

**Review of Thomas Nagel's *Moral Feelings, Moral Reality, and Moral Progress*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2023, v + 70 pp.**

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Thomas Nagel's 2023 *Moral Feelings, Moral Reality, and Moral Progress* comprises a collection of two closely related essays, both concerning moral intuitions and moral epistemology. This short, inviting book is accessible, yet rich in insights, and guides the reader through a contemplation of several important moral questions. Despite being only 70 pages in length, it offers the reader a clear and straightforward overview of different moral positions, whilst touching upon numerous profound themes and questions. