

Moral Blindness and Moral Progress

Matthew Pianalto

University of Arkansas

We often speak of a person's being blind to the truth (or the obvious) and being blinded by love (and similarly by hate). My task in this paper is to make some sense of this metaphorical notion of blindness as it relates to moral judgment, and to argue that there is an intelligible sense in which we can be "morally blind" and that corrections of this blindness amount to true moral progress (rather than mere *shifts* in how we judge). We can make sense of the notion of moral blindness by leaning on a distinction made by Hume between the moral perspective and the self-interested perspective, and by arguing that feelings and judgments that arise from inappropriate perspectives (like the self-interested perspective) are susceptible to charges of moral blindness. I will proceed by first outlining what I take the term "moral blindness" to mean. I will then examine a case in which we can legitimately apply this term of moral criticism, and explain how we can avoid objections to this project that are based upon an implausible kind of relativism (that there may simply be more than one way to look at a situation, none of them better or worse). Lastly, I will take up the more general issue of whether we can conceive of changes in our moral perspective (the kind which may have been the result of a prior moral blindness) as real improvements, rather than as mere conceptual shifts in how we apply moral concepts (or shifts in the concepts we apply). On my view, we are obliged to regard such changes as real improvements in our moral perspective, and thus to accept some form of moral realism.

1. Moral Blindness

An important point that is implicit in Hume's discussion of the general view (from which legitimately *moral* feelings arise) is that the perspective we assume when evaluating a person, action, or situation determines what kinds of responses we will be predisposed to have toward these objects of evaluation. A particular perspective primes the experience of particular emotions. If my mother telephones me and tells me that one of my sisters is in trouble with the law (and supposing this sister has never been in such trouble before), I will be predisposed to feel sorry for my sister and to feel disdain for her persecutors,

and given my loving relationship with my family, such feelings might persist even after it becomes clear to everyone else that my sister deserves the trouble that she is in, given what she has done. That is not to say that it is *appropriate* for my partisan feelings to persist. Depending upon the severity of my sister's crime – for example, if it is a relatively minor offense – it might be inappropriate to attempt to divest myself of all feelings of partiality toward her. (It would be absurd to disown her because she was caught spray-painting graffiti on an overpass.) But no matter what she has done – assuming that it was wrong on some reasonable standard – I would be responding inappropriately if my feeling of partiality made it impossible for me to recognize that she has done something she shouldn't have done.¹ Whenever a feeling inhibits our ability to take account of all the morally relevant features of a case, I will say that we have suffered an instance of *moral blindness*. In general, we can define moral blindness as a failure to form a moral judgment from an appropriate perspective, from which all relevant features of the situation or object to be judged are sufficiently salient. Thus defined, this concept can be readily extended to cases where it appears to be a belief rather than a feeling which inhibits a person's ability to appreciate important aspects of a situation. The concept can be applied here, too, because to firmly believe something is to *feel* a strong amount of conviction that the belief is true, and the salience of such a firmly held belief may undermine one's capacity for attending to, or assigning appropriate weight to, relevant features of a case.

Before proceeding, something needs to be said in support of the perceptual metaphor upon which the notion of moral *blindness* depends. The term *blindness* may be misleading, since what we usually mean to pick out as moral blindness is not the complete lack of a capacity but rather a deficiency of some sort, an inability to make certain kinds of discriminations, as in color-blindness or prosopagnosia (the inability to recognize faces). It might be suggested that we compare moral blindness to color-blindness, but this analogy fails to appreciate the normative significance of the prior concept. When we say that someone is morally blind, we are not simply *describing* how it is with that person's ability to form moral judgments, but are also indicating a moral deficiency that ought to be corrected (or which we ourselves ought to avoid). By *moral blindness* we do not, as in the case of color-blindness, merely describe how it is with a person who has this "condition." If moral blindness was a purely physical deficiency,

¹ Certainly, it might be an open question whether what she did was really wrong, but even if I ultimately side with my sister who maintains that she did nothing (morally) unacceptable, my siding with her will only be justifiable if there is something other than my loving feelings for her which lead me to claim that she did nothing wrong.

as color-blindness is, it would be inappropriate to criticize the morally blind. (Suppose we could discover that some people physically lacked the ability to feel certain emotions like sympathy; we might pity these people, or put them in some institution and attempt to train them how to get along without those emotions, but the discovery that their “moral blindness” was really a physical condition would render any moral criticism of them pointless.) To *criticize* someone as morally blind is to claim that that person has failed to recognize or appreciate the importance or weight of certain facts of a case or has failed to recognize that particular concepts apply to a given case.

Thus moral blindness is a sub-category of a more general class of “blindness” that warrants criticism, which is constituted by a failure to take all the relevant information into consideration before forming a judgment. Suppose I meet a friend for a cup of coffee, and a woman at an adjacent table, interested in our conversation, asks to join us. She quizzes my friend with interest, smiles at his answers, tells him about herself, and says very little to me. After we leave the coffeeshop, I ask my friend why he didn’t ask this woman out on a date or at least exchange phone numbers with her; I know that he has been wanting to meet someone. He responds that she didn’t seem that interested in him. “Are you blind?” I protest. “She was flirting with you from the moment she approached us.”

