced with a call to locate ourselves within an extended social field of positional and ecological differentiation.

Despite my efforts to step away from various preoccupations of modern philosophical ethics, the spirit of the argument has not been directly competitive. In highlighting the importance of critically responsive social engagement, my first goal has been the ecumenical one of adding a further dimension to our grasp of moral agency in practice. The same activity can generally be considered along all three dimensions: as causally directed conduct, as symbolic representation, and as social gesture. The recognition of a gestural and communicative dimension to our activity does not itself diminish the coherence of reflecting directly on ideals of conduct or ideals of principled policies of action.

Rather than insisting that morality resides in one or another favored dimension, I have supposed that different kinds of moral questions—different moral concerns—tend to foreground different dimensions of activity. This book has emphasized the need for a good account of critical moral gestures not because this dimension trumps the need for systematic accounts of the good and of the right, but because those axes of concern do not stand any great risk of going entirely unnoticed. Meanwhile, a certain set of moral challenges—those about our social encounters with one another qua moral agents—cannot yet be adequately appreciated and addressed by thinking along the familiar grooves of the good and of the right.

It is one thing to be convinced that certain stubborn metaphysical dichotomies are both pernicious and too hasty; it is another to sustain a line of thought that resiliently defies their influence. For that reason I have approached my account of critical practice in ethics by gathering together some positive concepts that illuminate the rich phenomena teeming in the gaps between the active and the passive. These concepts include interpersonal engagement, gesture, temporally-extended communication, jointly coordinated attention, embodied concern, social positioning, ecological fields of exchange, and virtuous attunement.

It is my hope that by means of practice using such concepts, we can come to approach moral criticism and related themes in ways that could not have been well articulated (or would not generally have met with understanding) from the more familiar perspective I projected at the outset of this book.

A schematic overview of the oppositions and alternatives discussed in each chapter appears in table 9.1. A concise representation of our themes and their mutual relations cannot capture the nuances of our argument, but it may serve as a reminder of how various parallel philosophical moves hang together to foster reflection on morally critical responsiveness.

Table 9.1

Dimensions of moral agency, and details emphasized according to chapter

Evaluative ideal	1	good	apt	right
Evaluative parameter	1	quality (aesthetics)	responsive fit	legitimacy (logic)
Aspect of activity to be evaluated	1	privately experienced results of action	relational engagement with other activity	publicly projected principles of action
Concept of action	2	conduct	gesture	representation
Psychological approach	2	controlled experimentation	interactive interpretation	transcendent self-reflection
Model of critical agency	3	promotion/regulation of behavior	communication of concern	expression of norm commitment
Temporality of agency	4	punctual (act based)	extended	noumenal
Model of meaning	5	natural information	dynamic translation	intentional representation
Sociological starting point	6	structure	relational field	agency
Relational ideal	7	economic optimization	ecological participation	cosmopolitan exemplification
Theoretical tradition	8	consequentialist	virtue/process-oriented	deontological

Explaining a Philosophical Omission, or Responding Critically to It?

The relative neglect of critical responsiveness within philosophical work reflects on the assumptions, vocabulary, and truisms to which we habitually appeal. A marginal or trivial treatment of critical responsiveness is partly the product of thinking habitually along certain familiar grooves: words versus deeds, the good versus the right, morality versus politics, private versus public, subject versus object, the natural versus the distinctively human, and so on.

At the same time, the habits of a philosophical and ethical tradition are not morally or politically neutral. The stark opposition of subject and object, authority and passivity, finds its plausibility and appeal mirrored

by projects of political dominance and strategically systematic management. These projects, in turn, are not so antithetical to Enlightenment democratic ideals as we might hope. The consolidation of humanism (even setting aside its internal failures) has brought a greater insistence on the passivity and subordination of the nonhuman—a heavy line separating doers and speakers from the world of stuff they can represent and act upon. That world of mere stuff includes not just rocks and plants and animals, but also our very bodies whenever they fail to speak in familiar and justifiable terms.

If we can change our habits of thought to make sense of gesture, we will also find ourselves appreciating a kind of agency with connective and liberatory potential. For this agency is not neatly distributed one per customer, present or absent; it allows for emergence, cultivation, and moral collaboration.

I have suggested that some simplified dichotomies of thought correlate with an unreceptive stance toward moral change. As with most correlations, we may be tempted to assign it a causal direction. If certain metaphysical dichotomies (agent and patient, internal and external) obscure our appreciation of moral communication, could a change at the core of philosophy make a tremendous difference in moral practice? Although the argument of this book may seem to suggest such a hope, it should not. It is too cynical to trace dichotomous thinking to political and moral arrogance, but too naïve to trace moral faults to conceptual oversimplification. If we are profoundly social beings, then philosophy is neither the master nor the slave of our real-world attitudes. Philosophy, like us, is caught up in a play of ongoing responses.

Distinctive Ways in which Critical Responsiveness Matters Now

I would like to venture some further thoughts about the practical task at hand in the world beyond philosophy, the world in dialogue with philosophy. With respect to many of our ordinary encounters, I am sympathetic to the thought that our critical social responses, just as they are, often work out well. A wholesale restructuring of attitudes and concepts is neither possible nor necessary. People often display remarkable attunement in many social relations without the benefit of any articulate reflection, let alone philosophy. In friendships, partnerships, family relations, and familiar bonds of work and community, complex and socially responsive engagement emerges in some form without any theoretical help.

It is for the sake of the most difficult practical encounters that our critical responsiveness must become more reflective. Of course some of these are local and intimate, as when what Strawson calls “the strains of personal involvement” render our habitual responses problematic and drive us to try new styles of approach. But the most difficult practical encounters are with people with whom we have shared very little practice at communication and coordination. They are people whose lives come up against ours abruptly, perhaps in desperation, violence, or polarized opposition.

While there is no sudden break in history that makes critical responsiveness suddenly matter *now*, there are historical challenges that add urgency to our encounters with unfamiliar others. Long-term interpersonal familiarity is less pervasive in our lives, regional and international migration lead us into encounters that can leverage few shared symbolic or gestural reference points, and communication itself has tended to be broken down into shorter and shorter broadcast bits, rather than extended patterns of mutual adjustment. But there is a yet more significant challenge: technologies of militarization and violence make it conceivable—and sometimes actual—that the turbulence of social engagement, when it is not fielded well, escalates into violence on a large, nearly instantaneous, and organized scale.

These are the cases which we might describe as “senseless violence,” from murderous individual rampages to genocide, military escalation, and gross indifference to suffering in the wake of catastrophe, both relatively natural ones and those exacerbated by human agency. While such phenomena are not entirely new, their pace and scale call for alarm.

We say that violence is senseless when it is poorly illuminated both by a strategic frame of reference (at least, until we posit obscure goals) and by a moral frame of reference. The gestural frame of reference—the angle from which we see critical response gone awry—remains the most promising tool for coming to grips with the volatility of our social world.

To say so is not to suggest that a certain attitude of thought and interpretation can halt atrocities midstream. Rather, it is to suggest that the best tool we have for responding critically to *abominable* conduct is to become more and more adept at seeing it not as conduct but as a tragic outgrowth of our responsive complexity. And, disturbingly, the gestural lens refuses to let us allow that any such action is ever simply *done*. It calls for response, and if we cannot countenance any response other than a refusal to engage, then the next best option is to begin looking for social intermediaries who can still recognize what we cannot.

It is vital, however, that we recognize our responsiveness not simply as the initiative we take in the name of our moral convictions, but as an openness to being engaged, as well. Even while we are overwhelmed with the discouragement of facing apparently unengageable human forces, we are simultaneously likely to contribute to the faceless and unresponsive activity that bewilders others. And what may look to me like someone's undirected and alienated hopelessness can always be recast, from another interpretive angle, as the projection of a practical expectation or call for some response by others, and by me in particular.

If it is urgent to combat the experience of abject unresponsiveness, we do it most effectively not by raising our voices, but by finding glimpses of significance to which we can respond, with just the sort of gestural conversion I described in chapter 2: we can redeem activity from the mute abyss of "mere conduct" by taking ourselves to be addressed by it.

A Last Reflection on the Importance of Moral Responsiveness

In emphasizing reflective critical practice, this book runs the risk of being misunderstood, as if some fraction of our attention should be diverted away from acting well ourselves, in favor of trying to correct what others do. And then it would be a fair question exactly how one could navigate the incommensurable demands of moral conduct and moral criticism.

Because such a misunderstanding would be a grave one, it bears discussion in these concluding reflections. What I initially described as first-order responsiveness—such as reducing suffering, attending to needs, caring for other human and nonhuman beings, carrying through on one's promises, and so on—are not activities from which our attention to critical responsiveness detracts. Instead, an ethic of critical responsiveness involves inhabiting these activities differently. To inhabit those activities *as* gestures is to recognize that they comment in some ways upon the world of agency that brings me to them, that they portend more than their bare particular performance (to others and to myself), and that they are thus ripe for others' critical engagement.

The observable difference between a stretch of similar activity before and after one's refinement of critical responsiveness—attending narrowly to a person's movements—might be minuscule. But here the connotations of "virtue" may help. To some, the difference between a virtuoso performance and a dull one seems slight. But it is a difference that may be amplified in its significance as we attend to it, cultivate our receptivity to it, and bring ourselves into dialogue with it.

Once we tune our thoughts to the world of more and less apt engagements, gestural encounters, and broadly interpersonal frames of reference, we will no longer be tempted to think that moral agency has ever been—even in some initial or original sense—simply a matter of individual conduct. For moral patterns of attention emerge out of a social conversation of gestures, weaving higher-order responsiveness into the nature of moral agency itself. Hence I might now say, looking back, that the book has primarily been an argument against the very notion of garden-variety conduct with which most moral philosophy seems to begin.

But the point is not that we should refuse to acknowledge or care about the goings-on that a notion of “plain old first-order agency-on-the-ground” brings to mind; nor is our stance toward conduct a trivial and morally unimportant matter. Rather, we should be hesitant to take a stance of existential commitment to conduct as such. To affirm that something *is* conduct—that it lacks critical and gestural significance—is to inscribe confidence where we ought to be generally agnostic. The process of reshaping our responsive habits into a more careful critical practice consists largely of discerning social responsiveness in just the space that might have seemed full of mere conduct just going about its solitary business.

In keeping with the spirit of critical engagement, this book cannot pretend to be the final word on how and when and with whom we ought to approach the critical and responsive dimension of moral life. Like all works of philosophy—but in this case self-consciously—this book may be read as a gesture. It seeks call the attention of my discipline to a concern, and to articulate it clearly enough that others might take it up in turn. Philosophical inquiry into the core concepts of morality has so often descended into obscure debates about abstract metaphysical questions, losing all but the most tenuous relevance to practical moral inquiry. Yet when it comes to moral criticism, especially in hard cases of conflict, our practice stands in desperate need of reflective tools. If this book can draw attention to that need in philosophical and wider dialogue, then it will have been an apt engagement.

Notes

1 Higher-Order Responsiveness

1. Dewey, "Morality Is Social," 714.
2. Martin Buber's ideal of "I-Thou" encounters, for example, illustrates the need to see another as more than a strategic object, or "it." See Buber, *I and Thou*. Kenneth Gergen rightly comments, "However, if moved by Buber's analysis to embrace the sacred posture of I-Thou, it is not clear what follows in terms of *action*." See Gergen, *Relational Being*, xxiii.
3. This turn of thought merits a tip of the hat to Todd Lekan's work, *Making Morality*.
4. John Martin Fischer's work on free will and responsibility initiated a literature on "reasons-responsiveness" which I will not discuss directly. I suspect that the rhetorical power of this phrase relies partly on an ambiguity. On one hand, there is a static sense in which some variable or other is or is not getting factored into deliberation (thereby counting as a reason). This sensitivity is articulated through counterfactual reflection: would this or that difference in the circumstance have made a difference to the action? On the other hand, responsiveness can have a stricter sense, which I rely upon here: there may or may not be a social and temporal responsiveness to reasons as they appear through others' responses to us—a disposition to engage in critical dialogue about our activities. The former, a kind of first-order responsiveness, is operative in Fischer's theory; the latter is implicitly invoked in his background discussion of Peter Strawson, and makes the rhetoric more attractive. See Fischer, "Responsiveness and Moral Responsibility," 81–106; and further discussion in Fischer and Ravizza, *Perspectives on Moral Responsibility*.
5. See Regan, *Case for Animal Rights*; Regan's notion of "subjects of a life" is helpful independent of what views we hold about who might count as such subjects. Descartes infamously believed that nonhuman animals could be alive without being subjects; some deep ecologists go so far as to consider niches or places as having,

in some sense, lives of their own. Here, the point is that our first-order responsiveness must attend, at least, to such subjects.

6. Swanton, *Virtue Ethics*, 21.

7. Social psychologist Kenneth Gergen has articulated “first-order morality” and “second-order morality” in a compatible way in his *Relational Being*, 360–365, though his work came to my attention only after formulating the account here.

8. Bennett, *The Act Itself*, 46–52.

9. Hare, *Moral Thinking*. Bennett largely endorses Hare’s account of levels, so that both orders *and* levels play a role in Bennett’s account.

10. I will not press the argument here, but it is not even clear that a status such as blameworthiness must serve as a constraint on blaming. The relevant exception is not the familiar specter of consequentialist scapegoating—such that the overall consequences of blaming the innocent might be favorable—but the possibility of relationships within which unusually demanding forms of blame do serve to recognize and cultivate moral agency. For example, a person might wisely blame a good friend for failing to do what is “supererogatory,” that is, for an omission that would not, from a generalized point of view, count as a blameworthy one. To insist that such a remonstration could not count as blame would save the theory (that wise blame entails blameworthiness) at the expense of gerrymandering the practical phenomenon.

11. See, for example, Baier, “Trust and Antitrust.”

12. Gruen, *Ethics and Animals*, see esp. 17–21.

13. Ibid., 20; see also de Waal, *Good Natured*.

14. The phrase “moral patient” dates at least from Warnock, *The Object of Morality*; see also McPherson, “The Moral Patient.”

15. Various uses of the phrase “moral solipsism” have occurred in philosophical writing—to mean either a variant of moral subjectivism (that one’s approval suffices to establish moral goodness), egoism, or the view that all duty is ultimately to oneself. As I intend it here, “moral solipsism” is simply a stance that treats moral agents as essentially unable to make contact with one another *as* moral agents.

16. Inspiration for articulating this diagnosis as “moral solipsism” derives from my reading of Langton’s *Sexual Solipsism*; her title phrase, similarly, provokes by way of paradox.

