Eternal Values, Evolving Values, and the Value of the Self
Christine M. Korsgaard

Forager: “Of course we have headmen! In fact we’re all headmen ... Each one of us is headman over himself.”
– A San ‘Kung forager

Farmer: “For when the Gentiles, which have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law, these, having not the law, are a law unto themselves.”
– Romans 2: 14

Early Fossil-Fueler: “The human being ... is subject only to laws given by himself ... Autonomy is ... the ground of the dignity of human nature.”
– Immanuel Kant

Ian Morris assures us that he does not think his view implies “that what is (let alone what has been) is what ought to be.” Nevertheless, Morris’s speculations raise questions about the relationship between the values that people actually do hold, or have held, and the values that we ought to hold, if indeed there are any such values.

In order to make it less cumbersome to talk about this, I want to mark the distinction terminologically, but it turns out that that is rather hard to do. I could call the values that we ought to hold “real values,” but I am afraid that some readers

2 The translation is that of the King James Bible.
3 Immanuel Kant in The Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals, translated by Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 4:432 and 4:436. The numbers are those of the volume and page number of The Prussian Academy Edition of the Works of Kant, found in the margins of most translations.
4 Morris, Chapter One, pp. X (7/7)
might take that to mean, “the values that people really hold,” as opposed to, say, “ideal values.” I could call the values we ought to hold “ideal” values, but of course the values of a culture always represent its ideals, whether they are the values it ought to hold or not. Another option is to call the values that we ought to hold “moral values,” but that might also be confusing, since it might be taken to refer to the kind or the content or the function of the values in question. We think of things this way when we identify “moral” values as the ones that govern human relationships, as opposed to say, the aesthetic values that govern our assessment of works of art and beauty. The values that Morris focuses on, embodied in our attitudes towards violence and various forms of equality and hierarchy, are all “moral values” in that sense, whether they are the ones that are actually embodied in some society or culture’s attitudes, or the ones that ought to be enshrined there. My solution will be to compound the available adjectives, and call the values that we ought to hold “real moral values.”

For the other side of the contrast, I am going to borrow a word from legal theory. In legal theory, the statues that are actually written down and enforced by a society are called “positive laws,” while the laws, if any, that ought to be enforced – the ones we can endorse from a moral point of view – are, at least in some traditions, called “natural laws.” This distinction has its roots in Stoic ethics and the natural law theories of morality that are derived from Stoic ethics. But it goes all the way back to Aristotle, who distinguished “legal” from “natural” justice, asserting that natural
justice is the same everywhere and, as he says, “does not exist by people’s thinking this or that.”⁵ So I will call the values that people actually hold “positive values,” and ask you to hear that on an analogy with positive law. Positive values vary from age to age, society to society, culture to culture, and era to era. Real moral values, I will suppose, do not vary, at least not at bottom, because if there are genuine differences between the values that, say, foragers ought to endorse, and the values that farmers ought to endorse, we will be able to explain those differences in terms of yet more fundamental real moral values that farmers and foragers both ought to endorse. Aristotle emphasized that natural justice is everywhere the same. Early modern moral philosophers liked to make the same point even more emphatically by saying that values are eternal and immutable. Philosophers do not go in for that way of talking much any more, but if we did, then we might see the difference between real moral values and positive values as the difference between eternal values and values that are in fact endorsed only in certain times and places.

One reason why Morris’s ideas raise questions about the relation between positive values and real moral values is that he suggests that positive values are shaped in part by biological evolution, and that raises questions about whether real moral values are shaped that way as well. Morris cites Frans de Waal’s Tanner Lectures, also given at Princeton, in support of the claim that “our values have

evolved biologically in the seven to eight million years since we split off genetically from the last common ancestor we shared with the other great apes.”