We can contrast two different ways in which this “blindness” may have come about. One way occurs if my friend simply doesn’t have the concept of flirtation. If he lacks the concept – if, for example, he says, “I don’t really understand what you’re getting at,” when I remark on the flirtatious character of her actions – then his “blindness” is similar to literal blindness; he simply fails to see the woman’s behavior as flirtatious because he doesn’t grasp the concept, and so cannot apply it. (This would also go a long way toward explaining why he’d had a hard time finding a romantic partner.) A different kind of failure occurs if he has some understanding of the concept and yet fails to recognize its applicability to the present situation; he might say, “No, she was just being friendly.” (Of course, he may be right, but I’m assuming in this case that anyone else would interpret this woman’s behavior toward him as flirtatious and that this interpretation is appropriate.) This second kind of failure parallels the kind of moral blindness that I am interested in here, because in this case my friend believes that he has some grip on the flirtatious, but there is something incomplete about his grasp of this concept – or something which blocks its appropriate application in the present case. We might say that his concept of flirtation is simply different than mine, and that he exhibits not a conceptual failure but only a conceptual *difference*. (This concept is, perhaps, more contentious than that of *triangle*.) What do *I* see that makes me so certain that she was flirting with him? I see her leaning slightly toward him. I hear a warm

tone of voice. I see her gazing at him with eagerness and anticipation. I notice the way she smiles at him. Nothing about her behavior fails to indicate that she is significantly interested in *him*, rather than only what he has to say. What does my friend see that assures him that she is not flirting? She didn't ask for his phone number. She sat opposite him at the table, rather than at his side. She had initially come over because she was interested in our conversation. I take it that none of his observations are sufficient to establish that she wasn't (or didn't end up) flirting with him, and if he insists that any of these reasons constitutes a proof that she wasn't flirting, then I will suspect that he is in some kind of denial (he hates it when I'm right), is embarrassed (since I was there, too) or afraid (of being rejected), or is simply too convinced that his particular perspective and the details he has focused upon are decisive. Whichever of these happens to be the case, his failure to see the woman's behavior as flirtatious, given that he has some grasp of the concept, turns on the interference of some feeling or other, whether it is embarrassment, fear, or stubborn conviction, which all can distort his way of understanding the situation.

In a similar way, we can criticize what we take to be poor moral judgments by appealing to the concept of moral blindness, and by arguing that such judgments result from a failure to occupy the most appropriate perspective. The perspective a person occupies with respect to a situation can be identified as a function of (1) the interests, desires, and prior concepts and beliefs of the person which are brought to bear upon the current situation, (2) the particular aspects of a case (or character) which the person takes to be the relevant features on which the case (or person) is to be judged, and (3) the subjective responses to these features of the case which influence the person's consequent judgment. Importantly, this critique to be advanced is made by appealing to moral concepts of which the person already has some grasp, and then by providing reasons for thinking that this person has not applied a concept correctly or has failed to apply a working concept that would be appropriate. If moral criticism is to be more than a merely self-congratulating activity, our criticism must attempt to make contact with the moral world of those whom we criticize and whose moral attitudes we seek to change (hopefully for the better). Moral progress cannot be made simply by articulating to ourselves the moral views we already accept, which is no more than preaching to the choir. Our criticisms must be intelligible to those whom we criticize, which is to say that we must find some point of contact between our conflicting moral perspectives.² The obvious starting point

² Of course, the situation is somewhat different when moral critique is leveled at those who are not present or members past ages. However, the claim that we must connect moral perspectives still holds, for if we make no attempt to make contact with the concepts (and manner of thinking and judging) of those we

involves developing an understanding of the scope the relevant concepts have for others, and discovering what beliefs and convictions determine this scope. Furthermore, if our criticisms are to have the trappings of objectivity rather than the brute appearance of intellectual or authoritarian pressure, the reasons we provide must be intelligible to those we criticize and must be potentially convincing to them.³ The notion of moral blindness only makes sense if we can establish that there *is* something to be seen (or grasped or understood), and because I am not conceiving of moral blindness as a physical condition (as with color-blindness) but rather as a morally deficient perspective, we should accept that establishing that there is something to be seen in a given case cannot be a mere matter of convincing the morally blind to accept our testimony. Instead, successful and legitimate criticism will consist in our getting these people to see the situation in ways that are closer to the way in which we ourselves see the situation, and to accept that these changes constitute a real improvement in perspective (again, bearing in mind the qualification made in Footnote 3). This requires an attempt to uproot such people from perspectives which are inappropriate for moral judgment, and it is clear that we will not be able to do this by simply telling someone that the way she sees things is wrong, but rather by emphasizing the aspects of a situation which fail to command the right amount of her attention, from the perspective she currently occupies.

2. A Case: Moral Blindness & Sexual Harassment

In order to make the notion moral blindness and its application more concrete, let us consider in detail the following real case, which involves a massive failure of the employers and the male workers of a Minnesota iron mine to acknowledge the hostility of the work environment for the female miners and the sexual harassment which ensued. This situation ultimately escalated into the first class-action sexual harassment lawsuit, in which Lois Jenson and several other female miners sued Eveleth Mines and their managing company Oglebay

critique and to discover intersections between our conceptual worlds which give our criticisms an over-arching credibility, then we run the risk of simply applying our own concepts where they don't fit, and of revealing a relativistic gap that admits of no bridgework.

³ I put the point this way because the objectivity of our reasons shouldn't be held hostage to whether they convince *everyone*, but they should be convincing, or at least be intelligible as bearing moral weight on the issue at hand for anyone who understands what it is to give and receive good reasons.