17. The apt term “Stoic fork” is offered by Robertson, *Philosophy of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy*, 89.

18. Epictetus, *Enchiridion*, §1:1.

19. Ibid. Some of the advice given by Stoic sages might be read in light of Aristotle's observation that our moral advice needs to steer us away from the most tempting and common vice, valorizing the opposite extreme in order to encourage departure from the easy extreme (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1109b5). Stoics do not so often champion the Aristotelian notion of a mean between extremes except in matters of appetite; Stoic virtues, like Christian virtues, are usually portrayed as absolutes. Still, sometimes disciples are encouraged not to attempt a project that is very difficult to pursue correctly, as when Epictetus suggests that a learner "altogether restrain desire," rather than expecting to be able to redirect desire well at first. Could it be that bad habits of criticism are sufficiently tempting and troublesome that all criticism ought to be dropped at first, as a step toward moderation? That this is not a likely interpretation might seem indicated by the fact that Epictetus specifically suggests that the learner engages in self-blame, while the perfectly instructed Stoic blames no one, and accepts everything that happens without wishing for it to happen in any other way.
20. Katie, *Loving What Is*.
21. Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 203 (Akademie 162).
22. Robert B. Louden argues that Kant's ethics includes a stronger strand of interest in efficaciousness and experience than most scholars have recognized. See Louden, *Kant's Impure Ethics*, esp. 20–25 and 44–46.
23. Not all Kantians embrace his ruthless rigorism; Korsgaard ("The Right to Lie") and Langton (esp. "Duty and Desolation," chapter 9 in *Sexual Solipsism*, 197–222) each explicitly defend a retreat to a more consequence-minded stance when the actual world presents us with certain systematic evils or injustices. The project of non-ideal theory in ethics will be discussed later in this chapter.
24. Lara Denis offers an extended cross-examination of Kant's claim that others' moral perfection is not a proper object of my own moral concern, finding poor argumentative grounds for this explicit position. See Denis, "Kant on the Perfection of Others."
25. Doesn't Kant's very act of publishing moral philosophy—some intended for a broad audience—show that he embraces a responsibility to engage in social criticism? I embrace the suggestion that moral philosophers are critically engaged with their actual and potential readers. Yet the content of Kant's moral theory renders such critical responsibility both marginal and obscure.
26. A rule-oriented consequentialism, meanwhile, opens the floodgate to a wide variety of considerations. Guidelines of social responsiveness might turn out to be a beneficial frame for our choices, but so might some obscure theological stance we have not yet considered—as far as the theory goes. This looser consequentialism enables us to comparatively evaluate the patterns of deliberation we bring to its

gates, but it can hardly help us invent or discover the nonconsequentialist attitudes that it might ultimately favor.

27. Bentham, *Panopticon Writings*.

28. See “Government House Utilitarianism,” chapter 4 in Goodin, *Utilitarianism as Public Policy*, 60–77.

29. Rawls, *Theory of Justice*.

30. Murphy, *Moral Demands in Nonideal Theory*, 5. Murphy argues that our moral obligation extends only so far as it would in conditions of full compliance; “one’s own fair share” serves as the guideline for moral requirements. Peter Singer and others have taken the contrary position that counterfactuals—such as about how much would be required if everyone else were contributing fairly—cannot bear directly on what our obligation is in the actual non-ideal case. (See Singer, “Famine, Affluence, and Morality.”) On both sides of this debate, however, argument focuses only on whether and how one’s first-order responsiveness, in the form of famine relief contributions, ought to differ depending on how others respond to the same demands.

31. See “Theory and Reflective Practices,” chapter 11 in Baier, *Postures of the Mind*, esp. 212–213.

32. Korsgaard, “The Right to Lie.”

33. Mills, “Ideal Theory’ as Ideology.”

34. See esp. Tessman, *Theorizing the Non-Ideal*.

35. An analogous argument has been made about punishment—that in some circumstances it requires a kind of “altruism” in the economist’s sense. (See, for example, Fehr and Gächter, “Altruistic Punishment in Humans.”) While a Kantian must hope that moral criticism can address more than the self-interest of an “offender,” the basic point is the same: narrow prudence would have us invest only the most stingy of efforts into affecting the moral character of anyone whom we might instead thwart and avoid.

36. See Krieger, “Content of Our Categories.”

37. For an ecological virtue ethics, see Curry, *Ecological Ethics*; and Sandler, *Character and Environment*. For a virtue ethics shaped by politically progressive concerns, see Tessman, *Burdened Virtues*.

38. Whether care ethics and virtue ethics should make common cause with one another is a contested question. Contrasting views are defended, for example, by Halwani, “Care Ethics and Virtue Ethics” and Sander-Staudt, “The Unhappy Marriage.” Clearly, however, both vie for position as a third alternative to the two landmark schools of modern moral thought, and their concerns overlap in some respects.

39. This particularly *apt* phrase is from Noddings, *Caring*, 5.
40. Peirce, *The Essential Peirce*, Volume 1, 296.
41. Clearly, Peirce's categories line up well against the moments of Hegel's dialectic. Indeed, Hegel's "thesis, antithesis, synthesis" triad is one of which Peirce approves. Yet Peirce distances himself from Hegel in various ways. As a practicing scientist and logician, Peirce finds Hegel's appreciation of those subjects to be lacking and naïve. More important, Hegel disparaged the first two moments as illusory, while Peirce took all three concepts to be essentially intertwined in all thought. Thirdness, on Peirce's view, marks nothing like an "overcoming" of the others, and Peirce accuses Hegel of "evolving everything out of the abstractest conception by a dialectical procedure," committing "the trifling oversight of forgetting that there is a real world with real actions and reactions." See Peirce, "The Essential Peirce," Volume 1, 256.
42. Ibid., 245–279.
43. As Cheryl Misak notes, Peirce was "no pathbreaker" when it came to moral philosophy (Misak, *Truth, Politics, Morality*, 48).
44. Peirce, "A Guess at the Riddle." Unlike Hegel for whom the third in a triad overcomes and trumps the other two, Peirce insists that contrasting terms are not like winners or losers in struggle. An ethics of thirdness, therefore, does not eclipse or obviate our interest in an ethics of firstness, or of secondness. A Peircean diagnosis of philosophical category errors does not charge attention to "the wrong" category; it insists that something further has been either reductively neglected or idealistically explained away.
45. The relation between Peirce's triad and the work of this book is complex. To think of action as response—not simply as individual conduct, or ultimately as representation—is to invoke what Peirce would call secondness. Yet responsive action, when it is apt, serves some mediating role as well—a mediation that does not look like argument or representation. Concepts of continuity, communication, and translation will play a central role in my account, and these are deeply bound up with Peircean thirds. Luckily, my task does not require hashing out the Peircean details, nor am I committed to remaining consistent with Peirce on all points. It is sufficient to note that Peirce's categories point the way toward a *positive* conception of the third term that is missing in any given dichotomy.
46. John Dewey articulates a similar broad tri-fold distinction in "Three Independent Factors in Morals." Beside the good and the right, he names "social approbation" as the third, and claims conceptions of virtue are based therein. My account resonates with this suggestion, but with the added insistence that in emphasizing "the existence of approvals and disapprovals" Dewey (quite uncharacteristically) begins to reify the very process I wish to explore. It matters greatly that encounters may take forms much more complex than approval and disapproval, and even these

two phenomena can take various paths in practice. See Dewey, “Three Independent Factors.”

47. Niebuhr, *Responsible Self*, 56.

48. Ibid., 57.

49. Holland, *Madwoman’s Reason*, xxix and 8; her challenge is to show how “the appropriate” can be distinguished from what is “appropriated” or what is subsumed under the normative governance of a culture or tradition.

50. For two recent philosophical works in this vein, see Tuomela, *Philosophy of Sociality*; and Gilbert, *Sociality and Responsibility*. Gilbert’s view is more fully social than Tuomela’s, as Tuomela countenances no true subject of action other than individuals.

51. See Foot, *Virtues and Vices*, 120.

52. As I shall argue in chapter 2, we may read a work as responsive without positing anything like a consciously responsive intention. Hence, what I am suggesting is not that particular philosophical texts can be sorted into foundational versus dialogically responsive ones, based on whether they address particular interlocutors or discuss the circumstances of their writing. Though Aristotle names Socrates and Kant names Hume, Descartes’ *Meditations* (for example) is equally well read as a response to intellectual and cultural provocations. For a brief gloss on moral philosophy that takes such a hermeneutic perspective, see Dewey, “Theories of Morals.”

2 Responsiveness Ain’t in the Head

1. Gergen, *Relational Being*, 364–365.

2. I say *most* people will see it this way because it’s possible for an ideologue to refuse to see critical responsiveness even in blame; any case of blame can be stubbornly recast as a kind of verbal adverse reaction or manipulative verbal trick rather than an attempt at engagement with others’ agency as such.

3. Haugeland, *Having Thought*, 2.

4. In chapter 5, I shall argue that critical responsiveness requires attention to embodied experience, especially because concerns are not always well captured by the existing vocabulary and standards for moral claim-making. That is, gestures of critical responsiveness should be seen as potentially *marking* the place where “what can be said” about a particular problem is not yet adequately open to articulation in a speaker’s linguistic community. Again, however, this is not to say that a critic is thinking *in terms of* such gaps of linguistic adequacy; a speaker may not be turning her attention to role of language at all. Nor does the importance of embodiment and affect entail anything like first-person transparency or direct internal access to the meaning of a critical response.

5. For illuminating discussion of imagination's role in moral agency, see Fesmire, *John Dewey and Moral Imagination*.

6. As noted in chapter 1, Freudian accounts of critical gesture also suffer from a tendency to conceive these gestures symbolically; hence such a hypothesis as applied to a specific patient is resistant not only to scientific inquiry but also to being approached as a more or less apt (or effective) gestural engagement with others.

7. While this more complex criticism may look like an appeal to simple instrumental reason, its normative force is embedded in tone and implication. First, it normatively discounts the possibility that her aim was "simply" to be mean. Then by implied contrast it marks what she has done as *not* a good way to respond. Last, the explanatory comment implicitly invokes a practical modus tollens argument whose punchline begins: "And since it's *not* reasonable to go on just being mean to each other, and you shouldn't encourage him to think so . . ."

8. Philosophers have a history of thinking of agency in tiers. At one extreme stand the acts of a "prime mover" or a "mover unmoved." At the other extreme we may imagine "mere" events—subject to being initiated but not exhibiting agency of their own (though of course an event may be part of a causal chain that extends through it). Between those extremes we can locate all notions of finite or imperfect agency—agency subject to some kind of external conditions or influences. There is hardly consensus about where to locate human agency along this spectrum, but classic theological accounts such as Augustine's took human beings' agency to be *conditioned by* and *dependent upon* divine agency in a way that did not preclude genuine agency of their own. Critical agency requires that we all be "moved movers" with respect to one another—making the spectrum not a linear array but more a bulging and buzzing network in its middle regions. "Conduct" stands in the penultimate position just shy of non-agentic events: agency over effects that themselves (by hypothesis) exhibit no agency.

9. See Langton, "Speech Acts and Unspeakable Acts." This essay also appears as chapter 1 of Langton, *Sexual Solipsism*.

10. When people contrast "words and deeds," the connotation of "deeds" may come close to this notion of conduct. But "deeds" seem deliberate and countably discrete; "conduct" is thus more flexible. The word "behavior" also comes close to what I intend by "conduct"—but "behavior" carries the burden of association with reductive psychologies such as Skinner's.

11. For actions carried out jointly, see Gilbert, *On Social Facts*. Despite the social emphasis of her work, however, her most developed pattern of argument is that agency (and related notions such as responsibility) should often be attributed to a plural subject; two or more people may act collectively as one. By contrast, higher-order responsiveness as I explore it in this book makes the different qualities and

trajectories of persons, and the nonsymmetry of interaction, crucial aspects of social engagement.

12. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 208–209.

13. One use of the word “gesture” that I will set aside here is the one popular among linguists, who mean something roughly synonymous with “gesticulation”—movements, especially of the hands, carried out while speaking or in presumptively conversational contexts: an “undercurrent” that takes place “alongside the acknowledged conversation in speech.” See, for example, Goldin-Meadow, *Hearing Gesture*, 103.

14. Mead, *Mind, Self and Society*, 145. Though Mead’s work on gesture enjoys the widest influence among American social psychologists, he credits Wundt with developing this basic account of gesture (358).

15. Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, 13–14. His objection should be understood not simply as a refusal to impute retrospective significance in the absence of communicative intention, but also as part of a broader Kantian tendency, also evident in Hannah Arendt’s work, to see the social realm as a pernicious distraction from fully public normativity.

16. Alasdair MacIntyre, for example—whose account of narrative contexts is otherwise compatible with the kind of narrow and broad framing described above—places intention at the center of his conception of action. See MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 208–209.

17. Debate among action theorists about whether and when to countenance “mental action” seems to have been easily led astray by supposed disanalogies between physical control and mental control—that I can *try* to move my finger, but can get no grip on “trying to believe” that I am, say, piloting an aircraft. But just as physical action must leverage our existing bodily structures and processes, a mental action must be specified so as to work with what we already have. The suggestion here is not that we should believe something for which there is no evidence, but that we exercise a capacity to attend to those details that make it possible to frame activity as gestural and responsive.

18. Hovland, Harvey, and Sharif, “Assimilation and Contrast Effects” (emphasis mine). These boomerang effects were originally documented by Hovland and his colleagues at Yale in the clearly positivist spirit of trying to attend *just* to the statistical patterns. The interests that might make something coherent and salient *as a pattern*, and questions of *why* a pattern might merit the interest of researchers, were thus relegated to the margins and informal commentary.

19. While utilitarians have always noted that the various *costs* of social and legal sanctions often outweigh their positive utility, they have usually implicitly reckoned these costs straightforwardly as the increasing social toll we would pay for ensuring

compliance. Reactance research entails that the cost–benefit curve for many forms of social pressure on choice resembles a cubic function: through a certain intermediate range of intensity, increased application of social pressure yields decreased compliance. See Brehm's 1966 treatise, *A Theory of Psychological Reactance*.

20. Hence, as we will note later in the chapter, social psychology remains a bifurcated field, with psychologists and sociologists tending to approach it in different ways. See Greenwood, *Disappearance of the Social*. Greenwood's own tendency is to use the word “interpersonal” rather than social to characterize Mead's approach to nonsymbolic gestures.

21. Miron and Brehm, “Reactance Theory,” 10.

22. Ibid., 13.

23. Ibid., 10.

24. Ibid., 16.

25. Among the earliest works are Deci, “Effects of Externally Mediated Rewards”; and Lepper, Greene, and Nisbett, “Undermining Children's Intrinsic Interest.”

