THE PAST, HISTORY, AND MORAL REFLECTION: SOME DOUBTS

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What part can history play in moral reflection? That, I take it, is the question Michele Moody-Adams has undertaken to answer. Her answer, in summary form, seems to be: *There is no canonical set of moral lessons that history teaches. What we learn from history may differ from person to person but will arise, if at all, only from arguing with the interpretations of the past put forward. History is not a monument but an activity; its lessons earned, not given.* With this answer, I agree.

I am nonetheless quite unhappy with her paper. In what follows, I explain why. The result is, I hope, a helpful critique. But I'm afraid that much of my criticism, perhaps most of it, amounts to no more than repeatedly saying that Moody-Adams is a philosopher of history and I am not.

I. Some Difficulties with Moody-Adams' Paper

Yes, I had difficulty approaching Moody-Adams' paper. There are at least three reasons that I might as well admit now. Others will become evident in due course.

The first reason is that I know most of the books she refers to, if at all, only from the New York Review of Books. My historical reading--works like William LaPiana's Logic and Experience: The Origin of American Legal Education or Donald Hill's History of Engineering in Classical and Medieval Times--tend to sell poorly. I felt like a dusty carpenter, saw-horse under one arm, at a party of the rich and famous.

The second reason I have had difficulty approaching Moody-Adams' paper begins with the title. The reference to "moral education" seemed to promise a paper about what the public schools call "moral education", whether the liberal's value clarification, Kohlbergian improvement in moral judgment, or William Bennett's inculcation of virtues. In fact, the paper seems to be primarily about what we might call "civic education"--the moral reflection of adult citizens concerned with the exercise of public power. But some of the paper, such as

the example of the working mother (about which more later), seems to be about moral deliberation rather than moral education in any definite sense. What is entirely missing is any attempt to picture history at work in a particular classroom, even a college classroom. This made me wonder whether the paper really is about moral education.

A third reason I have had difficulty approaching Moody-Adams' paper, perhaps the most important, is that I find implausible the conception of human nature with which she works. She does, it is true, devote much of the paper to domesticating it. Perhaps, if she translated what she wants to say into statements independent of that conception, we could agree. Still, it's clear that I am not her ideal audience. How am I to approach her arguments when my first response to hearing the name "MacIntyre" or "Sandel" is to groan? But approach them I must--if only to justify the honor of sharing this podium with her.

Here then is what I propose to do. I shall divide my time into two uneven parts. In the first, I identify three assumptions in the conception of human nature on which Moody-Adams relies, explaining what I find implausible about them. For convenience, we may call them: unity; history; and narrative. This first part will, I hope, clear the stage for discussion of the educational import of what Moody-Adams has to say. In the second part, I try to understand what consequences, if any, her thesis about history's part in moral reflection might have for moral education in a college classroom. My conclusion is: a little, but probably not much.

II. Unity

Consider what seems to be Moody-Adams's fundamental assumption: "one's capacity for morality and one's identity as a moral agent are (and can only be) developed in the historically specific life of a particular community". (9) On one interpretation, this assumption is a tautology. Because people are, by definition, neither abstract nor eternal, they must live at particular times and in particular places. If they did not, they would not be people.

On another interpretation, the assumption is trivial but not tautological. Unlike some insects, humans cannot develop very far without a good deal of contact--physical, emotional, linguistic, intellectual--with other humans. Morally speaking, a feral child will grow up to be

a wild animal, if it grows up at all. On this second interpretation, the assumption is not tautological because humans could have had more of their character genetically built in. It is nonetheless trivial because it does no more than state one necessary conditions of moral development, one that even moral monsters satisfy.

What then is the point of this assumption? I'm not sure. My guess is that Moody-Adams has a less trivial interpretation in mind. Unfortunately, she does not give it. Instead, she carefully--and, I believe, correctly--rejects the standard communitarian interpretation. The standard communitarian interpretation is that each human must grow up in one particular community to develop as a normal moral agent, that she must learn the stories that the society teaches so that she can play the role they assign her, and that therefore the moral unity of the individual presupposes a true community, a society unified by story and standards. Moody-Adams does not think of us in this way, as mere passive recipients of assigned roles. Instead, she thinks that we actively choose them; or, in her own words, "[that] locating oneself within a particular history or histories is a matter of placing oneself, not simply finding oneself, in some narrative or complex of narratives." (9)

Though I agree with Moody-Adams on this, I'd go further: Moral growth presupposes moral conflict, including the collision of social roles. Those who grew up in a morally coherent society, a true community, would not develop morally; they would at best grow up to be well-behaved children.