I was also a commentator for Professor De Waal’s lectures, and I would like to repeat a point I made then, though in a slightly different way. If we are going to talk about the evolution of values, it is important that we attend to the fact that it is not only the content of our values, but the very form of valuing, that must have evolved. What I mean by that is that valuing is a different kind of mental attitude than say, liking something, or wanting something, or being instinctively drawn to do something, or feeling compelled to do something. I will say how it is different below. Whatever explains our values must also explain the origin of that distinctive mental attitude or activity. Evolution’s contribution must involve giving us the capacity for valuing things, not, or at least not just, the content of our values.

There are three reasons why this is important. First, Morris follows De Waal in suggesting that some of the other animals also have moral values. I do not find this plausible, not because I think that the other animals act badly, or something like that,
but because I think they are incapable of the distinctive mental attitude that I call “valuing.”⁹ Again, I will explain why below. Second, I think that once we remind ourselves that valuing is something that people do, we may see a route to identifying real moral values. They would be the ones that would be held by people who were doing their valuing correctly. That is to say, it is possible that once evolution has put the capacity for valuing things into place, it is the correct exercise of that capacity that determines the content of real moral values, rather than evolution itself.

Of course, a skeptic might doubt that anything counts as “doing your valuing correctly.” But the bare fact that a capacity evolved does not prove that it has no correct exercise: after all, reason itself must have evolved. And – and this is my third point – Morris’s story, or at least the part of his story that I think works, works better if there is something that counts as doing your valuing correctly – that is to say, more simply, it works better if there are real moral values. Or rather, to put the point more carefully, it works better if the people that Morris is theorizing about think that this is so. The reason for this is simple. Positive values can only serve the evolutionary and social functions that Morris identifies for them if the people who hold them take them to be real moral values. For positive values to sustain forms of social organization made necessary by different methods of energy capture, people must

⁹ De Waal’s target was people who think that animals are not “moral” because they are savage and ruthless. My point now and in my response to De Waal is that animals lack the capacity for action that is either morally good or evil.
suppose their positive values are real moral values; and that means that people must have the concept of real moral values – they must believe that some forms of human interaction are genuinely valuable.

This point is worth emphasizing. Morris’s story raises issues about what philosophers sometimes call “transparency.” That is to say, it raises the question whether, if people came to believe Morris’s theory, their values would survive. Suppose people understood that their values functioned to support forms of social organization required by different modes of energy capture. Would female farmers still accept male hegemony? It seems unlikely that you could continue to believe that your king is a god if you knew that belief could be traced to the fact that it supported a certain form of social organization. Would you still be willing to treat your king as if he were someone with a godlike authority over you, a right to determine whether you lived or died? I rather doubt it, but if you would, it would at least have to be because you yourself valued that form of social organization, and thought that you were right to do so. Values can only function to sustain forms of social organization if people believe they are genuine. So people must have the concept of real moral values, or anyway of some kind of real values. And the most natural way to explain why people have the concept of real values – perhaps not the only way, but the most natural – appeals to the fact that such values exist.

The argument that I just made has a long legacy. Gilbert Harman famously argued that we do not need to appeal to real moral values to explain people’s moral
reactions: we only need to appeal to their beliefs about moral values.\textsuperscript{10} The argument I just made makes a counterpoint, which is that we still have to explain how it is possible for people to have such beliefs. Where did people get the concepts in terms of which their beliefs about moral values are framed – the concepts of right and wrong and obligation?

David Hume and Frances Hutcheson made a similar point against Bernard Mandeville’s idea that virtue is an invention created by politicians who reward people with praise when they behave in desirable ways.\textsuperscript{11} Morris’s view has a rather Mandevillian air about it, since he sees values as socially useful, so their argument seems relevant here. Hume and Hutcheson pointed out that if the only concept of “good” people operate with is the concept of “furthering someone’s self-interest,” no one would be flattered or rewarded by praise. When someone said you are “good,” you would just take him to be saying that you are useful to him in some respect, and you would have no reason to be especially pleased by this unless it was useful to you to be that way. Even then, it would not affect your self-conception. We can only persuade people that certain attributes are virtues, if they operate with the