26. Kohn, *Punished by Rewards*.

27. Their most disputed claim, the one taken up by Kohn (*ibid.*) is that rewards can easily backfire. For opposition, see Cameron, “Negative Effects of Reward”; and Reiss, “Extrinsic and Intrinsic Motivation.” I refrain from discussion of these—though many of their complaints are plausible—because they tend to acknowledge that *some* of the relevant phenomena occur, under some description. Furthermore these disputes generally retain the conceptual focus on conduct and motivation that I will go on to question. To be clear: my argument does not depend on a defense of the undermining theory, but rather on the phenomena *within* the studies and the phenomenon of the studies insofar as they illustrate researchers' interpretive activity.

28. Koestner et al., “Setting Limits on Children's Behavior.”

29. This is roughly the aim of Jules Holroyd's discussion of this question in “A Communicative Conception of Moral Appraisal.” Holroyd herself argues, taking inspiration from R. Jay Wallace, that any moral appraisal implicitly affirms that the evaluated agent *warrants* the status of membership in the moral community, thereby bundling positive competence feedback into the process of moral address. That hypothesis is addressed by Springer, “Moral Feedback and Motivation.”

30. Even psychological research that is socially oriented and sympathetic to moral agency in their subjects can fail to recognize its own “one-way mirror” pretense. For example, Norma Haan and colleagues, having placed four-year-old children in repeated prisoners'-dilemma scenarios, report that some children “*seem* [sic] to conclude . . . that the game is unfair and that the staff leader who allows such conditions to exist is inept.” Similarly, “Sam *seemed* [sic] to think that responsibility

for ameliorating the unfairness was not his but rather the adult researcher's. (Several children seemed incredulous that the adult was so lacking in foresight that they faced this contretemps.) Children who explicitly voiced distress about being placed in a prisoners'-dilemma "game," in other words, are not granted the real move of addressing researchers with complaints about the experiment structure or with a complaint, later, about being sent home without any of the pennies the researcher had disbursed to the more savvy children who had strategized well. See Haan, Aerts, and Cooper, *On Moral Grounds*, 294–296.

31. Marcel Griaule provocatively provides his own parody of such positivist field notes; in an "objective description of certain episodes from my first trip to Abyssinia" he describes the aftermath of a conflict between himself and his African caravan: "There followed blows, given by the White Man [Griaule himself] and not returned" (Clifford, *Predicament of Culture*, 76).

32. Miron and Brehm, "Reactance Theory," 10.

33. Cowan and Presbury, "Meeting Client Resistance and Reactance."

34. Suzanne Langer writes of Freud that "his great contribution to the philosophy of mind has been the realization that human behavior is not only a food-getting strategy . . . every move is at the same time a gesture" (Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key*, 51). Because he reads patients' gestures as symbolic, however, Freud cannot see himself as addressed by them; the theory of transference allows him to invoke the same one-way mirror as laboratory researchers.

35. Bilgrami, "What Is a Muslim."

36. Ibid., 214.

37. Ibid., 213.

38. Ibid., 215.

39. Ibid., 212.

40. See, for example, Woller, Buboltz, and Loveland, "Psychological Reactance."

41. Card, *Unnatural Lottery*.

42. Tessman, *Burdened Virtues*.

43. Meyers, "Emotion and Heterodox Moral Perception."

44. This is roughly the approach to moral psychology pursued by Joshua Knobe, Stephen Stich, and John Doris; and these thinkers tend to discuss only that model. See, for example, Doris and Stich, "Moral Psychology."

45. Swanton, *Virtue Ethics*, 13.

46. Hacking, "Looping Effects"; compare to Gergen, "Social Psychology as History."

3 Communicating Moral Concern

1. Strawson, "Freedom and Resentment," 5.
2. Ibid., 5.
3. Watson, *Agency and Answerability*, 221 (emphasis mine).
4. Among those who share this practical priority there are still questions about how to proceed. So, my distinction is not just the one Cheshire Calhoun draws between the "justification" and "point" of reproach (Calhoun, "Responsibility and Reproach"); rather, it is between multiple accounts of the point of moral criticism.
5. The word "expressivism" has been put to multiple philosophical uses. Expressivism about the meaning of moral claims is different from expressivism about the point of criticism as a practice—the latter being my topic here. One could have an entirely cognitivist and realist account of how moral claims can be justified, and yet still claim that the point of articulating them, in practice, is to demonstrate or exhibit one's beliefs or reasoning—rather than to secure agreement, or compliance, or some other result.
6. Some consequentialist thinkers deny this claim; they believe that the point of any moral practice is to be understood in terms of certain outcomes such as general happiness, and that those outcomes might best be advanced by agents who are not particularly aiming to promote them. Such a divorce between practice and theory is not compatible with a commitment to philosophy as reflection on practical problems. To ask *what the practical point of criticism is* is to ask what critics ought to care about and attend to in practice.
7. Strawson, "Freedom and Resentment," 3, 4, 22, 27. Though Strawson surely means to impugn consequentialist approaches to blame, not all concern for consequences reduces to an interest in regulating behavior.
8. Frye, *Politics of Reality*, 85.
9. Campbell, "Being Dismissed," 49.
10. I shall return, in chapter 5, to the question of what it means to hear a concern *through* another, rather than treating a concern as *in* the critic's mind.
11. Campbell, "Being Dismissed," 49, 51, and 49, respectively.
12. Walker, *Moral Understandings*.
13. For a classic articulation, see Alston, "Expressing."
14. Wallace, *Responsibility and the Moral Sentiments*, 69.
15. This is not to say that there is no concern over whether one's indignation is recognized as such; expressive speech acts do aim to make an impression, but they

achieve their effect simply by being received as expressions of a certain sort. These matters will be revisited in chapter 4.

16. The latter view—that such phenomena exist but do not substantially affect most moral criticism—is defended in Holroyd, “Communicative Conception.” For discussion, see chapter 2 as well as Springer, “Moral Feedback and Motivation.”

17. Murdoch, *Sovereignty of Good*.

18. See, for example, Noddings, *Caring*; Kittay, *Love's Labor*; and Held, *Ethics of Care*.

19. King, *Testament of Hope*, 291.

20. Ibid., 295.

21. Ibid., 301.

22. See Marcus, “Moral Dilemmas and Consistency.”

23. In addition to Gary Watson, to be discussed shortly, these include R. Jay Wallace, David Shoemaker, John Fischer, and Mark Ravizza.

24. Sneddon, “Moral Responsibility,” 261.

25. Ibid., 250. Emphasis mine on responsibility being true “of someone”—it is precisely here that responsibility is likened to a property of the individual, however settled by social variables. See chapter 1 on blameworthiness, trustworthiness, employment-worthiness, and so on.

26. Watson, *Agency and Answerability*, 230–231.

27. Ibid., 229.

28. Ibid., 231.

29. Ibid., 233.

30. Darwall, *Second-Person Standpoint*.

4 Dynamics of Engagement

1. Fogel, “Developing through Relationships,” 27.

2. Indeed, I argued in chapter 3 that some of the work that champions “expression”—particularly some work done by feminists on moral address and moral emotion—better fits the communicative model.

3. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 255, 309.

4. Even when speech act theory extends to acknowledge “unbounded action,” the point is to acknowledge temporal extension, but not to highlight interdependence or interpenetration of activities.

5. Austin's initial lectures on speech act theory were delivered in 1955, and his 1956 piece "A Plea for Excuses" foreshadows one line of Strawson's argument against metaphysical readings of responsibility. Strawson's "Freedom and Resentment" lecture took place in 1960 and was published (in article form) in 1962; Austin's *How to Do Things with Words* became available in print in 1975. Strawson was also himself directly engaged in scholarly debate with Austin and Searle over the finer details of speech act theory during the years leading up to the publication of his 1974 volume *Freedom and Resentment*.
6. Austin, "Plea for Excuses," 4–5.
7. Since the ground for speech act metaphors is muscular activity, it is worth noting that researchers in the field of human motor control recognize how little activity perfectly fits the ballistic model—what they call "closed-loop" as opposed to "open-loop" movement. Yet their laboratory research privileges closed-loop actions simply because the observation of continuously responsive activities would be prohibitively complex and open ended, the very opposite of a controlled study. Relatively ballistic acts, such as throwing-at-that-target-on-this-cue, allow for quantitative data comparing release times, distance, and directional accuracy across trials. Dynamic activity, such as dancing or wrestling, has no linear trajectory fixed in advance. Dances and wrestling matches may be compared, but not studied, as such, in the lab. See Kelso, *Human Motor Behavior*, 94.
8. Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, 282.
9. Gu, "Impasse of Perlocution," 420.
10. Fogel, *Developing through Relationships*, 27.
11. Hornsby, "Feminism in Philosophy of Language," 87.
12. Coates, "Gossip Revisited."
13. Marcu, "Perlocutions," 1728.
14. Ibid., 1726, attributed to DiClemente, Prochaska, and Gilbertini, "Self-Efficacy."
15. Langton, "Virtues of Resentment."
16. Ibid., 260.
17. That speech act theory has a particular salience for Langton herself is clear from other works of hers. See Langton, "Speech Acts."
18. Fogel, *Developing through Relationships*, 21–22.
19. Gibbard, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings*, 140.
20. Räikkä, "On Irrational Guilt."

21. McGraw, "Guilt Following Transgression"; Ferguson, Olthof, and Stegge, "Temporal Dynamics of Guilt."
22. Amodio, Devine, and Harmon-Jones, "Dynamic Model of Guilt," 524.
23. Steele, "White Guilt," 501.
24. Hardin, "Tragedy of the Commons," 1247, citing Paul Goodman in *New York Review of Books* 10 (May 1968): 8.
25. Frye, "Response to Lesbian Ethics," 53.
26. Ibid., 55.
27. Dewey, "Reflex Arc Concept."
28. Damasio, "Somatic Marker Hypothesis."

5 Unconventional Threads of Communication

1. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 5–7.
2. Addelson, *Impure Thoughts*, 13 (emphasis mine).
3. Sarah Grimké as quoted in Addelson, 21.
4. Ibid., 25.
5. Ibid., 21.
6. Ibid., 25.
7. Ibid., 26.
8. Ibid., 32.
9. Ibid., 32.
10. Ibid., 32.
11. Lerner, *Feminist Thought of Sarah Grimké*, 90; Emerson's phrase appears in "War," see Emerson, *The Complete Works*, 160.
12. Addelson, *Impure Thoughts*, 31.
13. Ibid., 31.
14. Ibid., 32.
15. Brandom, *Making It Explicit*, 614.
16. See Crary, *Beyond Moral Judgment*; and Murdoch, *Sovereignty of Good*.
17. One remarkable exception within the broad philosophy of mind tradition, here, is Andy Clark, who reaches to situate neural network processes within a socially and linguistically elaborated model of agency. See Clark, "Word and Action."

18. Dewey, "Pattern of Inquiry."

19. This line of speculation about animals' experience of indeterminacy is not intended to draw a clear line between human beings and all other organisms. Any being with a sufficient level of socially oriented complexity might be expected to participate to some degree in the practices of carrying and communicating concerns in this sense. Social primates—who are clearly capable of trying on different approaches to the same situation or object—might draw one another's attention to provocatively indeterminate things or circumstances, precisely so as to recruit more attention to the question of what to make of it. Interspecies communication of concern is also plausible: a dog might plausibly alert a human companion to some anomalous or curious situation, without any further anticipation of what response is called for.

20. The account here offers a dramatically different framing of what Christine Korsgaard presents as humanity's "fall" from the Eden of animal affordances. Korsgaard claims human beings are cursed and blessed with the self-consciousness that allows us to distinguish description ("That will be painful") from prescription ("Avoid it!") and hence with the need to "constitute ourselves" by choosing our rules. Humanity seems to confront the moral problem exactly where other animals are graced by instinct. (See Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution*.) On the contrary, we should recognize that all animals face problems, but prominent within the human repertoire of responsive options is to flag a problem for joint attention, keeping tabs on it—and potential variants—over time. On this view, the world of other animals is no Eden. They may face just as many practical crises as we do, but they must usually plump for a direction and get on with things—perhaps surviving, but not to tell the tale. A talent for distilling minimally prescriptive descriptions might be one adaptation for juggling practical problems, not the cause of our having practical problems in the first place.

21. The phrase "essentially indexical" recalls Perry's famous article "The Problem of the Essential Indexical." But we should not agree with Perry that indexicals (most notably "I," but also "this" and "here" and "now") supply key content within particular practically oriented thoughts. No ineffable belief about which identity is one's own, or which time and place is now, needs to be coupled with an indexical thought in order to make action possible (Millikan, *White Queen Psychology*, 265–277). Pointing supplies not the content of a single thought, but a skill for drawing multiple references together as picking out the same thing. Hence the ability to point, in both straightforward and extended ways, is essentially temporal and transitive. The skill of pointing is needed to make sure that whatever is being picked out at this moment can again be picked out at the next moment—whether by myself or by another. Success depends on one's finger (or posture, or gaze) establishing a direction reliably enough to facilitate the tracking of whatever is noticed. For this reason, indexical skills undergird the continuity of attention that is required anytime we recognize ourselves to be shifting our grasp on the same thing. If in one moment I suspect there is a skunk near me, and in a subsequent moment I clearly identify

my cat near me, the latter recognition will be no relief unless some continuous tracking process reassures me that it—that very stimulus I have flagged as a potential skunk—is itself only my dear cat after all. If I have “lost track of” my spatiotemporal relation to that skunk-like presence, I might at best convince myself to relax and dismiss the skunk alarm, but I can no longer clarify that impression in light of the new evidence.

22. See Weberman, “Heidegger and the Disclosive Character of the Emotions.”

23. Grice, “Meaning.”

24. Indeed, the line of thought that undermines Grice’s dichotomy may lead inexorably toward the Nietzschean conclusion that the appearance of fixed meaning in the domain of accountable claims is an illusory ideal about which we ought to be ambivalent. All cognitive activity and communication, then, might be approached as signs under cultivation, or emergent signs. However, I am inclined to suggest that the lack of perfect cases of representational claim making need not lead to any reluctance to discern and engage with accountable claims as such. For such a practice is essential to the level of normative complexity that characterizes human life.

25. Various arguments for ontological continuity between (merely) natural signs and full-blown intentional claims are persuasive. They focus on reproductively proliferating natural signals, for which we may speak of a token that “misfires” because circumstances differ in relevant ways from the circumstances under which the sign mechanism has won its place in nature. The philosophical program there is to comment on the variety of sign phenomena nature produces. If some chemical manipulation can cause a cat to manifest a hair-raising pattern that normally means fear or anger, there is a sense in which a relaxed lab cat’s raised-fur reaction “misrepresents”; it is a “false alarm” with respect to the meaning that attends its proper function. (See Denkel, “Natural Meaning.”) Yet they secure their ontologically naturalist continuum while retaining the dichotomy between claim-oriented and clue-reading stances toward events. My project is different: to point out that the opposition between Grice’s stances or “senses of meaning” is too stark.

26. Alas, at least one philosopher turns Grice’s terminological distinction nearly on its head, by taking the phrase “natural sign” to mean something that is essentially (that is by its own nature) a sign—nearly the opposite of what has since become accepted use. (See Addis, “Natural Signs.”)

27. An apparent exception may prove the depth of the effect. Tim Wharton comes close to softening Grice’s opposition: “Rather than the dichotomy Grice envisaged, there is a continuum of cases between the two extremes” (Wharton, “Natural Pragmatics and Natural Codes”). Yet his analysis ultimately yields layers of information and inference prompting, passivity, and intelligence. Wharton describes ostensive communication as generally “composite”—a “combination of showing and saying” (122). His discussion of examples retains the Gricean suggestion that the point of

drawing or permitting attention to a natural sign (or simulation), such as a shiver or smile, is to stimulate an inference that allows one's propositional attitudes to come across clearly (or to mislead someone about the same).

28. For illustrating the possibility of patients' presenting implausible claims in connection with conditions that certainly do merit concern, Oliver Sacks's work is rich in examples. See Sacks, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*.

29. Jones, "Second-Hand Moral Knowledge."

30. Ibid., 60.

31. Ibid.

32. Will it be objected that there is necessarily some implicit claim that a hearer accepts? Surely one can be ferreted out or constructed ad hoc in any such case. But I will press the analogy from chapter 4: the transfer of concern is like the transfer of a baby, or a football, or a suitcase. There is a coordination of attention around which successful transfer revolves. Is there some claim that both the passer and the receiver share when a football is successfully passed, and some claim that we share in common when a suitcase is handed up and successfully grasped? Perhaps so, but the skills of focusing attention on the same task are in the foreground, and the probable existence of something or other that both people would affirm about it is a fact that comes along for the ride, as it were.

33. Jones, "Second-Hand Moral Knowledge," 67 (emphasis in original).

34. Thus Grice's distinction between natural and "non-natural" meaning parallels Strawson's distinction, discussed in chapter 3, between the "objective" causally oriented attitude and the "participant" attitudes of accountability. While Strawson's dichotomy presented us with too sharp an opposition between ways of reacting to what people do (thus obscuring communicative skills), Grice's dichotomy presents us with too sharp an opposition between ways of interpreting people (again obscuring communicative skills in a different way).

35. For elaboration, see Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*; and Bartky, *Femininity and Domination*.

36. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 238, 1170b7.

37. Kukla and Lance, *Yo! and Lo!*

38. Toft, *External Inquiry*.

39. For a philosophical elaboration of "what is at issue" and "what is at stake" among interlocutors who do not begin with or achieve agreement about particular claims, see Rouse, "Practice Theory."

40. Barry, *Why Social Justice Matters*.

6 Contingency beyond Contagion

1. Walker, "Seeing Power in Morality," 7.
2. Addelson, *Moral Passages*.
3. Prior to the rise of a more quantitative approach to sociology, Alfred Schütz was among those who pioneered discussion of social fields, for example, see Schütz, "The Stranger."
4. For helpful discussions of the tension between agency and structure, see Fuchs, "Beyond Agency"; and Fligstein, "Social Skill." For critical consideration of "field" and related metaphors in sociology, see Silber, "Space, Fields, Boundaries."
5. Abend, "Two Main Problems," 87.
6. Swanton, *Virtue Ethics*.
7. Addelson, "Why Philosophers Should Become Sociologists (and Vice Versa)."
8. Ibid., 120.
9. Walker, *Moral Understandings*, 79, 99.
10. Walker, "Seeing Power in Morality," 6.
11. Martin, "What Is Field Theory?"
12. Ibid., 28.
13. Walker, "Geographies of Responsibility," 38.
14. Walker, "Geographies of Responsibility."
15. The basic philosophical move here is Deweyan in spirit: stimulus and response are to be distinguished only functionally and perspectively; the difference is not in the events themselves. See Dewey, "Reflex Arc Concept."
16. Walker, *Moral Understandings*, 30.
17. Walker, "Geographies of Responsibility," 38.
18. Smiley, *Moral Responsibility*.
19. See, for example, "Models of Public Space," chapter 3 in Benhabib, *Situating the Self*, 89–120.
20. Smiley, *Moral Responsibility*, 189.
21. Moody-Adams, *Fieldwork in Familiar Places*.
22. It is this more continuously textured account of boundaries that is illuminated, for example, by Gloria Anzaldúa's reflections in *Borderlands/La Frontera*.

23. Spector and Kitsuse, *Constructing Social Problems*; Hilgartner and Bosk, “Rise and Fall of Social Problems.”
24. Pfohl, “Discovery’ of Child Abuse.”
25. Ibid., 310.
26. Ibid., 315.
27. Loseke, *Social Problems*.
28. Woolgar and Pawluch, “Ontological Gerrymandering”; Ian Hacking, “Looping Effects of Human Kinds.”
29. Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics*. Though Kant does not rescind the distinction in other works, the notion of *permission* that seems intertwined with the possibility of hypothetical imperatives runs counter to Kant’s more detailed work on virtue. Those who take Kantian duties seriously may find all of their positive projects subject to the demands of imperfect duties.
30. Adorno, *Metaphysics*, 116.
31. Pfohl, “Discovery’ of Child Abuse.” 310.
32. Dawkins, “Memes.”
33. To be clear, sociologists in this tradition generally are engaged social critics at the same time; this is betrayed, at times, by their discussion of various *failures* of attempts at solution. See Woolgar and Pawluch, “Ontological Gerrymandering,” for discussion of how sociologists in this research tradition selectively adopt evaluative lenses and choose among commitments despite the mantle of value neutrality.
34. Silvey, “Sweatshops.”
35. Young, “Responsibility and Global Labor Justice.”
36. Lugones, “Playfulness, ‘World’-Travelling, and Loving Perception.”
37. Silvey, “Sweatshops,” 202.
38. See Haraway, “Situated Knowledges.”
39. Yet another concern that Silvey becomes able to make vivid—to readers of an academic geography journal—is how conventions of academic detachment make it difficult to recognize the academic situation as an embedded one within which larger social problems can be reflected or obscured, amplified or transformed.

7 The Transformation of Concerns

1. The etymological difference between “economy” and “ecology” is the difference between “nomos” (connoting human laws of ownership and distribution), and

“logos” (connoting a kind of order, law, or meaning that cannot be traced to human standards). Hence we should expect that economies tend toward the manageable and conventional, while ecologies tend toward orders within which we are already embedded, orders that are therefore harder to survey and articulate.

2. For an ecological account of differences in beliefs and cultural systems, see Naess, *Ecology of Wisdom*.

3. Brennan and Pettit, “Hidden Economy of Esteem,” 78 (emphasis mine).

4. It is hard to find a representative passage that will not come across as overly dense. But here is a sampling: “The economic process, objectively considered, is one of securing the redistribution of the foci of energy in such a way that the lines of discharge of that energy shall effect more with relation to the maintenance of life activity. . . . The philosophy of current economics [fails] to realize that the economic process is [a] development in . . . nature. . . . [The] tendency has been to look on the side of human selfishness, the attempt to satisfy these wants, and to get more pleasure for one’s self. Well, people might have wants . . . and might put forth their efforts for their attainment; and the results, if they were not of a particular kind, would not be the relatively consistent and orderly sphere of industrial activities which we have now in the development . . . of tools, of machinery and invention.” (Dewey, *Lectures*, 389–390.)

5. Plato, *Collected Dialogues*; see book I, “Republic,” 575–844.

6. We should note that this language of “coordination” does not necessarily involve us in any notion of simultaneous collectivity or “publicity” of the kind set aside in chapter 6. I have avoided conflating sociality with collectivity precisely because many social “coordinations” involve serial and geographically distributed agency.

7. It would be misleading to say, however, that a critic’s beliefs are irrelevant to critical competence from the economic perspective. Many beliefs serve either to attune people to certain concerns or to insulate them from concerns. Prejudicial beliefs about the worth of a whole demographic category of people, for example, are false beliefs that directly interfere with effective moral agency of this economic kind.

8. Sen, *Poverty and Famines*.

9. Sen’s choice of the normatively charged concept of “entitlement” here has drawn controversy; it means not moral entitlement but practical entitlement within the context of the geographical, social, political, and legal structures that must actually be coped with in meeting one’s needs.

10. Sen, “Well-Being, Agency and Freedom,” 184.

11. See “Virtue and Reason,” chapter 3 in McDowell, *Mind, Value, and Reality*, 50–73.

12. Ibid., 73.

13. Blum, “Moral Perception and Particularity.” This is one of two claims Blum makes in response. His first claim is that McDowell implies too tight a connection between perception and action, failing to acknowledge the value of good moral perception in cases that lead to awareness but not action. On this point, we can follow Blum halfway. Taking on moral concerns does always require some anticipation of how to carry a concern forward—if only through further attention and communication—but the anticipation need not involve prescriptive detail; and often our prospects for acting on a concern turn out to be insignificant in practice.

14. Ibid., 716.

15. Ibid., 712.

16. The word “ecology” is particularly vulnerable to casual misappropriation, especially insofar as biological ecology marks a field that is young, not dominated by systematic general theories, and yet urgently important. It is no surprise, then, that many inquiries into human phenomena appeal to suggestive ecological metaphors. Yet at least some such appeals do not follow through on the reach of the concept of ecology. For example, Owen Flanagan has argued that “ethics” should be understood as part of “human ecology.” By this he means that ethics is “concerned with saying what contributes to the well-being of humans, human groups, and human individuals in particular natural and social environments.” He thus recommends that “normative ethical knowledge” be “gleaned from thinking about human good relative to particular ecological niches.” Yet we should note that Flanagan’s version of “ethics as human ecology” seems to follow in the tradition of presenting a system of moral *beliefs* (or *norms* or *commitments*) at the center of ethics. His gesture toward the many possible forms of moral life is thus not far from arguments that frame morality as a *grammar* of human interaction. The point of Flanagan’s sort of comparison is to persuade us that moral norms should be evaluated not in isolation from one another, but rather in virtue of their roles within a working system, where multiple systems might of course work equally well—say, in the context of different cultures. Yet when moral critics think of morality as the grammar of social life—something like the “blueprint” for a local ecology (if that were possible)—we are bound to think that any moral critic’s task is to get the local grammar right and then nudge others toward better compliance with that grammar. See Flanagan, *Self Expressions*, 133.

17. Code, *Ecological Thinking*, 5.

18. Joas, *Creativity of Action*.

19. It bears repeating that an ecological mode of understanding, like an economic mode, is not straightforwardly open to confirmation or disconfirmation. To bring ecological concepts into our discussion is not to posit any sort of special

metaphysical dimension of human beings that renders us capable of ducking out of the regular patterns that interest most natural and social scientists. Rather, it is to say that human life acquires complexities that can only be appreciated with the help of such concepts.

20. This line of thought has been expressed by my economist colleague, Gil Skillman [private conversation], with reference to prisoner's dilemma theory. There may be genetic variables that dispose some creatures toward cooperative responses and others toward more selfish responses; and some ecological dynamics may play out in that contrast, but such creatures are not economic agents, for they themselves do not face prisoner's dilemmas. They do not deliberate, and cooperation and defection are not strategies but instincts in such cases. As soon as one speaks of deliberation and strategy, one must invoke agents who are poised to recognize a range of options among which to deliberate.

21. Giddens, *Constitution of Society*.

22. Joas, *Creativity of Action*, 167.

23. Ibid., 167.

24. Card, *Unnatural Lottery*; Tessman, *Burdened Virtues*.

25. Milgram, *Obedience to Authority*; Zimbardo, *Lucifer Effect*.

26. Code, *Ecological Thinking*, 6.

8 Critical Engagement with Virtue Ethics

1. Williams, *Ethics and Limits of Philosophy*, 7.

2. Intuitionism and “commonsense morality” are also friendly to pluralism; however, I take these doctrines, by themselves, to be theoretically shallow. Rule-consequentialist theories may be pluralist about the kinds of considerations that tend to promote the general good—but then we can ask about how the reflective agent might organize the various considerations she employs in practice. If her subjective orientation to action is virtue ethical, it will admit of less systematicity than if her subjective orientation to action is organized around, say, Kantian principles.

3. Swanton, *Virtue Ethics*, 5. This distinction between “virtue ethics” and “virtue theory” has achieved some traction among those recently publishing moral philosophy, but the terminology is unfortunate. The phrase “virtue theory” had been freely used, prior to Driver’s stipulated usage, in connection with any moral theory that made central reference to virtue, without implying the reduction of virtue to anything else.

4. Thomas W. Smith argues that the promise to reveal how many virtues there are is resolved by Aristotle, and that the number is *one* (Smith, *Revaluing Ethics*, 85).

Regardless of whether Aristotle is ultimately won over to the Socratic view, however, it is clear that he spends considerable time giving examples of moral virtues, and these virtues are not neatly enumerated. For example, some virtues are variations on others (magnificence being a variation on generosity, for example) and proper shame appears in Book IV of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, but is discounted as a “quasi-virtue.” Friendship will make a later appearance as a virtue in some sense despite not being discussed in Books III and IV.

5. Calhoun, “Virtue of Civility”; Ransome, *Moral Reflection*; Potter, *How Can I Be Trusted?*; Woodruff, *Reverence*.

6. In this connection, we could invoke an argument with a now-familiar structure in ethics: that a concern for character, like the concern to maximize pleasure, may be “self-effacing.” Focusing on one’s own character can in fact be detrimental to the very thing that supposedly matters, namely, one’s own character. Sorensen, “Paradox of Moral Worth”; Keller, “Virtue Ethics is Self-Effacing.”

7. Swanton, *Virtue Ethics*, 19.

8. Nussbaum, “Non-Relative Virtues,” 202 (emphasis in original).

9. Plato, *Collected Dialogues*, 377–379 (Stephanus 93–95).

10. In particular, Aristotle’s actual account of anger is highly driven by a preoccupation with whether to extract punishment for various insults to one’s status or property—or to people that are in some sense subordinates or associates of the self being provoked. See, for example, Stocker, “Aristotle’s Angry Man.” While it may have something in common with Strawson’s narrow account of resentment, it does not extend far into the emotional territory of what Strawson calls “indignation.” Yet something like a capacity for “vicarious address”—or being potentially aroused into concern by problems that do not resolve around the self—is essential to critical engagement.

11. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1094a23–24.

12. See “Virtue and Reason,” chapter 3 in McDowell, *Mind, Language and Reality*, 50–73.

13. *Ibid.*, 54.

14. Ruth Millikan, “Pushmi-Pullyu Representations.”

15. See “Virtue and Reason,” chapter 3 in McDowell, *Mind, Language and Reality*, esp. 62.

16. *Ibid.*, 70.

17. John McDowell writes that “awareness that values are contentious tells against an unreflective contentment with the current state of one’s critical outlook, and in favour of a readiness to suppose that there may be something to be learned from

people with whom one's first inclination is to disagree. . . . A sensible person will never be confident that his evaluative outlook is incapable of improvement" (see "Values and Secondary Qualities," chapter 7 in McDowell, *Mind, Value, and Reality*, esp. 144–145). Yet insofar as McDowell lacks an account of dialogue *within* the process of perception, we cannot yet see *how* disagreement could undermine the saliences and silencing phenomena posited at the level of perception in his earlier argument, "Virtue and Reason."

18. See "Values and Secondary Qualities," chapter 7 in McDowell, *Mind, Value, and Reality*, esp. 149.

19. Swanton, *Virtue Ethics*, 249.

20. *Ibid.*, 249.

21. *Ibid.*, 253.

22. Angle, *Sagehood*, 174–175.

23. *Ibid.*, 175.

24. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 188–190.

25. Swanton, *Virtue Ethics*, 254. This definition of a problem is, not coincidentally for our purposes, much narrower than Dewey's definition of a problematic situation. See chapter 5.

26. *Ibid.*, 252.

27. King, *Testament of Hope*, 252. For us to have faith, as King does, that this arc of the universe "bends toward justice," it is not required that we endorse a utopian vision of a society that will have transcended *all* moral problems. Nor must we believe that anyone who helps to bend that arc is already possessed of a full conception of what ideal or just action will look like.

28. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1105a31–33.

29. *Ibid.*, 1179b11–14; 1180a12.

30. This translation of *Analects* is Legge's early and influential one; other translations do soften the impression of rigidity. Confucius, *Analects*, 92 (16:9).

31. *Ibid.*, 94 (17:2).

32. Here the more vivid translation appears in Confucius, *Original Analects*, 23 (5:9).

33. *Ibid.*, 161 (17:2).

34. Graham, *Disputers of the Dao*, 426.

35. Ivanhoe and Van Norden, *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, 125–126.

36. It may be reasonable to raise interpretive doubts, however, about the nature of Confucius's belief (or his followers' belief) in the perfection of the Golden Age of King Wen, King Wu, and the Duke of Chou. One possibility—though it would lead us afield from the current discussion—is that a kind of transcendental presupposition lies behind Confucius's confidence about the ideal past. As Monique Wittig says, "Remember. . . . Make an effort to remember; and if you cannot remember, invent" (Wittig, *Les Guérillères*, 89). Projecting a lively conviction that some ideal has *actually occurred* in the history of humanity is one way to bolster our confidence that the ideal is *possible*.

37. Kupperman, "Feminism as Radical Confucianism," 54.

38. See Bartky, *Femininity and Domination*, chapter 1. The suggestion that we take the experience of contradiction as a call to transform the world—and not only our beliefs about it—comes to Bartky by way of Marx, though the historicist appeal to the pivotal role of contradiction is Hegel's.

39. Swanton, *Virtue Ethics*, 287.

40. Tessman, *Burdened Virtues*, 34.

41. Tessman's amendment to Aristotle is thus analogous to an amendment Christine Korsgaard and Rae Langton offer for Kant. Their argument is that we must sometimes put the personal expression of idealistic principles—"Act as if you were legislating for a Kingdom of Ends"—on a back burner in order to make the non-ideal world safer for moral projects. Langton calls this "strategy, for the kingdom's sake" (Langton, *Sexual Solipsism*, 510). Tessman's argument can be read as an insistence that some people must put the personal embrace of eudaimonistic ideals on hold *exactly because* a regard for the long-term realizability of eudaimonia requires it.

41. Tessman, *Burdened Virtues*, 8.

Concluding Reflections

1. Hoy, *Critical Resistance*, 23.

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Index

- Abortion, 19, 33
- Absurd moral concerns, 34
- Academia, 189
- Accountable claims
- in contrast to passive clues, 141–147
 - contrasted against concerns, 154
 - and participant attitude, 149
 - and skepticism, 282n24
- Accusation, 13, 155
- Action
- vs. coordinated activity, 113
 - pointed, 49
 - as reference to other action, 11
 - representation as, 62
 - as social, 39–69
 - understood as individuated and distinct, 84, 100
- Activism, 130–132, 151, 188–191
- Activity, 100–102, 235
- Act-utilitarianism, 16
- Addelson, Kathryn Pyne, 130–134, 164, 166
- Address, 92–93. *See also* Moral address
- Adorno, Theodor, 184
- Advocacy, 177, 228
- Affordance(s)
- animals and instinctual, 281n20
 - for hearers, 174
 - indeterminacy as source of problem, 137, 137
 - social, 141, 167
- Agency
- beyond deliberate decisions, 219
 - demand for, 188
 - economic, 196
 - of economists, 204
 - as relational, 215
 - as resistance or acceptance, 107
 - and social explanation, 128, 164
- Agent-closure, 101, 103–104
- Agents, 16, 17
- Agnosticism about moral verdicts, 31, 148
- Aim of critical engagement, 226. *See also* Critical responsiveness, aim of
- Alienation, 63, 65, 161, 248, 264
- and motivation, 58–60
- Ambivalence, 6, 10, 153, 175
- American philosophy, 256. *See also* Pragmatist philosophy
- Analysis, 236
- Anger. *See also* Resentment
- and Aristotle's approach to critical engagement, 225
 - and guilt, 116
 - and heterodox moral perception, 66
 - and insults in Aristotle, 289n10
 - as perlocutionary effect, 103
 - as phase in communicating concern, 118–123
 - poorly received, 78–79
 - as reactive attitude, 109

- Anger (cont.)
 and recognition of moral address, 91
 virtue in relation to, 221
 and virtuous response to injustice, 251–252
- Angle, Stephen, 236–237
- Animals, nonhuman
 and experiences of indeterminacy, 281n19
 extinction of as moral concern, 34
 facing organic problems, 137–138
 as moral agents, 10–11
 and myth of humanity's fall, 281n20
 as subjects of a life, 278n5
 subordinated by humanist ideals, 262
- Anti-theory, 217
- Anxiety, 120–121
- Appropriateness, 27–28
- Approval and disapproval, 55, 58. *See also* Praise and blame
- Apt(ness), 31, 71, 82–83, 89, 95, 97–98, 143, 261
 as ideal of responsiveness, 28–29, 51–52
- Arc
 of anger, 123
 of involvement in moral concern, 226
 of the moral universe, 240
 of phases of response, 228
- Aristotle, 67, 233, 237, 288n4, 269n19, 272n52, 291n41
 and aiming for virtue, 230–231
 and anger, 251
 approach to critical engagement, 225–226
 and available examples of virtue, 244
 and enumeration of virtues, 218
 and fixed character traits, 240–242
 and friendship, 152, 256, 247
 and ideal of eudaimonia, 250
 ideal of phronimos, 249
 and unity of virtues, 217
- and vertical modes of moral learning, 246–247
 and voluntary action, 221–222
- Assertion. *See also* Accountable claims
 as accountable, 145
 vs. conduct, 133
 in connection with concerns, 140–141
- Ataraxia, 12–13
- Attention. *See also* Joint attention
 to aim of communicating concern, 231
 as broader domain than judgment, 135
 within cognition, 30
 continuity of despite disagreement, 155–161
 coordination of, 95
 and emergency of social problems, 181
 and emotion, 123
 indexical form of, 138
 joint, 98
 to moral concerns, 71
 as philosophical concept, 84, 111
 pivotal to nonprescriptive engagement, 90–91
 as pivotal to social interaction, 112
 portrayed as "inner," 136
 role of, missing from social problem research, 186
- Attitude(s). *See also* Expression;
 Reactive attitudes
 implicit, 23
 objective and participant, 72–74, 65, 149
 propositional, 85, 99
 strategic, 150
- Attunement
 in apt gestures, 52
 as apt metaphor, 230, 260
 and continuity of responsiveness, 102
 differences of, 253
 to indications of uptake, 111–113

- lacking in nonvirtuous agents, 241
as relational phenomenon, 255–256
- Aufhebung, 36
- Auschwitz, 184
- Austin, J. L., 99–101, 103–104, 104, 106
- Authenticity, 58, 63, 165
- Author invariance, 205
- Authority, 77, 96, 155, 211. *See also* Agency
- Authorship, 145
- Autism, 207
- Autonomy
- failure of, 61–62
 - and moral solipsism, 15
 - and reactive attitudes, 73
 - in self-determination theory, 59
 - sense of, affected by critical pressures, 58–59
 - and social conditions, 66
 - transcendent forms rejected, 38
- Background conditions for criticism, 81
- Backward-looking
- direction of demands, 37
 - direction of judgment, 83
- Baier, Annette, 19, 20
- Ballistic acts
- and coincidental success, 255
 - vs. dynamic acts, hard to distinguish, 101–102
 - and gender, 106
 - in motor control research, 279n7
 - in speech act theory, 98, 100–101
- Barry, Brian, 158–159
- Bartky, Sandra, 248
- Basis of virtue, 228–229
- Behavior. *See also* Conduct
- adaptive (in Mead), 49
 - anomalous, 54–55, 60
 - vs. conduct, 273n10
 - coping with, 5
 - vs. gesture, 39, 36
- regulation of, 73–77, 87
- revolutionary, 130
- Behaviorism, 55–56
- Beneficence, 27, 228
- Bennett, Jonathan, 6–10
- Bentham, Jeremy, 17
- Besire, 31. *See also* Pushmi-pullyu representations
- Bilgrami, Akeel, 64–65
- Bitterness, 66, 252
- Blame. *See also* Blameworthiness
- accounts of the aim of, 71–73, 90
 - competence in enacting, 88
 - disadvantages of focus on, 43–44, 157–159
 - embraced by utilitarians, 16
 - emphasis on when rather than how, 111
 - and expressive function, 81
 - injunction to refrain from, 13
 - locating, 169
 - manner of enacting, 44
 - and moral judgments, 44
 - presumed practical efficacy of, 55, 59
 - as second-order responsiveness, 6–7, 9
 - tendency to focus on, 39, 41
 - unexpected outcomes of, 42–43
 - usefulness of inaccurate, 108
- Blameworthiness, 268n10. *See also* Blame
- of harmful clumsiness, 108
 - and metaphysical debates, 72
 - not a property but a set of relations, 8–9
 - as one factor in decision to blame, 44
 - preoccupation with, 88
 - and second-level moral judgment, 7
- Blum, Lawrence, 205–206
- Body. *See also* Embodiment
- associated with passivity, 133
 - capacities of, affected by oppression, 253
 - internal complexity of, 206
 - role in play and other action, 210

- Boomerang phenomena, 54–55, 62, 68, 81. *See also* Reactance; Undermining effect
- Bosk, Charles, 181
- Boundaries, 104, 175, 179–180, 284n4
- Bowling, 15, 113
- Brandom, Robert, 135
- Brehm, Jack, 56–63, 65
- Bridging, 190, 205. *See also* TranslationBuddha, 221
- Buddhism, 224
- Burdened virtues, 250–252, 254
- Burdens, 207
- Campbell, Sue, 80
- Card, Claudia, 211
- Care ethics
- and critical attention, 85
 - in dialogue with virtue ethics, 270
 - and ecological modes of understanding, 205
 - and responsiveness, 24
- Categorical imperative(s), 183–184. *See also* Kant, Immanuel
- Categories
- Peircean, 25–26, 36, 271n45
 - Peircean vs. Hegelian, 271n41
 - place of gesture within, 51
 - as ways of conceiving, 28–29
- Channels of communication, 153, 156, 167, 177, 181
- one-way, 180
- Character
- Aristotle's ideal of, 240
 - capacity to learn as part of, 243–245
 - developmental closure of, 241–242
 - fixity of, 216
 - moral confidence about one's own, 121
 - moral damage to, 254
 - as possession of economic agents, 206–207
 - resistance to fixed ideal of, 3–4
 - self-effacing concern for, 289n6
- and sex difference, 130
- singular ideal of, 249–252
- traits needed for political resistance, 65–66
- as unifying concern of virtue ethics, 219, 217
- virtue ethics' ideals of, 23
- virtue as good quality of, 222
- Charitable interpretation
- dependent on concerned attention, 127
 - of expressive intuitions, 81
 - of moral theoretical work, 36
 - toward troubling moral attitudes, 35
- within communities of resistance, 252
- Child abuse, 182–185
- Children, 9, 58, 90–92, 93–94
- Christianity, 131–132, 224, 269n19
- Civility, 218
- Claim-making. *See also* Representation; Propositional contents
- in connection with concerns, 138
 - in contrast to gesture, 41
 - role in constituting social problems, 182
 - sociological inquiry into patterns of, 170
- Closure
- of attention invited by propositional focus, 159
 - developmental, 241
 - implicit in concept of speech act, 101–102
 - lack of, associated with concern, 141
- Clumsiness, 108–109
- Code, Lorraine, 207, 212
- Cognition, 25, 31
- Cognitivism, 30–31, 117, 140, 277n5
- Coincidence, 226
- Collaboration, 80, 112, 146, 238–239, 262
- Collective, 29, 98, 240