There is no direct way to prove or disprove this fundamental criticism of communitarianism. The fact is that every substantial society about which we know much is divided in many ways, even on seemingly basic moral questions, such as whether killing-such-and-such is murder. Yet, there is empirical evidence for my claim about the importance of conflict for moral development. Whatever else Kohlberg and his followers have shown, they have certainly shown that the clash of opinions that make for a good discussion is far more important for teaching moral judgment than is a lecture clearly laying out the coherent standards of a true community.[1]

Since I believe Moody-Adams agrees that conflict between communities (or, at least, social narratives) is important for moral reflection, I make this point only to prepare for one with which I think she will disagree. Moody-Adams seems to think it important for one's life to have "moral unity". (10, 12) But, it seems to me, the argument against unifying one's

moral life is the same as the argument against a morally unified community. Insofar as moral development is a result of reflection, that is, the discussion I carry on with myself, moral unity is inconsistent with moral education. Where I am of one mind, I cannot reflect.

Am I denying what most philosophers seem to have taken for granted for more than two millennia, that a unified self--an "identity"--is a good thing? Well, not quite. What I am denying is that moral unity is good without qualification. I certainly agree that a totally fragmented self is a bad thing. We need to agree with ourselves, at least provisionally, on a great many things if we are to do any thinking orderly enough to count as reflection. But, if we agree with ourselves on too much, we become "single-minded" and cannot reflect. Too much agreement is as bad for reflection as too little. If I thought moral reflection were the only good, I would have to say that moral unity is positively bad. But, since I think moral reflection is only one good among many, I can allow moral unity to be another good, one sometimes in competition with moral reflection. Of course, as a philosopher, I have a decided preference for reflection over single-mindedness.

III. History

The title of Moody-Adams paper begins with "the Past" but, with only a colon between, continues with "the Uses of History". What is history for Moody-Adams? What is its relationship to the past?

The past is what was and now is no more. What it leaves behind--languages, cities, documents, garbage dumps, borders, and so on--are the raw material of history. History, that is, certain ways of writing about the past, may be divided into "history strictly so called" and "natural history". Both history strictly so called and natural history present the past as a narrative, that is, as a sequence of events in which the earlier events help to explain the later (rather than--as in a chronicle--"one damn thing after another"). Natural history is a narrative of the pre-documentary or non-human past. Moody-Adams has nothing to say about natural history. She also has nothing to say even about many forms of human history--etymology, art history, the history of technology, the history of ideas, sports biographies, and so on.

Moody-Adams uses several biographies of Jefferson as her chief examples of history. I take this to show that she considers political biography to be part of history in her sense.

The only other examples of history she offers--Chang's Rape of Nanking and Goldhagen's Hitler's Willing Executioners--are political history strictly so called. These examples together suggest that, for Moody-Adams, "history" is primarily (perhaps even exclusively) political history. I find that suggestion so startling that I shall dismiss it as an unintended consequence of her choice of examples. But I am left asking how much of history Moody-Adams does intend.

History is a way of writing about the past, but not the only way. Among the other ways of writing about the past are epitaphs, historical novels, elegies, legal opinions, diaries, and business-school cases. What distinguishes each of these ways of writing about the past from the others is form, purpose, rules of evidence, or the like. Except for Plato's "noble lie", Moody-Adams is silent about all ways of writing about the past but history. Is that because her real topic is not "arguing with the past" but "the uses of history"? If so, is there something about history that makes its contribution to moral education so special that the other ways of writing about the past should be passed over in silence?

One obvious answer to this question, one that Moody-Adams herself suggests, is that history, unlike other ways of writing about the past, must be true, that is, constrained by fact in an especially rigorous way. Because truth has a privileged place in moral development, history too must have a privileged place.

I said that Moody-Adams "suggests" this answer, not that she gives it. The answer she in fact gives seems to beg the question. "[We] must," she tells us, "know the truth about the actual past if we are to consider how we might emulate what was morally praiseworthy in it and reject what was morally unacceptable." (8) Yes, of course. One must know the truth about the past if one is to emulate or reject it, that is, the actual past. But our subject is moral education (or moral reflection generally), not emulating or rejecting the actual past. We are therefore free to ask why we can't learn moral lessons by choosing to emulate or reject an imaginary past, for example, the knights of King Arthur's court.

To this question, Moody-Adams has an answer of sorts. But, to reach it, we must move on to her assumption about narrative.

IV. Narrative

For Moody-Adams, historical narrative, and only historical narrative, underwrites our understanding of ourselves. A fictional narrative of my life would, presumably, give me only a fictional self, a self divorced from reality. Of course, that "presumably" presumes a lot. I shall focus here only on the presumption that narrative, some sort of narrative, underwrites--that is, provides the basis for--our understanding of ourselves.