\textsuperscript{11} See Bernard Mandeville, The Fable of the Bees: or, Private Vices, Public Benefits (edited by F. B. Kaye. Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1988), especially the section “An Enquiry into the Origin of Moral Virtue,” pp. 41-57. Mandeville himself denied that he meant either that virtue is unreal or that it is not worth having.
concept of virtue, and we need an explanation of how people came to do that.\(^\text{12}\) So the concept of virtue – the idea that the self itself can be valuable or disvaluable in a certain way – cannot be created in any straightforward way from the concept of self-interest. In the same way, a story about how people come to have values with a certain content has to be preceded with a story about how people come to have such a concept as “value” at all. That story has to explain why people believe that some things really are valuable or ought to be valued.

Now let me return to the question what sort of activity valuing is. One philosophical issue about valuing concerns the order of priority between values and valuing. Some philosophers believe that values simply exist – that some things simply have the property of being valuable, by virtue of their intrinsic nature – and that valuing is a response to that property. Correctness in valuing would then just be a matter of valuing those things that actually have value – in the case at hand, it would be a matter of somehow apprehending the real moral values that exist independently of that capacity. Others believe that valuing is prior to value, and that the things that have value are just the things that are correctly valued. We would then need a different account of what the correct exercise of the capacity for valuing

comes to. I do not think I need to settle this issue in order to make the point I want to make here, although it seemed worth mentioning, since the second possibility – that valuing is prior to values, and values do not exist independently of it – may seem friendlier to the scientific conception of the world. If we can find a different account of what the correct exercise of the power of valuing comes to, something other than simply apprehending independently existing values, then we will have shown that the idea that there are real moral values is not in any tension with a scientific view of things.¹³

Leaving that aside, many philosophers, representing a variety of different moral theories, have made a link between valuing and our evaluative or normative conceptions of people, of ourselves and others. So for instance philosophers in the “expressivist” tradition have pointed out that valuing something involves not merely wanting it, but being disposed to think badly of people who do not want it, and of

¹³ The view in described in the text is the metaethical or metaphysical theory these days known as “constructivism.” To make it a little less abstract, consider Kant’s idea that the values relevant to the guidance of action – the values of rightness, obligation, and permissibility – emerge when we see whether we can impose the form of rightness – the form of universal law – on a maxim of action. Of course a further story has to be told about why this counts as a correct exercise of the power of valuing, and it is the work of Kant’s moral philosophy to tell it. Once the story is told, however, it is a story about how values find their way into the world, not a story about how preexisting values are apprehended. Values enter the world when valuers endorse certain maxims as laws.
ourselves should we cease to want it. I can want chocolate ice cream without thinking that I would be a deplorable human being if I ceased to want it; indeed, I can want it while strongly wishing that my appetite for it would go away. But I cannot value truthfulness without thinking that I would be a deplorable human being if I became an unscrupulous liar, and without hoping very much that I will go on both valuing truthfulness and actually being a person who tells the truth. Harry Frankfurt, in his own Tanner Lectures, makes a similar point about the attitude he calls “caring,” which I take to be a species of valuing. Frankfurt says:

> When we …care about something, we go beyond wanting it. We want to go on wanting it, at least until the goal has been reached. …[W]e feel it as a lapse on our part if we neglect the desire, and we are disposed to take steps to refresh the desire if it should tend to fade. The caring entails, in other words, a commitment to the desire.

The common thought here is that our values are essentially connected to our capacity for evalutative or normative self-conception. The way in which they guide us is not merely by prodding us to satisfy them, like a desire, but by prodding us to live up to them: they determine not only what states of affairs we want to realize, but

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who we want ourselves to be. If something along these lines is true, then only a creature with the capacity for an evaluative or normative self-conception is capable of valuing things. To get back, for just a moment, to the other animals, I do not believe that the other animals are capable of normative self-conception. Normative self-conception depends on the fact that human beings are reflective in a particular way: we have evaluative attitudes not only about things in the world, but also about our own inner states and attitudes themselves. We endorse or reject our own likes and dislikes, attractions and aversions, pleasures and pains, declaring them to be good or bad. And we think of ourselves as worthy or unworthy, lovable or unlovely, good or bad, accordingly. All of this, I believe, is a feature of human life that makes it very different from the lives of the other animals. Some of the other animals may seem to have moments of pride, but they do not seem in general to think of themselves as worthy or unworthy beings. Some of them certainly want to be loved, but they do not seem to worry about being lovable. My own view is that our capacity for normative or evaluative self-conception, or rather the source from which it springs, also involves us in the construction of our own identities. You can do your valuing well or badly, because the construction of your own identity is an activity that

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can be done well or badly, depending on whether it renders you a well-integrated agent or not.\textsuperscript{17}

Earlier I proposed that an insight into the nature of valuing might give us the key to real moral values. Real moral values might be the ones that are held by people who are exercising their capacity for valuing correctly. Obviously, nothing short of a full moral theory could vindicate this proposal. Equally obviously, I cannot give you such a theory on this occasion. But I would like to point out that the connection between valuing and normative self-conception at least suggests an account of what correct valuing might amount to. Although the connection is admittedly a little vague, it seems plausible to suppose that people who have a positive normative self-conception would be prepared to make certain claims for themselves.\textsuperscript{18} They would,


\textsuperscript{18} In making these remarks, I am not ignoring the difference between respecting yourself, in the sense of demanding recognition for your standing as a creature with rights and interests of your own, and esteemling yourself, in the sense of thinking that you are superior to others in virtue of your social class, gender, race, or in terms of certain abilities, accomplishments, or other attributes, and that that superiority carries with it an entitlement to be treated in certain ways. But the story I have in mind relies on the familiar idea that there is a complex developmental connection between these two ideas of the roughly sort described by Rousseau and Hobbes. Both concepts involve thoughts about “worthiness-for” that connect the value of the self to the value of its interests and projects. People who esteem themselves think themselves entitled to be treated in certain ways because they are superior to others; we begin to learn respect when we learn that we should extend esteem of the relevant kind to all people equally. As Kant pointed out all too vividly, a comparative element remains, for at this stage of moral evolution, people learn to respect each other by deciding that they occupy some sort of rank that places them higher than the other animals. (see “Conjectures on the Beginning
for instance, treat their own interests seriously and demand that others do so as well. They would resist violence exercised towards them if they could, and demand that others aid them in this resistance. They would be unwilling to allow themselves to be sacrificed merely to serve the interests of others, or to be ruled by the judgment of others in preference to their own. They would treat themselves, and demand that others treat them, as what Immanuel Kant called “ends in themselves” or John Rawls called “self-authenticating sources of valid claims.”

In saying this, I am not disagreeing with Ian Morris when he traces apparently universality of some values – his list is “treating people fairly, being just, love and hate, preventing harm, agreeing that some things are sacred” to the fact that the hardware of human brains has not changed much since we were ice-age hunters. I am only making a suggestion about what it is about our brains that dictates these values. But it actually does not matter for the point I want to make now if you accept my suggestion or not. All need for the point I want to make now is that you grant

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20 Morris, Chapter One, p. X (7).
that if there are any real moral values, and we sometimes know what they are, then you should also think that the connection between them and our capacity for valuing is not accidental.\textsuperscript{21} Whether the connection between the capacity for valuing and real moral values is made by right reasoning or correct apprehension or in some other way does not matter for present purposes, as long as you suppose that there is such a connection. If you think that, you will think that when the capacity for valuing does manage to attach itself to real moral values, it is not an accident. After all, why we would ever even suspect that there are such things as real moral values, if we had no reason to suppose that valuing is something that can be done well or badly? This is where I begin to take issue with Morris.

After conceding that there are apparently universal values, Morris goes on to say that, “there are ... enormous differences through time and space in what humans have taken fairness, justice, etc. to mean” and to connect these differences to the different social forms required for different forms of energy capture.

Now of course I do not mean to deny the banal truth that human beings have had different ideas about what justice, fairness, and other values require of us. It is obvious to everyone that this is true about issues of hierarchy and domination, part

\textsuperscript{21} This is closely related to a point that has been made effectively by Sharon Street in several of her papers – that the explanation of how we come to value certain things should not make it seem accidental that we sometimes manage to value the right things. See, for instance, “A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value, Philosophical Studies 127 No. 1 (January 2006): 109-166.
of Morris’s focus. But here are three different things we might say about these differences. I will give them names.

1) The first view we might call Sociological Positivism, although I hasten to say it is only loosely connected to the other things that have called themselves that. According to this view, human beings have a capacity for valuing, but what people actually value can be wholly explained by sociological forces, which may in turn be driven by evolutionary forces.

2) The second view we might call the Enlightenment view. According to the enlightenment view, human beings have a capacity for valuing, and that capacity has some natural tendency to attach itself to real moral values. But like our capacity for scientific knowledge, it develops slowly through history, and only manages to bring its proper object, real moral values, slowly into view.

3) The third view we might call the Distortion View. According to the distortion view, human beings have a capacity for valuing, and that capacity has some natural tendency to attach itself to real moral values, but its tendency to do that is vulnerable to distortion by sociological forces. Traditionally, this view has been associated with the claim that our values are subject to distortion by what is called, in the pejorative sense, “ideology.”

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22 Later (in note 26 below) I will mention some reasons for thinking that this name for the view I might have in mind might not be exactly right.
I think there is something to be said for the Enlightenment view, but even more to be said for the Distortion view. After all, I have already suggested that the capacity for valuing is essentially connected to our capacity for normative or evaluative self-conception, and that is a capacity that is notoriously susceptible to all sort of disorders, some of which we may well wish to call distortions. Normative self-conception may be the source of our capacity for valuing, but it is also the source of our liability to a whole set of unique human maladies and delusions. People suffer profoundly from the idea that they are worthless or unlovely specimens of humanity, and can even be driven to suicide to escape from these thoughts. Freud and Nietzsche, seeing the connection between our capacity for valuing and our normative self-conceptions, occasionally went so far as to characterize morality itself as a kind of disease.\textsuperscript{23} Our sense of self-worth makes us vulnerable to all kinds of influences, and those influences work by distorting our values. After all, in one of the cases that Morris focuses on – gender inequality – that is plainly at least part of how it works. Male hierarchy is maintained by the propagation of gender ideals, especially ideals of femininity, which make women believe that they are worthless and unlovely women if they are not pretty, vulnerable, obedient, nurturing creatures. Gender Ideals, as we all know, can cause a woman to value looking a certain way over her

own health, having a manner soothing to men over the assertion of her own autonomy, and exercising a capacity for wifely and motherly self-sacrifice over pursuing her own rights and happiness. I, for one, am prepared to say that such gender ideals lead to distortions of value, rather than merely saying they explain the specific form that certain values take. Perhaps I am just hopelessly locked into the fossil-fuel mentality.

But I do not think so. I have already made one criticism of the view I have just called Sociological Positivism. If values were just a way of maintaining the social forms called for by a certain form of energy capture, and people knew that, it is hard to see how they would work. People must believe they are living up to real moral values before values can do that job. Now let me admit that if I try to spell this thought out in a certain way, I will be liable to a valid objection. If I said in this context, as I did earlier, that subjects would not obey sovereigns unless they actually believed that sovereigns had authority over them, or that women would not stay home if they didn’t think that was really their place, you might protest that I am assuming that I know what people would do or would want if their values did not tell them otherwise, or perhaps even that I am assuming that I know what their values would be if they were undistorted. And of course I do think something like that. But it would not be quite fair for me to appeal to those claims in assessing the three possible explanations of differences in value, since these claims presuppose that
there are real moral values and that our capacity for valuing would attach itself to them if no distorting influences were at work.

So I am happy to see one small piece of evidence for my view, in the person of a the San !Kung forager whom Morris quotes in his lectures. If we take him to be a representative of our foraging ancestors, then the basic principle of Kantian moral autonomy finds expression almost as far back in the history of values as we can go – I mean, of course, the principle that we are all headmen, because each one of us is headman over himself. This glorious idea was doomed to be quashed by the forces of state and church control, eventually convincing ordinary people that they must obey what British people a hundred years ago quaintly called their “betters.” And perhaps, as Morris speculates, the needs of energy capture are somehow working in the background of this quashing.

But I am not going to try to convince you of my view about that; instead I am going to explain why Morris does not convince me of his. Part of the problem is that if each age got exactly the values it needs, then each of the values Morris offers to explain would have to make some positive contribution to upholding the social forms needed for its mode of energy capture. But Morris does not always show that. Sometimes, all he shows, or all he obviously shows, is that the opposite value is not especially needed to uphold the social forms in question. For instance, to carry on with the theme of self-rule, Morris tells us that in foraging societies, “men who get too bossy, or extend bossiness into inappropriate contexts, or try to turn their
temporary influence into permanent power over others, rarely survive their companions’ disapproval.”

Now we might accept that authoritative structures are necessary for farming societies in a way that they are not for foraging societies, if only because of the larger populations. But that does not show why egalitarian structures are necessary or even good for foraging societies: perhaps, for whatever reason, equality is just the default when hierarchy is not necessary. Now I can imagine an answer in this particular case – if foragers go out and forage alone, perhaps they need to learn the kind of independence that egalitarian structures tend to foster. But I am a little more puzzled to see how promiscuity and marital infidelity might be a good thing for foraging societies. Morris points out that foraging societies do not encourage wealth inequalities, without those there is not much to inherit, and so issues about the legitimacy of children matter less.

But that only shows that there is no special reason, based in its method of energy capture, for foraging societies to enforce marital fidelity. It does not show why marriages in such societies do take the loose form that they do.

Another explanation that does not convince me is the one about why farmers go in for gender hierarchy. Morris’s explanation is primarily that the farming way of life requires a strict gender-based division of labor. But even if that is right, it does

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24 Morris, Chapter 2, p. X (7/20)

25 Hume tells a similar story to explain why chastity is considered important in women but not in men. See David Hume, A Treatise of Human Nature, Book 3, Part 2, Section 12.
not explain male hegemony. One can imagine a world in which women dominate men from a basis in the home, ordering them out to work in order to earn money since that is the only thing they are good for, and taking control of the money as soon as the men bring it home. I am ready to agree that is no accident that it never happens this way at the level of whole cultures, but the explanation of that cannot rest in the division of labor alone.

But the most obvious problem of this kind concerns the tolerance for violence. According to Morris, foragers tolerate an astonishing amount of it, and farmers think it is permissible in cases in which we would not, while we fossil fuelers are supposedly dead set against it. Perhaps violence poses a bigger problem for societies organized for farming than for ones organized for foraging, and a bigger problem still for industrial societies. But that does not explain why it is tolerated in foraging societies.

Now let me be fair. I have suggested, as an alternative to the idea that our values are shaped by our method of energy capture, that the capacity for valuing has some tendency to attach itself to real moral values, but that this tendency is extremely fragile and subject to distortion. Of course if you agree with this, and you also agree that the forager's easy tolerance for violence is wrong, then you must also think that that easy tolerance calls for an explanation. So my alternative style of explanation fares no better than Morris's so far as this example goes. What was the distorting force that caused foragers to fail to notice that people should not go
around killing each other, while we ourselves can see that plainly? I think a lot depends on what the usual motives for violence are in forager societies.

