



Communicating Moral Concern

An Ethics of Critical
Responsiveness

Elise Springer

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

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

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

—John Dewey¹

1.1 Social Responsiveness and Moral Complexity

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

First-Order Responsiveness

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Higher-Order Moral Responsiveness

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

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

Multi-Level Theories in Moral Philosophy

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Importance of Higher-Order Responsiveness

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

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

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

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

1.2 Moral Solipsism in Two Modern Flavors

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

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

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

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

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

Standing for Any and Every One: Stoic Moral Solipsism

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

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

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

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

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

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

Kant’s Stoic Legacy

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Agency as Engineering: Empiricist Moral Solipsism

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

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

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

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

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

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

1.3 Non-Ideal Theory and Social Complexity

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

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

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

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

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

Derivative Non-Ideal Theory

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

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

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

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

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

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

Critical Non-Ideal Theory

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

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

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

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

1.4 Toward Virtue Ethics and Beyond

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Philosophical Support for Recognizing Critical Engagement

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

First, Second, Third

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

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

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

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

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

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

Valuing in Connection with Secondness

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Toward a Dynamic Conception of Social Activity

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

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

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

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

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

1.5 Concerns and Systematic Moral Theory

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Concerns and Moral Permissions

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

1.6 Glancing Ahead

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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