Moody-Adams gives precisely one example of the way a narrative might underwrite the self: "[For a working mother,] the historical narratives that underwrite understandings of her responsibilities in the world of work may be in profound conflict with the narratives that have traditionally underwritten understandings of her responsibilities toward her children." (10) I find this example oddly unconvincing. The odd part is that I can, I believe, substantially improve the sentence by editing out "narrative" (and its close relations "historical" and "traditionally"). The result is this sentence: "A working mother's understanding of her responsibilities in the world of work may be in profound conflict with her understanding of her responsibilities toward her children." As far as I can see, this sentence, apart from being shorter and clearer, says pretty much what the original did. This makes the original rather poor evidence for the claim that "narrative" underwrites the self.

If "narrative" is more than verbiage in Moody-Adams' original sentence, it must be so because the working-mother's understanding of herself in fact takes the form of a narrative, a sequence of events organized so that the earlier explain the later. How can Moody-Adams know this about the understanding of the working mother in question? The working mother, as presented, is merely a philosopher's illustration, not the subject of a biography cited in an endnote or an excerpt from Moody-Adams' own autobiography. So, the only way Moody-Adams can know what she claims to know is, it seems, by theory. This working mother must understand herself in terms of narrative because everyone must.

That <u>everyone</u>, or at least every morally healthy person, must understand herself through historical narrative is an interesting claim only if it is an empirical claim. What interest me is that, while hard to prove, the claim is easy to disprove. One example of a morally healthy person who does not think about herself through historical narrative would be enough to disprove it. Moody-Adams should therefore find the following data worrisome.

I have sometimes interviewed practitioners to develop ethics cases. Over more than two decades, I have, I think, interviewed more than two hundred (mostly lawyers, engineers,

and public administrators). While about half those practitioners did report their past in a series of stories, the other half did not. They were not story tellers. But their inability to tell stories did not seem to have anything to do with their moral sensitivity, moral development, or even their ability to recall dates, times, places, outcomes, and the like in answer to specific questions. They seem, then, to be counter-examples to the claim that humans must understand themselves through narrative. Moody-Adams cannot just assume that narrative underwrites the self-understanding of her working mother--or of anyone else.

V. Narrative, cont.

Of course, Moody-Adams does not just assume that historical narrative underwrites the self; she relies on two authorities for support. These two are among the darlings of communitarians, Alastair MacIntyre and Michael Sandel. I cannot resist the opportunity to explain why they are no help whatever. Let's begin with MacIntyre.

MacIntyre claims, Moody-Adams tells us, that "human beings are essentially story-telling animals". (9) On one interpretation, this claim is certainly true: every substantial human society has its stories. We are, "essentially", that is, as a species, story-telling animals. But, from this fact about human societies, it does not follow that each of us, except for a few defectives, is actually a story-telling animal (whatever he is "essentially"). The claim that each of us is actually a story-telling animal is a much stronger claim. It follows from the first, if at all, only with the help of a theory connecting attributes of a collective with attributes of individuals. Anyone who put forward such a theory--and MacIntyre is one--would then have to do something with my data. The data threaten the theory at least as much as the theory threatens the data. Moody-Adams gives no evidence that she, or the authorities she cites, have given such empirical matters any thought.

That is one problem with Moody-Adams' claim for the priority of history in underwriting the self. Here is another. Even if MacIntyre were right about stories, Moody-Adams would still need a premise to move from stories to history. She gets this premise from the other communitarian authority she cites: "I agree with Michael Sandel's assertion that we can have genuine moral commitments only because we are, in part, 'encumbered' by history that we share with others." (10) Agreeing with this assertion seems to me to help not

at all--for at least three reasons:

First, there is the weasel-word "genuine". What it admits is, in effect, that we can have moral commitments even if we are not historically encumbered; they just won't be "genuine". What makes a moral commitment genuine? Sandel (or Moody-Adams) must answer that question without begging it.

Second, there is the ambiguous "commitments". Strictly speaking, I have a commitment now only if I made one earlier. Commitments are what I have committed to. But, in this sense, commitments are only a part of a decent person's moral framework. Beyond commitments, there are, for example, moral duties like not killing. These exist independent of what I have committed myself to. They are genuine moral duties, even if not genuine moral commitments. I owe them even to people with whom I share no history.