- Communication
and attention to audience, 234
channels of, 180
channels of, as finite, 181
and concrete transfers, 112
as continuously responsive, 102
in contrast to expression, 112
as point of critical engagement, 223
- Communication of concern
as goal of critical engagement, 37, 82
as third kind of meaning, 146
and worry about passing the buck, 159
- Communication of moral concern, 226
- Communicative account, 96
- Communicative activity, 106
- Communities, 179, 252
- Compassion, 10, 224
- Competence. *See also* Ideal
difference of, vs. qualitative differences, 207–209
economic model of, 205, 196–199, 202
of hearers to respond to concern, 87
inarticulate forms of, 135–136
moral, 219, 232
not clearly indexed to individuals, 98
relevance to attributing responsibility, 88
in responding to critical speech, 108
in self-determination theory, 59
virtue ethics' emphasis on, 38
- Concepts. *See also various specific concepts*
between active and passive, 260
conditioned by non-ideal reality, 21
cultivation of, 161
as distinctive of intelligence, 135
effect of on practice and experience, 67–68
as implicated in claims but not clues, 145
means of cultivating, 32
- moral agency as cultivation of, 37
necessary for describing attention, 84
necessary for overcoming dichotomy, 24–26
noticing the lack of suitable, 137
reductive approach to moral, 216
responding to the need for moral, 127
subsuming phenomena under, 141
threshold, 229
as tools of practice, 97
- Concern
broadcasting of, 178
as central to moral change, 136
defined, 31
as dimension of communication, 140
emergence out of conduct, 49–50
enlistment of, 91
and expression, 72
mishandled, 159–161
as philosophical concept, 84
prioritizing among, 202
relation to belief, 30–31
- Conduct
in contrast to gesture, 39–69
conversion into gesture, 49
defined, 47
emphasized in virtue ethics, 234
and failure of communication, 157
as focus of moral theories, 125–126
as occasion for narrow collaboration, 238
as purposive but not responsive, 42
as shaped by inarticulate perception, 136
as signaling of concerns, 224
uncooperative, 46
- Confidence
in emotional expression, 80
and moral intervention, 76
in one's moral character, 120–121
and resolution of moral emotion, 123
- Confucianism, 247–248

- Confucius, 223, 236–237. *See also* Confucianism
- and communication of virtue, 224
- and critical engagement, 221
- and lifelong moral learning, 243–246
- Consequences, 14, 101, 104–105
- Consequentialism
- as courting moral solipsism, 16–17
 - with critical module added, 125–126
 - and emphasis on conduct, 52
 - and emphasis on regulation, 223
 - and reactive attitudes, 108
 - and responsive promotion of good, 228
 - as target of Strawson’s argument, 73, 76
 - and uptake of communication, 90
- Conservatism, 247
- Constraint integration, 236, 238–239
- Constructionism, social, 38
- Constructivism, 181
- Consultation, 236–239
- Contagion, 181, 183
- Contemplation
- vs. attention, 84
 - role in moral agency, 135
- Context-sensitivity, 234
- Contingency
- of encounter with concerns, 37, 163, 184
 - of moral concerns, 128, 183
 - of moral theories, 127
 - and social problems research, 181
- Continuity
- of activity appreciated in virtue ethics, 220
 - of activity as central to skill, 227
 - of concern, 154, 157, 175
 - among phases of concerned attention, 226
- Continuous process system, 95, 104, 109
- Contradiction, 248
- Convention(s)
- of academic detachment, 285n39
 - and illocutionary force, 105
 - implicit in Greek root *nomos*, 207
 - and meaning, 49, 50–51
 - for moral argument, 130
 - moral concerns as irreducible to, 30
 - and moral vocabulary, 136
 - never entirely static, 134
 - role of in speech act theory, 97
 - and uptake of expression, 78, 94
- Coordination, 112
- Coping
- as central to Korsgaard’s non-ideal theory, 20
 - contrasted with creativity, 210
 - with differences in judgment, 148
 - as first-order responsiveness, 5
 - with moral criticism, 241, 59
 - with non-ideal moral world, 251
 - and objective attitude, 73
 - with unclear situation, 137
- Corporations, 189
- Correction, 6, 74
- Corruption of others, 14
- Counterwill, 61–62. *See also* Reactance
- Courage, 224–225
- Crary, Alice, 135
- Creativity
- in adoption of new rituals, 248
 - vs. coping, 210
 - of ecological agents, 207, 196
 - and “intrinsic motivation,” 58
 - and moral change, 130–132, 136
 - vs. preoccupation with judgment, 159
 - in transformation of concern, 170
 - virtues of, 236
- Critical agency, 186
- Critical attention, 84
- Critical engagement
- as burdened virtue, 254
 - in Confucian texts, 221
 - and modes of responsiveness, 228

- presupposing flexibility of character, 240
sphere or field of, 223
as split into anger and shame, 225–226
as training or as virtuous activity, 242
as a virtue, 215–257
as virtue heretofore neglected, 221
Critical morality, 7
Critical non-ideal theory, 19, 20–21
Critical responsiveness
aim of, 37, 71–94
in apparently irrational conduct, 43
as dimension of action, 44
higher-order, 41
introduced, 2
as neither conduct nor representation, 140
orientation to social concerns, 166
as socially dynamic, 3
Critical specialists, 40
Cultivation. *See also* Self-cultivation
of agency, 86
of attention, 150, 154
of concepts, 37, 97, 127, 161
of critical responsiveness, 40
of meaning, 151, 143, 146
and monoculture, 252
of moral concern, 159
of moral concerns, 53, 211
of moral responsiveness, 47
of moral skills, 4
of norms, 32
of responsibility, 171
of talents, 22
Culture(s), 32, 180. *See also*
Monoculture
Currents of concern, 37, 163–164, 169, 195

Damasio, Antonio, 123
Dao, 246
Darwall, Stephen, 93

Darwinian account, 28, 218
Deci, Edward L., 57–60, 62–63, 65
Defensiveness, 64–65. *See also*
Reactance
Defiance, 9
Definitional approach, 182
Degree(s)
of burden attending virtues, 254
of community membership, 176
of economic competence, 205, 207
of resistance or acceptance, 107
of virtue, 229–230, 242
Demand(s). *See also* Demandingness
acceptance of, 117
for agency, 203, 188, 200
backward- and forward-looking, 37
for compliance, 90, 108
for concerned attention, 93, 123, 174, 220, 256
of critical practice, 128, 142, 221–222
deontological, 32
distresses as, 204
expression of, 30, 72, 90
field of, 195–197, 206, 213
implementation of moral, 125–126
inarticulate, 248
of moral criticism, 22
morally central kind of, 219
problem as, 238
of reason, 64, 183
for recognition, 90, 189
for responsiveness, 17, 65
responsiveness to, 4, 32, 255
supply and, 197–200
for translation, 190
and trust, 91
for virtuous response, 223, 241
Demandingness, 19
Demonstration, 86, 178
Deontological ethics
as backward-looking, 37
and emphasis on representation, 52
and expressive account, 109

- Deontological ethics (cont.)
 as family of concerns, 32
 and moral permissions, 33–34
 and status, 27
 and thirdness, 26, 261
 vs. virtue ethics, 215–216
- Derivative non-ideal theory, 18–20
- Desert, 73
- Determinism, 72
- Deterrence, 5
- Development
 closure in moral, 225, 240–243
 of concerns over time, 143
 dialogue and moral, 237
 research on social, 104, 112–113
 role of criticism in, 23
 and social coordination, 112
 trauma as interference in, 254
- Dewey, John, 24–25, 29, 123, 204, 236, 240, 273n5, 271n46, 284n15, 290n25
- economic theory of, 198–200
- organic account of problem, 137
- and transactional model of activity, 104
- Diachronic, 97–98, 256. *See also* Temporal dynamics
- Dialectic, 126
- Dialogical virtues. *See* Virtues of practice
- Dialogue
 and communicative aim, 111
 in Confucian moral epistemology, 237
 as embodied and gestural, 105
 and “reasons-responsiveness,” 267n4
 and reinterpretation of concerns, 228
 and responsibility, 27
 Socratic, 104–106
 and utilitarianism, 17
 virtues of, 236–237
 within perception, 289–290n17
- Dichotomy(ies)
 accuracy vs. usefulness, 108–109
 agency vs. passivity, 142
- authoritative voice vs. passive silence, 133
- backward-looking vs. forward-looking, 88
- ballistic vs. dynamic action, 102
- categorical vs. hypothetical imperatives, 183
- cognitivist vs. noncognitivist, 140
- compared to field of differences, 144
- compared to threefold contrast, 146
- conduct vs. claim-making, 82
- illocutionary vs. perlocutionary, 99
- natural and intentional meaning, 127
- natural and non-natural meaning, 143–144, 150
- philosophically troublesome, 3, 97, 262
- public vs. private, 177, 30
- regulative vs. expressive accounts, 101, 283n34, 77
- representation vs. conduct, 109, 140, 148, 174, 41, 62
- representation vs. reality of responsibility, 172
- resistance to, 260
- revolution vs. reform, 129–134
- systematic philosophical, 24
- use of vs. respect for testimony, 149
- Difference(s)
 cultivation of, 211
 as essential to organisms, 208
 in habits of moral response, 194–196, 206
 within the public sphere, 176
- Differentiation, 210
- Difficult cases, 83
- Dilemma(s)
 false 150 (*see also* Dichotomy[ies])
 moral, 66–67, 238
 under oppression, 250–254
 prisoner’s, 199, 275–276n28, 288n20
 about public status of concern, 177
 for understanding critical speech acts, 107–109, 111

- Dimension(s)
of agency, 44, 51, 109, 259–261
cognitive, 117–118
of communicative significance, 140–143, 154
geographical, 188
gestural, 41, 59, 65, 82, 134, 148
of moral development, 249
of moral perception, 206
in pragmatist thought, 25
responsiveness as moral, 10, 26
sociality as, 29–30, 125–126
temporal, 84, 97
of value, 28
of virtue, 224
Disagreement, 154, 233–235, 290n70
Disclosure, 142, 153
Discontinuity, 132–133, 176–180, 242
Dismissal, 33, 78–79, 120, 161
Displacement, 198–200
Dissidents, 248. *See also* Outlaw emotions
Distinction. *See* Dichotomy(ies); Difference
Distinctness of agents, 16, 16–17
Distress
awareness of, 197
displaced from resources, 200–204, 239
freedom from, 12
geographical insulation from, 179
and moral burdens, 254
and resentment-guilt process, 118
responsiveness to, 4–5
understood as demand for agency, 188–190
understood as need, 198
Distributed process, 84, 110, 202, 218, 240
Down syndrome, 207, 209. *See also* Trisomy-21
Driver, Julia, 218, 255, 288n3
Dynamics. *See also* Temporal of moral community, 179
of moral sensibilities, 212
of representations of responsibility, 169
in ritual interactions, 236
of social encounter, 29, 99, 172, 207
in social problems research, 181
temporal, and guilt, 119
temporal and social, 37
in virtue ethics, 109
Dysfunction
in guilt and anger, 120–123
as psychological verdict, 65
reactance as, 36
undermined motivation as, 60, 63
Ecological agents, 207
Ecological model, 40, 193, 205–213. *See also* Social ecology
in epistemology, 207
of moral community, 252–253
of responsiveness to moral concerns, 38
Ecology, 191
Economic and ecological, 205
Economic model, 38, 193, 196–205
Economists, 204
Economy, 190, 191
Ecosystem, 212
Effortlessness, 227
Elevation, 180
Embodiment
in conversation, 105
of critical practice, 38
of ecological agents, 207
essential and sex difference, 253
as factor in others' response, 251
and moral perception, 210, 253
virtue and differences in, 232
in virtue ethics, 220
Emergent signs, 143–144, 146
Emerson, Ralph Waldo, 131

- Emotion
 and binding of attention, 119
 compared with feelings, 142
 considered as desired outcome of critical encounter, 116
 different sensitivities to, 207
 framed as involuntary effect, 103–104
 as inner state or as social gesture, 98
 somatic marker account of, 122–123
 transaction through, 115–116
 and uptake, 78
- Empirical approach, 181
- Empiricism, 26
- Encounters, 25–26
- Engagement
 aiming neither for accuracy nor usefulness, 109
 of attention, 90–91, 153
 vs. causal and representational stances, 30
 emerging from secondness, 26
 between expression and control, 2
 with mainstream philosophy, 35
 as reciprocal, 10
 and specialization, 40
 vs. treatment, 1
 as volatile, turbulent, 3
- Epictetus, 12
- Equality, 132
- Equilibrium, 212
- Essentialism, 103, 166, 253
- Ethics, 121
- Eudaimonia, 250
- Euthyphro, 104
- Evaluative feedback, 58
- Evolution, 211, 219
- Examples
 accusation met with remorse, 89
 active listening with facial gestures, 210
 autism and trisomy-21 as embodied differences, 209
 blaming homosexuals for terrorism, 173
- clues and claims about measles, 145
 confronting academic dishonesty, 115
 critical encounter about lateness, 110
 discussing something wrong, 138
 global warming, 88–89
 guilt in connection with racism, 120–122
 inarticulate communication between friends, 152
 infant handing over object, 113
 mediation between friends, 201–202
 of natural signs, 144, 144
 persuasion in Socratic dialogue, 104–106
 Peter and housemates' moral testimony, 147–151
 playground sandbox intervention, 45–50
 rape and public concern, 177
 responding to insulting humor, 74–75, 83
 response to vincristine death, 154–161
 seeking medical assistance, 89
 self-presentation of patient concern, 146
 Silvey and sweatshop labor, 188–191
- Excellence
 as matter of degree, 229
 of practice vs. of character, 217
- Excellence, 217
- Exchange, 202
- Exemplars, 216, 243, 250
- Existential commitment, 42
- Existentialism, 103, 133
- Experience, 177
- Experiments, 54–63
- Expertise, 216, 232, 237
- Exploitation, 188
- Exploration, 211. *See also* Play
- Expression
 as collaborative, 80
 vs. communication of concerns, 224
 contrasted with communication, 112

- vs. growth of character, 245
recognition and uptake of, 78
as serving communicative ends, 83,
227
as trope of virtue ethics, 237
as valued metaphor, 80
Expressive conception, 77–82
of the aim of critical response, 74, 75
of guilt, 117
lack of concern for method, 95
of responsiveness, 2–3
Strawson and Watson compared, 92
Expressive responsiveness as vice, 231
Extinction, 32–33
Eye contact, 230
- Factivity, 144
Failure of communication, 212
Fallibilism, 127
False dilemma, 149. *See also*
Dichotomy(ies)
Famine relief, 19, 203
Feelings, 141–142
Feminism
and anger, 251
challenging public-private dichotomy,
177
and Confucianism, 248
and expression of attitudes, 78–80
and intersectional social locations,
254
and moral change, 130–134
and new forms of virtue, 247
and non-ideal theory, 20
in philosophy of language, 106
and variety of temperaments, 252
Field, 164. *See also* Social field
of each virtue, 222
as metaphor for social relations, 176
three senses of, 167
Field of differences, 143
Field theory, 193
Filial piety, 246
- Finitude
of capacity for concern, 202
of channels of communication, 181
and Kantian noninterference, 76
of virtuous agent, 239
First-order concerns, 40
First-order responsiveness, 4–6, 45, 47
First-person stance, 64
First, second, third, 25
Fitting, 28
Fixity, 232, 240
Flourishing, 250. *See also* Eudaimonia
Flow, 227
Fluency, 256
Focus, 236
Fogel, Alan, 103, 112
Follow-through, 115
Force, 196
Forward-looking, 37
Frames of understanding, 43, 45, 51
Framing, 189
Freedom, 56, 71, 139. *See also*
Autonomy
Freud, Sigmund, 61–62
Friendship
and communication of concerns,
152–153, 227
in morally non-ideal situations, 251
as site of relational virtues, 256
virtue in relation to, 221
Fromm, Erich, 67–68
Frye, Marilyn, 78, 120–123, 251
Fundamentalism, 64–65
- Game, 152
Gender, 78, 106, 151
Genealogy, 183
Geography
illuminated by social problems
research, 186
and limits of individual perspective,
240
of moral concerns, 38