Norton for refusing to acknowledge the harassment or to take action to correct this hostile work environment for decades.⁴ These women were harassed daily, regularly encountering sexual graffiti scrawled on workplace walls and pornographic photographs tacked onto bulletin boards. Some had been touched and propositioned on multiple occasions, and occasionally stalked, by fellow employees. One woman twice found that someone had ejaculated on the clothing in her locker. Complaints were rare because the women felt that the foul language and other vulgarities were simply par for the course in a workplace filled with working men. Additionally, the miners were union members who were pressured – even where these problems were nominally acknowledged – not to take job-threatening action against their “brothers.” When these women did complain to management, either they were blamed for egging on their co-workers, or they were promised investigations and corrective actions which never happened. Such was the life of the female workers whose director of personnel (Bob Raich) often commented to his secretary that “women did not belong in the mines, that they belonged at home, barefoot and pregnant,” as well as that the women were taking jobs that belonged to men.⁵ Raich expressed this view to the female workers as well; to a woman who planned to return to work after giving birth (and to whom he was attempting to deny health coverage for the pregnancy), he commented, “What kind of mother are you? A good mother would never come back to work in a place like this.”⁶ These sentiments were widely shared by male employees (although many workers maintained that the majority of harassment was committed by a relatively small number of men. While that may be true, it is also true that the majority of the men did little to minimize the harassment, since that was the job of the management and not the union workers themselves.) The following claim was typical: “For myself, I wouldn’t want my wife working there... It’s dirty. It’s filthy....A woman can’t handle it.”⁷ However, most of these women were not wives but single mothers, and the mining job was one of the few options

⁴ Women were first given jobs in the steel mines in 1974 and Jenson’s lawsuit began in 1988; the final settlement did not come until ten years later, and throughout the many rounds of litigation, Oglebay Norton refused to implement a substantial sexual harassment policy or to educate employees about sexual harassment.

⁵ Clara Bingham and Laura Leedy Gansler, *Class Action: The Story of Lois Jenson and the Landmark Case That Changed Sexual Harassment Law*, (New York: Doubleday, 2002), 213. A fictionalized adaptation of this story was also made into the film *North Country* (2005).

⁶ Bingham and Gansler, 51.

⁷ Bingham and Gansler, 190.

such women had which would realistically allow them to support themselves and their children. Employment at the mine was essential to their survival, and the necessity of working at the mine compelled them to tolerate what they could not change, and what no one else would.

From our own perspective this gender discrimination and harassment may seem obviously unacceptable, but the problem on the Range was that very few people, including many of the women, either recognized or would admit that the way the women were treated and the hostility of their working environment reflected a morally degraded culture in the mines (and in the management which tolerated these circumstances). At best, the management of the mine insisted that the gravest instances of harassment were singular incidents which did not indicate a systematic problem with the entire culture of the mine. Let us ask: how is one to advance moral criticisms which have the power to penetrate such deeply ingrained convictions about the proper roles of women and men and of what employees should be expected to tolerate in the workplace? It might be easy to say that there is simply no reasoning with some people, and although that is sometimes, sadly, true, we should not assume that such people are merely unreasonable moral monsters, incapable of reflection and change. Assuming that many of these people could be brought to recognize that the sexual graffiti, language, and gestures which were commonplace (and thus morally unremarkable to many people in the mine) constituted (or encouraged) significant moral wrongs, how does one go about showing them this? How does one get such people to reflect upon and scrutinize the convictions which make such immoral behavior possible, and which make this behavior possible in such a way that it goes unrecognized as immoral?

Clearly, the conviction which seemed to either legitimate or excuse the hostile behavior of (some of) the male miners toward the women was the belief that the women didn't belong in the mines in the first place. How did they expect to be treated, working with a bunch of *men*? The point, of course, is not that the way men act at the mine is how men treat women, but it is the way that men will act *at the mine*; presumably, they didn't place dildos made of industrial grease in their wives' closets or scrawl the phrase, "I eat cuntz," in the bathrooms of their homes (or the church vestibule). The belief that women didn't belong in the mine is one way of saying that they were bound to be mistreated given that the rules of "etiquette" were quite different at the mine. To put it that way makes it sound as if the claim is that the men couldn't have acted differently than they did, and so it is the women who were at fault for entering a hostile environment. This sets up a deterministic double-standard in which, although the men can't change, the women are quite free to quit their jobs, which is plainly false from an economic perspective. The belief that the women didn't belong in the mines was probably also motivated by a strong sense of

territory: mining is men's work, and the mine is where men get to behave like men. Not only did women present a threat to the vulgar culture that passed as acceptable, but they also represented jobs that men could have had – men with families to support. The double-standard here should be evident. However, the force of exposing a double-standard depends entirely upon whether it is wrong for there to be two different standards for the two different groups. When the prevailing sentiment is that women belong at home, barefoot and pregnant, women will be measured against that standard or expectation. Women who fail to meet that expectation will be criticized, and women whose activities diverge too far from it – say, those who go to work at the mine – cease, in some sense, to be *real* women. But in doing *men's work*, they did not become men, either; they did not get the same respect and acceptance as the men, and so they remained women, but not the kind of women that waited for many of these men at home. Insofar as the mining women remained women, they became merely sexual objects. In failing to live up to the married, barefoot and pregnant ideal, they did not warrant respect. (The implicit double-standard here is that the basis of respect is different for women and men.) They became also objects of hate, insofar as they represented a cultural threat to world of “men's work.” The belief that women didn't belong working in the mines was derived from the staunch acceptance of the barefoot and pregnant ideal: if a woman's place is (should be) in the home, then it is not (and she shouldn't be) in the mines.