So here is some very raw speculation. First of all, it is sometimes observed that at least some people in the past have had a more social, public, conception of their identities than we have now. We now readily say that it does not matter what people think of you if you know inside that you are a good person, but it was not always so. People used to speak of their “characters” as if the term at once meant both what we mean by “reputation” and their inner identities. And they seem to feel that their inner identities could be damaged or destroyed by what people thought about them. The defense of honor was a defense of one's very identity in this public sense. So we might speculate that, say, killing someone in defense of your honor may once have seemed much more like the one form of violence that many of us even now find perfectly acceptable – namely, self-defense. If this is the motive for forager violence, then the source of distortion – or anyway of difference from us – was the way that people thought of themselves.\(^{26}\) I do not know enough about

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\(^{26}\) If we think of the older, more public, and the modern, more inward ways of individuating the self merely as different, rather than thinking of one of them as a distortion, then “distortion view” is a little too crude for the form of explanation I have in mind. Some differences in value would be distortions, like the ones dependent on silly gender ideals, while others would simply be different forms the same values take when refracted, as it were, through different lenses. Notice that this is still different from a more familiar kind of case, where the same values point us toward different actions in light of different views of the facts. A familiar example from ethics textbooks is of a tribe that killed people at a certain age, because they believed that you are preserved for all eternity in the form you
hunter-gatherer societies to know how plausible this is. The two sources I consulted – Lee’s book on the !Kung and Marlowe’s book on the Hadza, do not make it clear whether something like the sense of honor is involved. What they do make clear is that sex is very often involved – infidelity and jealously are the causes of a lot of the violence. And of course sex is a subject on which even modern people do tend to have very sensitive evaluative self-conceptions.

My other thought is that there are now, among us, people who design designer drugs, people who spend their time devising advertisements aimed at luring young people into smoking, people who try to save themselves a little money by using risky inferior ingredients in products on which people's lives depend, and many other people who lure others to their deaths, or put them at grave risk of death, from motives of profit, without ever wrapping their own hands around a gun or a knife. My guess is that when social scientists tally up the number of people who die by violence, the victims of these people are not included. Yet the people who kill these victims are surely just as much killers as those who take the gun or the knife in hand. This makes me wonder just how useful “violence” is as a morally significant category.

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are in when you die. The case I discuss in the text has some affinities with that – we find the value intelligible once we understand the view, but in the case in the text, it does not follow that we approve of the value once we understand the view.


28 As Morris himself notes in Chapter 2, p. X (10/23)
In the modern world, we do a lot of things less directly by hand, including injuring and killing.

Actually, there is another problem with what Morris says about violence, which I can best bring out by reference to Table 4.1. In the original lectures on which his text is based, Morris used the term “OK” where he now uses “middling.” “OK” suggests “permissible,” while “middling” has no evident normative implications, and it is not clear what it means. He explains his reason for using it in Chapter One, when he discusses the possibility of assigning a score to each group’s attitude towards a certain action by arbitrarily assigning +1 to actions regarded as good and -1 to actions regarded as bad. Here, however, it does matter what philosophical conception of morality you have in mind. Philosophers sometimes argue that on a consequentialist conception of morality, where the concern is simply with how much good you do, it makes better sense to rank actions simply as better and worse than as forbidden, permissible, and obligatory. On a consequentialist conception, the use of “middling” might make sense, for it is possible to think of good and bad as two ends of a scale. But it is not possible to think of forbidden and obligatory that way – the permissible does not in any sense rest “between” them. So Morris now seems to be presuming some sort of consequentialist view. However that may be, I do not think the idea that more violence is tolerated in foraging societies is adequately captured either by the thought that it is “middling” or by the

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29 Morris, Chapter 4, p. X (97/29)
thought that it is “OK.” No society thinks that violence is permissible in the sense that, say, spending your afternoon off at the movies if you want to is permissible. Violence always requires a justification or an excuse – to say it is tolerated is just to say that it is more often regarded as justifiable or excusable. It is clear from Morris’s own descriptions, and others, of the attitudes of foragers, that they regard violence in that way.