- Geography (cont.)
 and movement of concern, 188
 relevance of to economy, 198
 of responsibility, 168
- Gesture
 broader than praise and blame, 48
 calls to responsibility as, 188
 in critical responsiveness, 36
 as dimension of action, 39–69
 emergence out of conduct, 49–50
 as essential in preserving traditions and conventions, 134
 as extending between judgment and conduct, 89, 109
 as means of communicating concern, 140
 moral value of, 52
 realized through uptake, 60, 49
 in ritual, 236
 as vital to moral change, 133–134
- Gibbard, Alan, 115
- Giddens, Anthony, 210
- Global warming, 88
- Goal of criticism 71. *See also* Aim of critical engagement; Communication of concern
- God, 15
- Goodin, Robert E., 17
- Goodman, Paul, 120
- Government-house utilitarianism, 17
- Graham, A. C., 245
- Grice, Paul, 127, 147, 153
 and kinds of meaning, 143–146
- Grimké, Sarah, 130–131, 248
- Growth, 245
- Gu, Yueguo, 103–104
- Guilt
 approach vs. inhibition in accounts of, 119–121
 as call to listen, 117
 implications for agency, 116
 as located in individual, 98
- philosophical accounts of, 116–118
 rejected as direct aim of critical engagement, 122–124
 in transaction with resentment, 115–116
- Habermas, Jürgen, 50
- Habit, 82, 137, 244
- Handing-over, 112–114, 114
- Hardin, Garrett, 120
- Hare, R. M., 6–10
- Harmony, 248
- Haugeland, John, 42
- Health, 218
- Hearers, 229
- Hegel, G. W. F., 143
- Heidegger, Martin, 142
- Hermeneutic, 40, 66–67. *See also* Interpretation
- Heteronomy, 128
- Higher-order responsiveness, 6
- Hilgartner, Stephen, 181
- History, 184, 207, 240
- Holding-responsible
 and fairness, 173
 and shaping of moral responsibility, 168
 and social access, 179
 and transfer of concern, 118
- Holland, Nancy J., 27
- Holocaust, 184
- Horizon, 175
- Horizontal moral learning, 247–249
- Horney, Karen, 67–68
- Hornsby, Jennifer, 106
- Human beings, 10–11, 219
- Humility, 164
- Hypersensitivity, 66, 78
- Hypocrisy, 22, 159, 219
- Hypothetical imperatives, 184
- Iago, 242
- Iatrogenic casualty, 154–161

- Ideal
of Confucian harmony, 248
of economic agency, 196–197, 200, 205
of eudaimonia, 250–251
of fixed characters and traditions, 216
of mutual recognition, 176
of a single exemplary moral character, 249
of social impartiality, 170
of stable cultural tradition, 245
- Ideal theory, 18
- Identity, 64, 206
- Illocutionary acts, 99, 101
- Imagination, 62, 237
- Imitation, 247
- Immaturity, 61–62
- Impartiality, 170, 196
- Imperatives, 183–184
- Imperfect duty, 22–23
- Implementation, 37, 125–126, 131
- Implicit attitudes, 23
- Improvisation, 104
- Inarticulateness
in higher-order responsiveness, 6, 10
of moral concerns, 127
in moral perception, 233
in recognition of needs, 201
as taken up by others, 134
- Incommensurability, 211
- Incompleteness, 32
- Indeterminacy, 10, 240
- Indexical, 138, 142
- Indignation, 75, 79
- Individualism
in accounts of inarticulate know-how, 136
in accounts of moral change, 132
in critique of guilt, 122
critique of, 38
in Hare's moral theory, 8
and judgments of blame, 157–159
and moral problems in virtue ethics, 238–239
- in philosophical accounts of responsibility, 87, 171
- in psychology, 42, 65
- in social philosophy, 29, 60
- in virtue ethics, 216, 232, 239
- Inhibition, 119–121, 122–123
- Injustice, 250, 252
- Innocence, 120
- Inscrutability, 15, 232–235, 237
- Inside-out, 237
- Insincerity, 161
- Institutions, 219
- Integrity, 14–15
- Intelligence, 141
- Intelligible world, 146–147
- Intention, 49–50, 62, 136. *See also* Unconscious meaning
- Interaction, 104, 235
- Interdependence, 147, 223
- Internal goods, 237
- Internalized oppression, 151
- Interpersonal, 97, 215
- Interpretation. *See also* Translation
in discernment of claims and concerns, 139
as exercise of moral agency, 36
and imagination, 62
and improvement of critical practice, 40
and imputation of moral concern, 185
of meaning in gesture, 49
in mediation of concerns, 203
as moment in arc of concern, 226, 228
of moral agency, 195
in normative clinical psychology, 67–68
of religious and moral concerns, 34
and responsibility for misunderstanding, 81
role in virtue ethics, 215
- Interpretive freedom, 41, 52, 139
- Intersectional identity, 254

- Intervention, 50, 220
 Intimidation, 189
 Intuitive morality, 7–8
 Irony, 105, 224
 Irrationality, 43
 Islam, 64–65
- Joas, Hans, 207, 210
 Joint attention
 as central to critical engagement, 99, 224, 94, 111
 contrasted against shared claims, 139
 in exchange of concerns, 202
 in human response to problems, 281n20
 and physical coordinations, 112
 in resentment and guilt, 118
 and transactive processes, 98–99
 Jones, Karen, 147–151
 Jowett, Wayne, 154–156, 160–161
 Judgment
 compared to agnostic responsiveness, 148
 as focus of other multi-level theories of morality, 6–10
 Kantian sense, 23
 and puzzle about moral change, 136
 valued as cognitively fundamental, 135
- Kant, Immanuel, 23, 64, 135, 188, 218
 as heir to Stoics, 13–14
 and ideal theory, 18
 and moral change, 130
 and two kinds of imperatives, 183–184
 Kantian arguments
 and emphasis on expression, 223
 for moral criticism, 22
 and personality differences, 250
 for reactive attitudes, 73
 for skills of judgment, 205
 Kantian moral theory, 126
- Katie, Byron, 13
 Kierkegaard, Søren, 67
 King, Martin Luther, Jr., 86, 240
 Kingdom of Ends, 20
 Kitsuse, John, 180, 182
 Knowledge and virtue, 232
 Korsgaard, Christine, 20
 Kuhn, Thomas, 130–131
 Kukla, Rebecca, 153
 Kupperman, Joel, 248
- Labeling theory, 182
 Lance, Mark, 153
 Langton, Rae, 107–110, 111
 Language, 11
 Language game(s), 129, 135
 Legal permission, 34
 Legal structure, 20
 Legitimacy, 139, 141
 Levels of practice and judgment, 8
 Liability, 157–159
 Looping effect, 67, 182
 Lugones, María, 189
- Macintyre, Alasdair, 48, 237
 Managerial stance, 63, 224
 Mapping, 169, 187
 Marcu, Daniel, 106–107
 Marginality, 176, 211
 Martin, John Levi, 167, 193, 196, 207
 Marxism, 20
 Materiality, 207
 McDowell, John, 205–206, 232–235, 237
 Mead, G. H., 24, 25, 29
 account of gesture, 41, 49–51
 Meaning, 143, 143–147
 Meaning of gesture, 49
 Meaningfulness, 229
 Mediation
 in critical practice, 166, 190
 of economic transactions, 200
 between friends, 201–202

- Medical practice, 154–161, 182, 185
Memes, 186, 189
Mencius, 245
Meno, 245
Metaethics, 3
Metamorphosis, 154. *See also* Translation
Metaphor(s)
attunement as, 230
boundary as, 175, 179
communication as, 112–113
for conduct, gesture, and representation, 52
contagion as, 181
dao or way, 246
dullness in learning, 243
in economics, 196–197
ecosystem as, 212
elevation as, 180
expression as, 80
geography as, 180
horizon, 163
horizon as, 175
language game as, 129
making ends meet, 204
mapping as, 171
moral career, 164
moral niche, 211
and moral responsibility, 166
in Niebuhr's ethics, 27
“outness” as, 178
passing the buck as, 159, 174
path of guilt as, 119
performance as, 101
of position, 206
rise and fall of social problems, 181
social margin as, 176–177
in social psychology, 61
social space as, 175
target of virtue as, 226
thread of attention as, 159–160
transfer as, 115
vertical and horizontal dimensions, 154
virtuous agent as oracle, 235
of the virtuous mean, 231
Metaphysics, 71–72, 73
Meyers, Diana, 66
Milgram, Stanley, 211
Mill, John Stuart, 17
Millikan, Ruth, 233
Mills, Charles, 20
Mishandling, 159–161
Misrepresentation, 144, 145
Misunderstandings, 80–82
Modes of moral responsiveness, 4
Modular account, 125–126
Monoculture, 208, 252
Monologue, 12, 235
Moral, 10
Moral address, 203
and children, 93–94
as communicative metaphor, 89
constraints on, 91–92
content of, 90
across differences in moral sensibility, 212
as one of two critical phases, 225
permissibility of, 171
as second-personal encounter, 93
and shaping of moral responsibility, 168
and social access, 175, 179
Moral agency
vs. conformity or conviction, 85
as developed through critical engagement, 53
as fashioning of morality, 4
figurations of, 27
of philosophical work, 158–159
ways of recognizing, 195
Moral change, 129–136, 249–252
Moral community, 175, 176
Moral competence, 232
Moral complaints, baseless, 33
Moral concepts, 126

- Moral concern(s)
 contingently encountered, 38
 ecosystem of, 212
 elasticity of, 202
 empty or pernicious, 35
 first-order, 40
 as focal point of critical practice, 82–83
 inquiry into movements of, 170
 and interest in its communication, 224
 lack of single ideal profile for, 156
 nature of, 37
 two phases of handling, 172
 plurality of, 218
 positional evaluation of, 203
 prioritizing among, 193
 not reducible to demands of moral theories, 126
 uptake different from both strategic attitude and agreement, 150
 various forms of, 175
- Moral conflict, 8
- Moral criticism, 22, 188
- Moral damage, 65, 252, 253–254
- Moral demand, 90
- Moral development, 240–241
- Moral dilemmas, 238
- Moral disagreement, 233
- Moral ecology, 167
- Moral economy, 167
- Moral education, 232, 245, 246
- Moral egoism, 11
- Moral emotion, 98, 142. *See also* Anger; Emotion; Guilt; Resentment
- Moral epistemology, 235
- Moral geography, 167
- Morality as language game, 129
- Moral judgment, 44
- Moral knowledge, 122, 147
- Moral learning
 in the absence of role model, 256–257
 capacity for, 243–244
- horizontal model of, 247
 as training, 242–243
 vertical model of, 246
- Moral legislation, 15
- Moral luck, 163
- Moral passages, 164
- Moral patients, 11
- Moral perception, 233–235
 differences in, 205
 in economic and ecological perspective, 205
 failure to revise, 150
 heterodox, 66
 informed by moral theory, 217
 as potentially inarticulate, 135
 refined by criticism, 23
- Moral permissions, 33–34
- Moral problems, 181
- Moral profile, 250–252
- Moral psychology
 hermeneutic variant of, 165
 individualism of, 43, 163
 relation to moral philosophy, 36
- Moral responsibility, 87–88, 173
- Moral revolution, 130–134, 134
- Moral sense-making, 126
- Moral sensibilities, 194, 253
- Moral sentiments, 80
- Moral sociology
 as complement to moral psychology, 68
 in contrast to sociology of morality, 165–166
 defined, 164
 two models of, 181
- Moral solipsism, 11–18
 defined, 11
 as implicit in world of mere conduct, 48
 and individual virtue, 224
- Moral stasis, 134
- Moral status, 9
- Moral testimony, 147–151

- Moral theories
competition among, 216–217
and concerns, 31–33
as cultivated forms of receptivity, 211
emphasis on deliberate action within, 219–220
and mapping of responsibilities, 169
not essential to critical intervention, 190
and relation to critical practice, 125–126
as responsive social projects, 36
as transcending social position, 170
- Moral theorists, 17, 211
- Moral theorizing, 1, 217
- Moral trust, 147. *See also* Trust
- Moral verdicts, 31
- Moral vocabulary, 126
- Motivation, 56. *See also* Reactance; Undermining effect
ascribed to self-interest, 185
extrinsic vs. intrinsic, 58
implicit in moral perception, 233
inhibition vs. approach, 119–121
as psychological state, 42
- Multi-level moral theories, 6–10
- Murdoch, Iris, 84, 135
- Murphy, Liam, 20
- Musical activity, 220, 246
- Musical learning, 220
- Muslim identity, 64–65
- Mutual recognition, 176
- Myth of the verb, 100
- Narrative, 48
- Natural meaning, 143
- Needs, 198, 198
- Network, 197
- Neurosis, 68
- Niches, 211–213
- Niebuhr, H. Richard, 24, 25, 29
account of responsibility, 27
- Nietzsche, Friedrich, 61, 67, 121, 131–133, 211, 237
- Noncognitivism, 30, 140
- Noncompliance, 19–20
- Non-ideal theory, 18–21, 250–252
- Non-natural meaning, 143, 144
- Nonviolent direct action, 86
- “Normal morality,” 134. *See* Moral revolution
- Nussbaum, Martha, 222
- Objection, 208
- Objective attitude, 73, 149. *See also* Regulative conception
- Objectivity, 204, 206
- Omen, 145
- Opposition, 42. *See also* Dichotomy(ies)
- Oppositional identity, 64
- Oppression
effects on moral sensitivities, 253
internalized forms, 151, 179
and public protest, 178
and reactance, 65
sensitivity to effects of, 211
and virtue ethics, 250–252
- Optimality, 206, 207. *See also* Ideal
- Oracle, 235. *See also* Inscrutability
- Oratory, 105
- Ostensive, 142
- Panopticon, 17
- Paradigm shift, 131. *See also* Moral revolution
- Paradox, 176
- Paralysis, 116, 120–121
- Paranoia, 66
- Participant attitude, 73, 91, 149. *See also* Expressivism
- Particularist ethics, 205
- Passing the buck, 174
- Passive clues, 145, 146. *See also* Non-natural meaning
- Passivity, 145