How does one challenge such convictions in a way that makes it possible for someone deeply committed to this picture of gender roles to see that the behavior of many of the miners was vicious and that the female miners deserve to work in an environment that is free of such hostilities? We might try to chip away at these convictions by appealing to the financial needs of the women and their lack of viable alternatives to mining. We could ask the miner who wouldn't want his wife working in the mine, “What if you died and she had to raise your children alone? What if it was the only job that would pay the bills and put food on the table? Isn't that why *you* work there? Would she deserve to be derided, harassed, and abused? Would it make sense to tell her that she didn't belong there?” Rhetorical arguments of this sort are imperfect, and might be met with grudging responses to the effect that, yes, *that* would be an exception. Nevertheless, offering such scenarios for reflection is a start. What we ultimately want to establish is that the circumstances which lead any woman to seek employment at the mine are irrelevant to deciding how she ought to be treated as a fellow employee, and that these “circumstances” include, of course, one's gender.

We might also challenge those who are deeply committed to a gender-based division of labor to explain how they can consistently treat women one way at home (or at church or the supermarket) and another way at work; we can ask,

“Does a woman stop being a woman when she puts on a hard hat?” Although also imperfect, in part because it appeals to a more benign kind of sexism (the “women are weaker than us, so be nice to them” type), this approach may appeal to the gentler side of the macho sensibility. The sympathy we manage to elicit may itself be a distorted sympathy, based upon beliefs about the frailty of women, but it is better than no sympathy at all, if sympathy is what it takes for such men to become angered and embarrassed by their own behavior or that of their co-workers. The goal, of course, is to free such sympathy of its attachments to beliefs about female fragility – that is, to ensure that what such people experience is real sympathy and identification with these women (as fellow workers and humans) and not simply a patronizing pity – and to show such people that the issue is not one of how a *lady* ought to be treated, but rather is about how *anyone* ought to be treated.

How, then, do the questions and scenarios that we can pose constitute moral criticism? They show that there are ways of looking at the situation at the mine which elicit quite different feelings and thus different judgments about the moral status of the female workers and the treatment to which they were subjected. But how do we establish that the way we see the situation is not simply different, but *better*, morally speaking? That is, how can we establish that those who fail to recognize or give weight to the considerations we offer are blameworthy for failing to see what we see, or failing to feel what we feel (or, for failing to see and feel all that there is to be seen and felt)? It can seem as if the only way to provide an answer to such questions will require us to discover yet another, more general (more objective) perspective from which our perspective and that of those we seek to criticize can be compared, but it is doubtful either that such a perspective exists or, to the extent that it favors our perspective, that it is significantly different from the perspective that we ourselves inhabit as we criticize the hostile conditions at the mine. Rather, the cases and questions by which we challenge the perspective of the hostile miners, and thus challenge the moral legitimacy of their perspective (and the beliefs or convictions which comprise it), are at the same time an implicit argument for the moral rectitude of our own perspective and the feelings and judgments that flow from it. The very activity of arguing that sexual harassment did in fact occur at the mine, or that certain behaviors constituted a form of harassment, is an argument that there is a perspective from which the concepts of harassment apply and that a view of the situation at the mines which fails to recognize the applicability of these concepts (as well as their normative implications) is an impoverished, blind view. We can explain what we mean by sexual harassment, and we can cite facts about the attitudes or intentions of the miners and about the effects of their behavior on the women which show that the application of the concept fits the facts. But once we have given this interpretation of the

situation – once we have shown that it makes sense to call particular behavior acts of sexual harassment, and once we have pointed to the damages and violations that such behavior involves – the interpretation must, in a sense, speak for itself. Either one will be moved to sympathy (or outrage, etc.) by our description, or one will shrug it off and say, “Well, that’s one way to look at it.” In practice, this latter response is not really an expression of relativism but is a rejection of the first way of responding, and for our purposes it is important to note that even the person who says, “Well, that’s one way to look at it,” seems to be admitting that there is something to be seen from our perspective, and that our description of the case and the concepts we apply to it make some sense. If it didn’t make sense, then it wouldn’t really be a coherent way to look at the situation.

The inherent problem with rejecting coherent moral considerations that flow from a moral perspective that conflicts with one’s own is well-put by Stanley Cavell. He writes,

I can *refuse to accept* a “ground for doubt” without impugning it as false, and without supplying a new basis, and yet not automatically be dismissed as irrational or morally incompetent. What I *cannot* do, and yet maintain my position as morally competent, is to deny the *relevance* of your doubts...fail to see that they require a determination by me.⁸

This suggests that we can criticize the negligent attitudes of those at the mine who systematically deny that there was a harassment problem, and our criticism will be legitimate as long as those who oppose us fail to provide any reasons for thinking that there isn’t a problem. Our insistence that a moral wrong (or a host of moral wrongs) has occurred, and the fact that we can specify the nature of these wrongs by bringing the concept of harassment to bear on the relevant cases, requires *some* response from those who deny that any wrongdoing has occurred, and it requires more than a mere denial of our claim (as was the response of the mine and the managing company). The person who attempts an outright denial of our claim, who says, “I just don’t see what the problem is,” does present us with a “ground for doubt” about our claim, but once we have offered reasons for our response to the case, the burden is on this other person to either recognize the problem or to offer reasons for preferring a different overall description or interpretation of the case. In the mining case, we can then attempt to show that the reasons which potentially excuse the alleged harassment – or which deny the applicability of the concept sexual harassment to these cases – are irrelevant or insufficient. Even if it were true that the women didn’t belong