Third, there is the question of what Sandel (or Moody-Adams) means by "history" here. Sandel (and Moody-Adams) are certainly right that some moral commitments--that is, commitments in the strict sense--depend on the past. My obligation to keep a promise, for example, presupposes my having made the promise sometime in the past. But this past is "history" only in the trivial sense that it is past. History, strictly speaking, is more than the past. History, strictly speaking, is a narrative satisfying the standards of historical writing. If we take Sandel to mean "history" in this strict sense, then what he says is false about most moral commitments. Few of our moral commitments depend on works of history. History-strictly-speaking encumbers few people.

For several pages following the appeal to Sandel, Moody-Adams uses "narrative" or, occasionally, "historical narrative", rather than "history". What explains this shift away from the word "history" half way through the paper? Has Moody-Adams begun to think about narratives that are not history? I am inclined to think so. She seems to sense, but not consciously realize, that she cannot stretch the term "history" as far as she needs for the conclusion she wants to reach. Anyway, her conclusion about moral education has more to do with narratives of the past than with history strictly so called.

Consider, for example, her claim that "an important part of what moral education should do is provide opportunities in which we learn how to choose responsibly between overlapping or competing histories." (11) If she means that an important part of moral education is learning to choose responsibly between overlapping or competing interpretations

of past events, she is certainly right. Often, we cannot act responsibly without making such a choice. But, if she really means choosing between alternative histories, she is, I think, clearly wrong. In my class in business ethics, for example, we almost never choose between overlapping or competing histories, though we do regularly discuss alternative interpretations of a sequence of events reported in a case, whether an actual case or a mere hypothetical. What can Moody-Adams be thinking about? The paragraph by which she reaches this conclusion suggests a disappointing answer. That paragraph is entirely about "narrative" rather than "history".

There is other evidence of trouble with her argument for the importance of history in moral education. For example, near the end of Moody-Adams' discussion of the general relation of history to moral education, she draws this conclusion: "The development of moral maturity thus involves the development of the capacity to make responsible choices about organizing narratives"? (12) History has disappeared. The verb "involves"--and the omission of any reference to history--leave the claim so weak that it needs no argument. Yet, the argument for this conclusion, spread over several pages, prepared us for a much stronger conclusion. Moody-Adams seems to be shaking off the very assumptions she just defended. I shall therefore ignore them in what follows.

VI. The Classroom

So much for the assumptions about unity, history, and narrative. We must now consider the use of history. Moody-Adams identifies five ways in which history might aid moral reflection. History can, she tells us (among other things): 1) help us justify current practice by reminding us of the bad consequences of alternatives; 2) help us criticize current practice by alerting us to the bad consequences such a practice has had; 3) provide models of good character; 4) help us to understand morally puzzling obligations by explaining how they came to be; and 5) help us to claim our "moral inheritance". (13-14) With these five ways in which history might help in moral reflection, I have only minor quarrels. For example, I am not clear how the "moral inheritance" of 5 differs from the moral models of 3.

But, I put such quarrels aside. I shall also put aside my concerns about how Moody-Adams gets from her philosophy of history to her list of history's uses. As far as I can see,

the list stands or falls independently of her philosophy of history. If the list fits our experience of using history, it stands. If not, it falls.

What I now want to do is think carefully about the contribution history can make to moral education in the classroom. Since the classroom in question would, presumably, be a history classroom, I am definitely not the one for this thinking. Not only do I never teach history, I have never even taken a college course in history. My most recent experience of a history course occurred in high school--almost four decades ago. I can't recall anything from that experience I recognize as moral reflection. So, I must rely on my imagination. I hope Moody-Adams will correct the errors I am about to commit.

Suppose that I am teaching a course in American History to college sophomores. The class is small enough to allow discussion. We are done with the American Revolution and are now on to the Early Republic. The text includes a biographical sketch of Thomas Jefferson, mentioning not only his slave-owning but the possibility of a child by his own slave Sally Hemings. Should I raise Jefferson's affair with Hemings for discussion today or instead focus on Jefferson's conflict with John Marshall, on the Louisiana purchase (including the diplomatic maneuvers that led up to it), or on the economics of westward expansion?

My impulse is to say nothing about Hemings--for the same reason I didn't have much interest in what exactly our current president did with a certain intern. Jefferson's relationship with Hemings, at least given our present crude knowledge, tells us very little about the man Jefferson, even less about the political person or the republic he helped to shape. Those who think otherwise seem to accept a picture of human beings presupposing moral unity, so that any flaw in character is a window revealing the whole person. If Jefferson behaved badly with Hemings, he must have been a hypocrite and everything else he did is contaminated. Since I don't think most people do, or even should, achieve moral unity, I'm inclined to reject such easy inferences.