- Peirce, Charles, 24, 25, 29, 51
 Perception, 235
 Performance, 101
 Perlocution, 104–106
 Perlocutionary acts, 99, 101, 113
 Permission, 34
 Personality, 57, 65
 Personhood, 73, 146
 Perspectival transform, 189
 Perspective, 157, 187–188
 Persuasion, 104–106, 107
 Pfohl, Stephen, 182–183, 185
 Phases, 119, 225–226. *See also*
 Dynamics
 Phenomenology, 97
 Philosophers, 158–159
 Philosophy
 agency of doing, 65, 173
 clearing up philosophical misunderstandings, 97
 and inquiry into methods, 95–97
 as vital to refining critical practice, 97
 Phronimos, 233, 249, 253
 Pivotal responsiveness, 189
 Plasticity, 241
 Plato, 104, 224, 246
 and unity of virtues, 217
 Play, 210
 Pluralism
 of moral concerns, 215, 218
 in virtue ethics, 229, 247
 Poets, 132
 Policymakers, 189, 189. *See also*
 Government-house utilitarianism
 Political resistance, 250
 Positionality, 204
 Positivism, 60, 165, 185. *See also*
 Behaviorism
 Practice
 excellences of, 217
 of holding responsible, 72
 internal goods of, 237
 virtues of, 235–236
- Pragmatist philosophy, 24–25, 51, 217
 Praise, 6, 55
 Praise and blame
 aim of, 90
 connection to reactive attitudes, 72
 not exhaustive of critical responsiveness, 39, 41
 presumed practical efficacy of, 59
 Predicaments, 37
 Preferences, 140
 Prescription
 contrasted against concern, 226
 role in regulative conception, 77
 as serving communicative ends, 83, 227, 227
 Prescriptive responsiveness, 231
 Prescriptivism, 117
 Primates, 11
 Prisoner's dilemma, 199
 Privilege, 252
 Problem(s), 86–87, 238, 249
 as demand plus constraints, 238
 as focal point of shared attention, 85, 137, 226
 handled individually or socially, 137–138
 as philosophical concept, 84
 Problem-solving, 202, 204
 Problematic situations, 236. *See also*
 Problem(s)
 Profile
 of moral concern, 156
 of moral sensitivity, 208
 of virtue, 215, 222
 Progress, 130
 Propositional content, 39–69, 99, 141.
 See also Claim-making
 Protest, 178
 Psychoanalysis, 61
 Psychoanalytic explanation, 46
 Psychological oppression, 151
 Psychological research, 57, 59
 Psychologists, 43

- Psychology
of beliefs and desires, 39
clinical, 67
of guilt, compared to social account, 121
individualism of, 43
normative and empirical aspects, 66–67
as privileged by philosophy, 66, 68, 87
relation to philosophy, 36
and strategy for regulating behavior, 74
- Public sphere, 176–177. *See also* Publicity
- Publicity, 176, 181, 212
- Punishment, 241
- Pushing and pulling, 118
- Pushmi-pullyu representations, 233
- Qualitative difference
in attunement, 253
played down by Confucian ideals, 246
role of in ecological model, 207–209, 208
in social interaction, 29
between virtue and related vices, 231
among virtues, 217
among virtuous moral profiles, 250
- Qualitative experience, 140
- Quotability, 144
- Racism, 120–122, 147
- Rationalism vs. empiricism, 29–30
- Rawls, John, 18, 254
- Reactance
compared to undermining effect, 58
and dynamic interaction, 106
as gesture of resistance, 59
implications for critical practice, 57
as motivational state, 56
and Muslim identity, 64–66
as psychological phenomenon, 36, 42–43, 54–57
- in response to expressive criticism, 79
as seen by Freud and Nietzsche, 61–62
strategic handling of, 96
- Reactive attitudes
accuracy vs. usefulness of, 108–109
as backward-looking, 87
candidates for, 88
as incipient moral address, 92
in R. Jay Wallace's account, 80–81
and social interaction, 98
- Reactive attitudes, 2, 72
- Reactive opposition, 35. *See also* Reactance
- Reassurance, 161
- Recalibration, 227
- Receptivity, 225, 226, 228
- Recognition, 226, 228
- Recognitives, 153. *See also* Engagement, of attention
- Reflective equilibrium, 67
- Reframing, 190
- Regan, Tom, 4
- Regret, 87
- Regulative conception
and objective attitudes, 73
rejected, 74–77
of responsiveness, 2
technical nature of methods, 96
- Relationships, 219, 253, 256
- Relativity, 204
- Remorse, 89
- Replication, 186
- Representation
as activity, 62–63, 173
as central to cognitivist accounts, 140
vs. conduct, 109
contrasted against concern, 226
as manifestation of concern, 173
of moral ideals through reactive attitudes, 75
pushmi-pullyu, 233
of responsibility, 171–172
- Research subjects, 60

- Resentment
 as backward-looking, 87
 ill effects of indulgence in, 77–78
 as located in individual, 98
 as reactive attitude, 72
 sensitivity to effects of, 211
 in transaction with guilt, 115–116,
 123
 virtues of, 108
- Reservations, 232
- Resistance, 252
- Resolution, 187, 190
- Resources, 198
- Respect
 and communication of related
 concerns, 224
 as moral distance, 15
 and responsive honoring of value, 228
 shown by engagement with claims,
 146
- Responsibility, 118. *See also*
 Holding-responsible
 as alternative metaphor of morality,
 27
 for carrying of concern, 184
 for choice of concepts, 53, 42
 conflict of claims about, 155–159, 179
 construction and cultivation of, 171
 criteria for moral, 88
 and holding-responsible, 72, 73
 for misunderstanding, 81–82
 and moral geography, 170
 and perspectival difference, 156, 179
 political sense, 188
 as social and relational practice, 88
 and trust in moral testimony, 148
- Responsive habits, 3
- Responsiveness
 to concerns despite lack of agreement,
 148
 first-order and second-order, 45
 as matter for interpretation, 36
 modes of, 228
- profiles of, 193
 vs. reactivity, 28
 to wide problems, 238
- Reverence, 218, 228, 247
- Reverse psychology, 54. *See also*
 Reactance
- Revolution, 131. *See also* Moral
 revolution
- Right action, 237, 239
- Right vs. good, 24–27, 71
- Rigorism, 14, 18
- Ritual, 236, 246
- Rorty, Richard, 129–130
- Sagehood
 in Confucian mythical past, 246
 and inborn aptitude for moral
 learning, 243
 and social consultation, 237
 and transformative influence, 249
- Salience, 193, 205, 233–235
- Sanctions, 58, 59. *See also* Blame;
 Punishment
- Sartre, Jean-Paul, 103
- Scapegoating, 174
- Scare-quotes, 187
- Scientific revolutions, 130
- Secondhand moral confidence, 209
- Second nature, 241
- Second-order morality, 39
- Second-order responsiveness, 45
- Second-person standpoint, 93
- Seeing-as, 41, 48, 205. *See also*
 Interpretation
- Self-cultivation, 210–211, 246
- Self-determination theory, 57–58.
See also Deci, Edward L.
- Self-interest, 185, 198–199
- Self-knowledge, 220
- Self-preoccupation, 120–121
- Self-representation, 75
- Self-sufficiency, 237
- Selfhood, 152

- Sen, Amartya, 203
Sensitivity, 79, 211–212, 219. *See also* Hypersensitivity
Servility, 248
Sexism, 130–134, 147–151
Shame, 225
Shared understandings, 168, 171
Sharing, 47
Significance
 of concern, 229
 cultivation of, 159
 of emotion, 142
 symbolic, 61–62
Signs under cultivation, 143
Silencing, 233, 237
Silvey, Rachel, 188–191
Situated intervention, 190
Situationalism, 234. *See also* Context-sensitivity
Skill
 and continuity of coordination, 227
 in handling critical encounters, 94
 not independent of social context, 98
 in virtue ethics, 215
Skinner, B. F., 75
Smiley, Marion, 175, 179, 179–180
Sneddon, Andrew, 87–88
Social constructivism, 182
Social determinism, 128
Social dynamics, 37
Social ecology, 40, 167
Social economy, 167
Social field
 as combining agency and structure, 164
 continuous differentiation of, 177
 and imperfect publicity, 176, 177
 multiple conceptions of, 167
 as site of moral concerns, 38
Social geography, 167
Social hierarchy, 242
Sociality, 29–30, 138
Social landscape, 169
Social location, 163, 166–170, 195, 204. *See also* Positionality
of concern, 229
with embodied differences, 253
Social movements, 170, 186
Social pressure, 42
Social problems, 181
Social relations, 168
Social roles, 227
Social space, 176
Social structure, 164
Sociology, 128, 181–188
Sociology of morality, 165–166
Socrates, 104, 105, 198, 224
 and unity of virtues, 217
 and virtue as knowledge, 232
Solipsism, 11–12. *See also* Moral solipsism
Somatic marker, 122–123
Speaking out, 178
Spector, Malcolm, 181, 182
Speech acts, 227
Speech act theory, 97, 99–109
Spheres of experience, 222
Standpoint theory, 194, 211
Startle reflex, 119–121
Steele, Shelby, 120–121
Stoic fork, 12
Stoicism, 12–13, 77, 217
Strategic attitude, 75–76, 87, 149. *See also* Objective attitude; Regulative conception
Strawson, Peter F., 71–76, 77, 81, 89–91, 91–92, 108, 115, 149
 and speech act theory, 99, 101
Structural problems, 158–159
Stubbornness, 61. *See also* Reactance
Swanton, Christine, 4, 215, 218, 226, 235–239
 and fine inner states, 255
 and modes of responsiveness, 228
 and morally ideal character, 249
 and philosophical psychology, 67, 164
 and profiles of virtue, 222

- Symbolic interactionism, 166, 166, 188. *See also* Mead, G. H.
- Symptom, 145. *See also* Passive clues
- Synthesis, 143
- Taking responsibility, 171
- Taking a stand, 75
- Target, 226
- Technological problem, 158
- Temporal closure, 101
- Temporal dynamics. *See also* Diachronic
of critical practice, 37, 97
of guilt and resentment, 118–119
obscured by “target” metaphor, 226
of social problems, 181
- Temporal extension, 240
- Tension, 86
- Terrorism, 173–174
- Tessman, Lisa, 65, 211, 250–252, 253
and non-ideal theory, 21
- Thailand, 188–189
- Themistocles, 224
- Theories, 127
- Theory-making, 43. *See also* Metaethics; Moral theories; Philosophy
- Thick description, 177
- Third dimension, 143. *See also* Dichotomy(ies); Dimensions
- Third-order morality, 8–9
- Third-person stance, 64. *See also* Psychological research
- Thou, 3
- Thread of attention, 137
- Threshold concept, 229–230
- Thrown-ness, 203
- Toft, Brian, 156, 158
- Topography, 168
- Trace, 145. *See also* Passive clue
- Tracking, 137
- Tradition, 245, 247
- Training, 220
- Transaction
in communication, 98, 103–104
economic, 199
vs. interaction, 104
- Transcendental argument, 73
- Transfer of concern, 85. *See also* Communication of concern
- Transformation. *See also* Translation
of concern, 157–158, 170
contrasted with adaptive mutation, 186
contrasted with simple contagion, 185
- Transformative account, 126
- Translation
across differences of sensibility, 211
aim of, in critical encounters, 111
of concerns, 38, 110, 236
of concerns between moral theories, 216
of concerns for children, 93–94
of concerns about medical responsibility, 157
of concerns about sweatshop labor, 189–190
contrasted against mimesis, 186
as moment in arc of concern, 226, 228
of religious and moral concerns, 34–35, 160–161
and resolution of guilt, 124
- Transvaluation, 131
- Trauma, 254
- Trichotomies, 25–26. *See also* Dichotomy(ies)
- Trichotomy, 146
- Trisomy-21, 207
- Trust, 91, 93–94
- Trustworthiness, 5, 218
- Typical concerns, 31–33
- Uncertainty, 175
- Unconscious meaning, 46, 61
- Underdetermination, 183

- Undermining effect, 42
as psychological phenomenon, 36, 54, 57–59
- Understanding-as, 48. *See Seeing-as*
- Unity of virtues doctrine, 217–218
- University administration, 188
- Uptake
continuous responsiveness to, 106, 111
of emotion, 78, 251
of expressive demonstrations, 178
as extension rather than copy, 137
failure of, and how to handle, 114
of gesture, 60, 49
of moral sentiments, 81
phases of, 106–107
of reactive attitudes, 90
as tracking of problem, 150
- Ushering, 254
- Utilitarianism, 16–17, 16, 250. *See also Consequentialism*
- Value, 203, 229
- Value-free research
critique of ideal, 63, 66–68, 165
and researcher agency, 187
- Verdicts, 31, 86, 99. *See Moral verdicts*
- Vice, 159, 231
- Vices, 226
- Vincristine, 154–161
- Virtue(s). *See also specific virtues*
of analysis, 236
basis of, 228
burdened, 250–252
burdened more or less, 254
communicative dimension of any, 223–224
enumeration of, 218
established in developmental years, 240–241
indirect value accorded to, 216
interdependence among, 223
as knowledge, 232
- masculine and feminine, 253
and modes of responsiveness, 228
and moral perception, 205–206, 233–234
newly articulated, 218
non-ideal, 251
of practice, 235–239
in relationships, 256
as social patterns, 244, 253
Swanton's definition of, 222
- Virtue ethics, 21–22, 205, 215–257
and critical practice, 38, 109, 128
emphasis on skillful manner of action, 23
and inarticulate know-how, 136
as one of three canonical theories, 23
pluralism of, 217
against preoccupation with judgment, 135
and progressive concerns, 248
progressive variants, 23–24, 250–252
reservations about, 232
vertical model of moral learning in, 246
- Virtue of critical engagement, 3, 98
- Virtue theory, 218, 255
- Vocabularies, 126–127
- Voluntary action, 221
- Walker, Margaret U., 80, 167–173, 180, 191, 193, 207
- Wallace, R. Jay, 80–81
- Warrant, 141
- Watson, Gary, 72, 74, 89–91, 91–93
- Web of concern, 154
- Williams, Bernard, 64, 216
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig, 97, 133, 135
- “World”-travelling, 189
- Writing vs. speech, 105–106
- Young, Iris Marion, 188
- Zimbardo, Philip, 211