⁸ *The Claim of Reason*, (New York: Oxford UP, 1979), 267.

in the mine, how could *that* justify the hostilities these women faced? This is like saying that a person who has to walk through a bad part of town in order to get home deserves to be mugged, or that anyone who disagrees with the President's foreign policy deserves to be ostracized or imprisoned. The male workers who strongly disapproved of the presence of women could have ignored them (*not* their demands for respectful treatment), refused to help them more than necessary to keep their own jobs, and while such behavior might seem cold and irrational to us, it alone wouldn't have been nearly as outrageous as the sexual harassment that occurred. Anyone who persists in his claim that he still does not see the problem is simply blind to what sexual harassment is, and most likely has a distorted grasp of the concepts of desert, fairness, equality, and respect.

The appropriateness of our moral perspective does not depend upon our ability to convert others to it (although the success of morality does depend on this), but it is important to notice that there is no clear distinction between arguing for its appropriateness and arguing against other (deficient) perspectives from the very perspective we embrace. We cannot prove that our perspective is the best perspective or that it adequately responds to all the morally relevant aspects of a case, but we can show that other perspectives fail to provide a conceptual basis which is adequate to account for the subjective responses of those involved in the situation or which fail to admit certain facts into the class of morally relevant features. The sexist attitude of many of the miners allows little or no room for cultivating a sympathetic response to the pain and suffering of the women who were harassed, and consequently, such attitudes make criticism of, or even significant reflection about, the behavior of the men who harassed these women nearly impossible from within the perspective of which that attitude comprises a part. We might suspect (or hope) that any serious reflection on the attitudes which made such behavior possible would soon raise significant questions about the feasibility of the convictions which cultivate sexism. If an attitude or conviction cannot bear the weight of reflection, then any reasonable person will see that those attitudes and convictions cannot serve as a decisive basis for further beliefs or actions. That is not to say that they cannot serve as a basis at all; whether they can, and to what extent, depends upon whether reflection gives us reason to reject them outright, or only to be suspicious of them to a greater or lesser degree. To reject our own feelings or convictions, the evidence against them needs to be quite damning, because we cannot proceed to think about moral issues without assuming that at least some (and perhaps most) of our beliefs and feelings indicate something important and true about reality, or that they are pointed in the right direction. As McDowell suggests, we can protect such assumptions from charges of dogmatism or insularity by remaining open to the possibility of revising some of our

convictions and attitudes when it can be shown that our current concepts (or our current understanding of them) fail to account for aspects of a situation which demand attention.⁹ This is, in part, what distinguishes our perspective from that of the defiantly sexist person. We have reason to believe that our perspective is more appropriate, for where the sexist perspective tends to mask aspects of the situation which demand attention (and demand it in ways that can be articulated), our perspective brings those aspects into view so that they can be adequately responded to by our sensibility – i.e. our moral feelings as Hume uses this phrase – and accounted for in our moral judgments.

3. Change or Progress?

The picture of moral value and moral judgment that informs the foregoing conception of moral blindness rests upon the idea, well-articulated by Hume, that moral values arise from a subset of our subjective responses to features of the world. As Hume argues, we can distinguish between sentiments resulting from an impartial (what he calls a *general*) view and those that arise when we take a self-interested view of the same situation. He points out, for example, that we might respect and even admire the disciplined efforts of an enemy or rival even though we condemn his efforts when we consider them from a purely self-interested perspective.¹⁰ To determine which sentiments indicate moral value, we must inquire into the causes of our responses, dismissing those responses that owe their existence to an undue influence of self-interest. (We can ask, for example, whether a feeling was a result of features of the thing itself or merely a result of our own personal interests. This is not to say that our own interests are never relevant, but only that our own interests cannot reasonably count for more than anyone else's would in an impartial evaluation of a situation.) That particular acts or persons (or character traits) consistently provoke particular responses in us and that we can point to features of these acts or persons which seem to legitimize our responses gives shape to our moral concepts: e.g. shameful things are those that consistently give rise to feelings of shame (or judgments that such feelings would be appropriate), and for which there is some story to tell about why such things are shameful (i.e. a story about the beliefs and convictions we have which prime the feeling of shame as a response to particular kinds of things or acts).

⁹ See, "Values and Secondary Qualities," 145.

¹⁰ See *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Book III, Part I, Section II.