What inspiration can I derive from the list Moody-Adams has provided? Let's see: I'm not concerned to justify or condemn slavery; I'm sure everyone in the class already has a pretty good idea of what was wrong with it. I see no puzzling moral claims on my students that Jefferson's slaveholding would help to resolve. I would like my students to take Jefferson as a model, but the Jefferson I'd like them to model themselves after is the Jefferson who wrote the Declaration of Independence, devoted much of his life to public

service, and closed his days designing, building, and inspiring the University of Virginia. That, I think, is a moral inheritance worth claiming, not his slaveholding. So, in this class, though probably not in all, we cannot use history as Moody-Adams suggests.

But suppose a student in the back of the room raised the Hemings question on her own, what then? I would, I think, have no choice but to take it up. Student questions are the keys to student attention. We ignore them at our peril. So, what next? Can I put that question to the service of moral education? I have already explained why I don't think I can use the Hemings question in any of the five ways Moody-Adams suggests. So, I am thrown back on my own notions of moral education. For me, moral education can do at least four things: 1) increase sensitivity to moral problems, so that we are more likely to recognize them when we encounter them; 2) add to moral knowledge, that is, knowledge not only of moral standards but of resources available to help us act morally; 3) improve moral judgment, so that we are more likely to recognize the right choice; and 4) strengthen moral will-power, so that we are more likely to do as we think right.[2] The question now is whether I can use that question about Jefferson to do any of this.

Since history is about the past, Jefferson and his contemporaries have no choices open to them now. What choices are open, are open to my students and me. We stand to Jefferson much as a jury stands to a criminal defendant (or as the Senate stood to Clinton). We must judge. I would, then, not be so much concerned with what Jefferson actually did as with how we should go about judging him. That is, I would take the question as an opportunity to think about our relationship to history.

There would, first, be the factual questions--what we believe Jefferson did, why we believe it, what evidence we have for it, and whether the evidence is sufficient to justify the belief.

Having sorted the factual questions well enough, I would, if time allowed, go on to the moral questions--what did the students object to in Jefferson's conduct with Hemings, assuming it occurred and we had our facts right. Is the objection that he committed adultery? that he crossed the color line to have sex? that he had sex with a niece? or that the niece with whom he had sex was both much younger than him and not in a good position to refuse, that is, that he took advantage of her? What standards are we to hold him to? Why?

Suppose we decide that we think that what was wrong with what Jefferson did is that

it was a form of sexual harassment. We might, then, compare Hemings with Lewinsky: why suppose that Jefferson was the prime mover and Hemings a mere victim? Slavery gave Jefferson a decided advantage, but how do we know that he used that advantage? How much do such details matter? What should we do if don't have them?

No doubt, many of the students would want to condemn Jefferson, but I would press them to examine themselves. What is the point of condemning a historical figure? What is the point of condemning this historical figure for this? What are our motives here?[3]

VII. Conclusion

This class discussion, as I have imagined it, would probably leave students less clear about what was wrong with Jefferson's conduct than they were initially. What will have become clearer to them, if I have done my job right, is the question the student asked from the back row, the difficulty of answering it properly, the special constraints under which historians choose to labor, and the moral principles or considerations that must go into a proper answer to such a question (whether or not the answer is one historians would give). The students should have gained some appreciation of the complexity of living decently in an imperfect world.

What I hope has become clear to you from observing this imagined discussion is that a history class will not have time for many such discussions. History classes can only be a part, and probably not a large part, of whatever moral education four years of college provide.

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NOTES

1. See, for example, Robert Liebert, "What Develops in Moral Development?", in Morality, Moral Behavior, and Moral Judgment, William M Kurtines and Jacob L. Gerwirtz, eds. (John Wiley and Sons: New York, 1984), pp. 177-192.

2. For more on this list, see my Ethics and the University (Routledge: London, 1999).

3. I would hope that, if time allowed, the discussions would bring us to the question of Jefferson's slaveholding. Does his slaveholding show that he was a bad person or just that even good people can participate in bad institutions? How might Jefferson have broken with that institution, say, in 1809, when his second term as president ended? He would, presumably, have had to free his slaves. What would have happened to them? Would they all, including the old and infirm, have found work and fulfillment? What was a freedman's life like in Virginia--or Pennsylvania--in the early 1800s? And what would have happened to Jefferson? Without slaves to work the land, Jefferson would probably have had to sell Monticello and, having paid off his considerable debts, have had to move into cheap rooms in Charlotte, Arlington, or Philadelphia. There might have been no University of Virginia, but American slavery would almost certainly have endured another half century.