But leaving that aside, my main point has simply been that there are various ways to explain changes in value systems over time, and some of them allow us to admit that social forms, and whatever in turn causes them, put pressure on the shape of our values without concluding that social forms completely determine the shape of our values. Morris has not shown us that his own explanation is better than some others that seem possible, in particular what I have called the distortion view. In fact if we look at Morris’s Table 4.1, we are just as likely to be struck with the broad similarity of the values of foragers to our own – a reaction that, by Morris’s report, his own students share.30 Instead of thinking that values are determined by modes of energy capture, perhaps we should think that as human beings began to be in a position to amass power and property in the agricultural age, forms of ideology set in that distorted real moral values, distortions that we are only now, in the age of science and extensive literacy, beginning to overcome.

30 Morris, Chapter 4, p. X (30/98)
It is unclear whether Morris believes there are any real moral values. Perhaps a story of the sort he tells does not necessarily have skeptical implications. Indeed, it is easy enough to imagine telling a story, parallel to Morris’s story about changing values, about changing conceptions of how the world works. Foragers, we will say, have an animistic view, seeing the world as inhabited by immanent spirits who make things happen. Farmers have a theological view, seeing the world as governed by a transcendent god. And fossil-fuelers have a scientific view, seeing events as determined by efficient causes. Perhaps each age gets the thought it needs! But even if such a case could be made, I do not suppose any of us, including Morris, would be eager to give up on the idea that events really are determined by efficient causes.

However that may be, the closest Morris comes to conceding that there may be values people ought to hold is a remark in Chapter 5 that there might be “a single, all-best set of human values, whether it be calculated in terms of a telos, utility, the categorical imperative, or a difference principle.” The remark surprised me, because we might suppose that Morris’s view of values as socially useful devices commits him to a specific way of “calculating” the best set of values. If we finally arrived at a stable and sustainable mode of energy-capture – say, economically feasible solar power – at that point the best set of values would be the ones that supported whatever social forms were required for that.

31 Morris, Chapter 5, p. X (129/23)
But in any case I am not sure what exactly Morris means to concede when he says that there might be a “best” set of values. As Morris reports, in the discussion following his lectures, we brought up the then-recent shooting of Malala Yousafzai, to try to see whether we could elicit any moral views from Morris himself. Here was a chance to make a practical test of what I earlier called “transparency.” What effect does believing Morris’s theory have on Morris’s own values? Morris reports that we thought that “the only explanation for the attempted assassination was that the Taliban were guilty of profound moral failures.” Actually this is not true. The question whether an action is wrong and the question why someone nevertheless thinks it’s right are two different questions, and we were not taking a position on why the Taliban did what they did or thought it was right. Our point was just that this action was obviously wrong. On the occasion, as in the discussion of the text, Morris tried to sidestep making any moral claims of his own. In the text, Morris talks instead about how things “would seem” to agrarians and industrialists. Oddly enough, this is preceded by a discussion in which Morris accuses his own students of trying to sidestep the other question of what explains someone’s doing something morally wrong – in this case, holding slaves. The students had no trouble saying that slavery is wrong, but were reluctant to attribute this to moral “retardation” (Morris’s word). I think the students were right to resist that simplified explanation of the slaveholders’ wrongdoing, just as I think an explanation of the attitudes of the Taliban towards women might well involve a complex mixture of some morally faulty attitudes, some
genuine religious conviction, and the usual murkiness of human attitudes about sex. That thought need not interfere with our conviction that slavery, and shooting girls who want to go to school, are wrong.

Morris’s text sometimes reads as if he is not one of the human beings he is theorizing about, as if he has no personal stake in the answers to these questions. I think we all do. But Morris does to be speaking in his own voice when he says that the Taliban who shot Malala Yousafzai and the Boko Harum who kidnapped the Nigerian schoolgirls “are not guilty of moral failings for thinking that girls who want to go to school should be punished violently.” If Morris means only that their holding the views that they do does not spring from any defects in their moral characters, I doubt that it is true, but I suppose it is possible. But if he means that shooting girls in order to punish them for wanting to learn about the world they live in is not wrong, or that it has not always been wrong, I can only conclude that he is a moral skeptic, who does not believe that anything has any real moral value at all.

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32 Morris, Chapter 4, p. X (100/32)
Bibliography