Once these concepts develop a sufficiently robust character (once they are recognized as a category of judgment), these concepts can, in turn, exert influence on our feelings. That is, once we are at a point where we can give reasons for classifying some act or character as, say, shameful (or repugnant or unfair), such reasons themselves, when convincing, will be sufficient to produce feelings of shame or disdain (depending on our place in the situation). Thus, a two-way connection is established between moral concepts and moral feelings. To reduce this connection to a slogan: what we see determines what we feel, and what we feel determines what we see. Moral criticism, therefore, can flow in both directions: we can lean on our moral concepts (and their current shape) and our reasons for applying them in order to criticize feelings (or lack of feelings) which fail to fit with our assessment of a situation, but we can also lean on our feelings in order to push for reinterpretations of situations which demand adjustments in our array of moral concepts (and beliefs). That is, a feeling can serve as a reason for further reflection, but in the majority of cases, it will not be the only reason for a particular judgment. We should be suspicious of anyone who claims that there is nothing over and above her feelings which could justify a particular moral judgment. (Purely physical pain and pleasure are probably the limiting case here.¹¹) The point of nevertheless allowing feelings to serve as reasons (or, perhaps, *prima facie* reasons) is that if subjective responses play an essential role in determining the shape of our moral concepts, we have to allow for the possibility that our moral concepts will have only rough boundaries, and that there will be situations in which it is difficult to decide whether a concept is fully applicable. In such cases we rely upon our feelings in order to get our foot in the door – that is, our feelings do not decide the issue in the problematic cases, but they fix the starting point of moral inquiry, by operating as “red flags” which indicate the need for further moral investigation. If this sounds mysterious, it is simply because sometimes we can *feel* that something is wrong before we can articulate what exactly is responsible for triggering this response.

We should also expect that feelings precede the development of robust moral concepts; the sexual harassment case discussed above is an example of this progression. Lois Jenson seemed to recognize a moral problem before she fully understood how to conceptualize the problem in a way that made the moral offenses clear and increasingly difficult to ignore. But again, once we have such

¹¹ In the case of these purely physical responses, we are, as Thomas Nagel suggests, too close to the source of the event which gives rise to a positive or negative evaluation to be mistaken. The point is simply that in these limiting cases, there is nothing more to justifying the negative evaluation of pain than the feeling itself (and similarly for pleasures). See *The View From Nowhere*, (New York: Oxford UP, 1986), 157-158.

concepts in hand, we should expect that they refer to not only the feelings which initially birthed them, but also the features of things (acts, characters, etc.) which give rise to such feelings. These concepts thus have objective features in addition to their subjective basis, for an act is shameful (or generous, etc.) not only because it is such as to cause and warrant feelings of shame, but also because it has the objective marks of a shameful act. (Those marks are the aspects of the act we point to as causes of our feelings of shame or disdain.) That some feature is a mark of shame is a contestable claim, because shame (unlike physical pain or pleasure) depends upon more than just our physical constitution (and not even essentially that), but rather upon particular beliefs and convictions we have about what kinds of actions warrant an array of feelings such as guilt and embarrassment. There is much about such concepts which is conceivably revisable (such as where in particular they appropriately apply), but that need not commit us to the view that the entire concept of shame is revisable (or eliminable). (For that would be tantamount to saying that feeling shame – or guilt – about some things is inessential to being a person, or a moral agent, and *that* smacks of a fairly deep skepticism about morality.)

We regard shamefulness as a real feature of some acts because of the feelings those acts produce in us, but it will be asked what we should say about behaviors we no longer regard as shameful: did they *cease* to be shameful, or were they *never* shameful to begin with? This question flows from a key potential criticism of my overall picture of moral judgment: that it is hopelessly circular to define moral concepts in terms of feelings, to evaluate feelings (and consequent judgments) in light of these concepts, and then to hold up the entire system as an account of how values are real and judgments objective. At best, this picture explains why we make the particular judgments we do by connecting those judgments to a causal story about our feelings and beliefs and their connection to things in the world, but this explanation does not amount to a theoretical (metaphysical) justification of the moral judgments that are produced in this way. For example, let us consider (in highly simplified terms) the general shift in attitude about the moral status of divorce. Suppose that the prevailing judgment fifty years ago was that divorce is shameful, that anyone who divorces ought to feel ashamed, and that this view is driven by the conviction that a marriage ought never to be dissolved, because it is a sacred promise, or because divorce undermines the essential societal institution of the family, or because more harm occurs by permitting divorce than by condemning or disallowing it, etc. Given this system of beliefs, its relative stability, and the degree of resulting commitment to the propriety of keeping marital promises (“come what may”), anyone committed to this system will be more or less determined to judge that divorce is shameful, that it is an affront to basic convictions about the sanctity of marriage. Such judgments will be justified from *within* this conceptual system

and will appear objective from within this particular web of beliefs and associated feelings. If we are participants in this moral system, we will not say that divorce is shameful *for us*, but rather that divorce is shameful *simpliciter*, given our presumption that our relevant background beliefs are true. Now suppose that we undergo some kind of conversion. We watch a documentary film about bad marriages, or we spend a great deal of time with a friend undergoing a painful divorce in order to end a terrible marriage, and we eventually begin to think and feel differently about divorce. We still think that it is unfortunate, that it would be better if people didn't get divorced (or didn't get married in haste). We feel sorry for such people, but we no longer condemn them, and when someone insists that a particular divorce was shameful, we disagree and offer reasons. Has divorce (for us) ceased to be shameful, or was it never shameful – that is, were we wrong ever to judge it as a shameful act? If we say that it simply ceased to be shameful, then we admit that whether divorce is shameful depends upon the judge (and the judge's beliefs and convictions); it is only shameful relative to some conceptual system.

Clearly, a moral realist will be under pressure to say that divorce was never *objectively* shameful, and that our previous judgments were mistaken. The realist will note that although it seemed that divorce was shameful, it wasn't, and its seeming shameful at the time can be explained by appealing to the prevailing beliefs about the stringency of particular kinds of promises or about what people ought to put up with in a marriage. By rejecting such reasons, we thereby reject the judgment of shameful which is produced by them. We abandon the view that all divorces comprise a univocal moral category; we may still hold that particular divorces are morally reprehensible, but our reasons for such judgments will have to refer to features of the case that are more specific than its being an instance of divorce. The revised view about divorce might then be presented as standing upon a more objective basis, because it is responsive to reasons that were not countenanced by the prior (overly simple) view. The anti-realist might complain that the objective status of our revised judgments is no less relative to a conceptual framework than the rejected view that all divorces are shameful, and that there is no reason to presume that our new perspective on divorce is the final word, or that there is *any* final word on, or fact of the matter about, the moral status of divorce. The fact that divorce seems (or feels) shameful from within one system, and fails to seem shameful from within another, is merely a fact about these separate systems and the judges who embrace them.

The realist can accept the possibility that the revised view of divorce might eventually be superseded by another view from which our current stance on divorce can be criticized as deficient. But this possibility is in some sense irrelevant because the *actual* situation is one in which (let's assume) we have

some reason to believe that our revised moral outlook constitutes a real improvement over the old way of thinking about divorce. If the divorce example is too controversial, then we should simply change cases and look at the developments in our moral outlook toward sexual harassment or slavery, for one would be hard-pressed to deny that our rejection of these abusive practices is the result of improvements in our moral perspective. To speak of “real improvement” here is to claim that the changes made to our moral perspective are not merely matters of convenience or preference but that these changes are in a way *forced* upon us both by our awareness of particular facts and by our subjective response to those facts. Once we come to recognize the pain and suffering that some practice inflicts on a person or group, we are forced to respond to that fact, even if our response is to ignore it. But simply to ignore some feature of the situation, to refuse it as worthy of consideration, is, in a sense, to deny the reality of that feature. Such denials cannot be advanced without reason.

The problem is that there seems to be a gap between conceiving of our current moral outlook (or parts of it) as improvements over past moral views and regarding our moral outlook – considered on its own merit – as delivering objectively true judgments or of treating the moral qualities or predicates that are elements of this outlook as real features of the things, acts, and persons that are subject to moral evaluation. This apparent gap is exposed by the possibility of further revision and improvement. But we should note that the notion of improvement presupposes some kind of standard for comparison, such as an ideal morality of which our (or some actual) moral perspective is an approximation. However, if the anti-realist objection to a realist account of moral progress is conceived in these terms, then the argument is too narrow, for it only establishes what the realist can accept: that our current moral outlook (or parts of it) might be wrong, but wrong for real reasons, and not simply because there are no reasons that would either legitimate or overturn our moral view. The anti-realist must deny the intelligibility of the notion of moral progress in order to establish as a conceptual truth the claim that no amount of adjustment, revision, or reflection upon how moral outlooks have changed over the millennia is sufficient to justify claims of moral objectivity or realism: that our satisfaction with the current developments in our moral perspective is nothing more than yet another subjective attitude.

Whatever our current state of satisfaction might be, the anti-realist needs to provide some reason *not* to conceive of the adjustments we make to our moral outlook, in light of new evidence or new ways of interpreting the situations we judge, as conceptual (and moral) improvements rather than merely as conceptual *changes*. Against any such claim, the realist has two lines of resistance. I have already mentioned the first one above. To identify some feature of a situation is

to acknowledge its reality and to accept that where there is a moral problem to be solved, this feature has some bearing on how we are to evaluate the overall situation (or how we are to act, given the facts of the situation). A moral perspective which produces judgments that fail to take into account all the features of a situation is corrupt because its judgments fail to manifest a full sensitivity to reality (even when this failure is harmless because the features it is blind to turn out to be irrelevant to the case). A more comprehensive perspective would thus count as an improvement over this deficient perspective. This line of argument would be question-begging if the features I am referring to needed to be conceived as *moral* features, but my point is that the question as to whether a feature has moral import or not (or *how much* import) can only be raised after the feature itself is identified. For example, we can only ask whether the emotional distress of the women in Eveleth Mines has any moral relevance in determining whether there was something wrong with the work environment at the mines if the emotional distress itself is regarded as a real or ineliminable feature of the situation, rather than a mere appearance (i.e. something “wrong” with the psychology of these women). That this emotional distress, once admitted as a feature worthy of consideration, seems to carry undeniable moral weight does not show that the moral relevance of this feature is simply presupposed by introducing the concept of emotional distress; rather, the fact that we respond to the presence of emotional distress in this way shows that there is something wrong with simply denying its existence or relevance when there is evidence of such distress. Thus, we can in general conceive of better and worse (or more and less adequate) perspectives on a situation in terms of their propensity to acknowledge factors that are relevant to arriving at a responsible judgment.

The second line of resistance (against the anti-realist objection) involves arguing directly that our subjective responses to situations admit of adjustments and revisions, some of which can be legitimately characterized as improvements rather than as mere changes. The adjustments I have in mind here are not those picked out, for example, by Hume when he notes that some passions are (in a sense) unreasonable because they are based upon existence judgments or means-ends judgments that are mistaken. In those situations, changes in sentiment are effected by corrections in factual judgments (about what there is to respond to or about what actions will actually achieve our ends and thus warrant our approval). Rather, the adjustments of sentiment which we are to argue constitute real improvements are those which involve some critical reflection on the sentiment itself (e.g. its phenomenology), its connection to the objects which give rise to it, and its appropriateness. While Hume maintained that it is not contrary to *reason* to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of his finger, that does not preclude its being contrary to other sentiments we

have.¹² We can agree with the person who has an extreme fear of heights that high places are dangerous and that being in a high place may warrant some trepidation and still consistently criticize this person's exceedingly fearful response to heights as manifesting an inappropriate amount of fear. When the acrophobe responds, "That's just your opinion," we can retort that even if a particular amount of fear serves a good purpose when standing at great heights, a fear which causes paralysis and an inability to cope with the situation has failed to serve any purpose once we are already, say, crossing the Brooklyn Bridge. (We could also point out that such fear could possibly prevent this person from doing things that he ought to do, like visiting his mother in Brooklyn.) To tame one's fear of heights would constitute not just a change in sentiment, but a real improvement of one's emotional character.

Certain refinements in our sentiments put us in a better position to make fully adequate judgments, not just about what is fearful or dangerous, but also about what is good or virtuous (and not just nice or pleasing or lucky-for-us) and what is vicious or evil (and not simply inconvenient or unpleasant or alien). How we refine our sensibility does not depend only upon how our own sentiments or responses strike us when we reflect upon them, but also upon what concepts we bring to bear on our sentiments, and how we distinguish between various kinds of sentiment. Part of Hume's point in distinguishing between the general and the self-interested perspectives is that the feelings that arise from each perspective are different, even though they may be related phenomenologically. (It may be easy to confound the various good feelings I get from being treated kindly, since there may be a good feeling which is connected to my own personal satisfaction but yet another good feeling to be had when I consider the nature of the act itself, regardless of the fact that it was done to me in this case.) Developing an ability to conceptualize these differences, and thus to take notice of them, can make a significant difference in how we react to our

¹² Annette Baier argues that Hume conceived of moral criticism as the process of turning the reflective sentiments on other of our sentiments. She writes, "Hume believed that all of morality was a matter of what he called reflection, turning natural responses, not just on their natural target, but on responses, turning self-interest on the workings of self-interest, turning sentiments on sentiments." ("Theory and Reflective Practices," *Postures of the Mind*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 225.) This reflective ideal only makes sense on the assumption that we get something like an improved moral view out of the process of reflection, that reflecting upon our sentiments provides us with an opportunity to exert influence over them by way of condemning immediate responses we want not to have (upon reflection) and praising those responses which seem appropriate (upon reflection).

own responses and how we proceed to judge the world in light of our feelings. What kind of feeling it is matters in more than one way; whether something is pleasing or painful is not sufficient for moral judgment until we have also determined not only why it pleases or pains us, but also what kind of pleasures and pains we are dealing with in this particular situation. (Is it a pain of inconvenience or of undeserved humiliation? Does this please me simply because this is what I wanted for myself, regardless of how it will affect others, or because this is the sort of thing I would want for anyone?) Refinement in our ability to conceptualize our sentiments and the differences between various sentiments thus opens up the possibility of new (and richer) experiences, of a heightened awareness both of our own subjectivity and how it is shaped by – and what we *allow* it to be shaped by in – the world.

This project of attaining a reflective understanding of our own sentiments is not separate from the project of seeking to occupy what Hume called the general view (i.e. the moral perspective). Whether we are trying to gain a clearer understanding of a situation that requires some evaluative determination by us or of our own dispositions to respond in particular ways, our ultimate aim is not only to better understand *why* we judge as we do, but why we *must* judge as we do or why, in light of reflection, we *must* revise our past judgments.¹³ When we conceive of the possibility of an improved, deeper understanding of our moral commitments, we necessarily presuppose the possibility of making progress in our moral understanding. Critics will object that this kind of progress need not involve a commitment to some form of moral realism, because our concern is a pragmatic concern with how to interpret the range of experiences we are inclined to call *moral* experiences. The revisability and contestability of our moral concepts are, on this opposing view, necessarily at odds with any attempt to confer the mantle of realism upon moral discourse. But “revisable” does not mean *will be revised* and “contestable” does not mean *will be successfully contested*. Until we are shown the necessity of abandoning our current concepts and the judgments that flow from our use of them, there is nothing in detail that we can conceive of that we can agree would be better than our current concepts or perspective. On the other hand, if there is a detailed proposal, if there are specific reasons for doubting our moral views, then we find ourselves in the uncomfortable position of those who aren’t sure what is real and what is merely appearance. To decide one way or the other is to admit the reality of something:

¹³ Raimond Gaita makes a compelling case for the idea that moral philosophy is primarily an attempt to understand why we judge as we do (where this is not simply a psychological question) rather than an attempt to solve moral conflicts or to provide normative guidance. See his *Good and Evil: An Absolute Conception*, (London: Routledge, 2004), especially Chapter 15.

some experience, some reason, some feature. Even if some of the things we admit into our moral considerations must later be made to disappear, others refuse to go away – tables and chairs, the color blue, the preciousness of life, the atrocities of war criminals, the fear of death, and the desire for happiness. Subjectivity is not a strike against a thing's (an experience's) reality. For if how things seem to us was always an illusion, then so, too, would *that* be illusory. But once we have begun to take some feature of the world, or some feeling in the gut, seriously, it is not only difficult but also absurd to suppose that there is nothing real about what we are seeing or feeling or doing or saying. Although we know well enough that our assumptions and judgments can be wrong, we only know this because there is something real – some reason, some experience, some feature – which has revealed to us our errors and compelled us to change our ways.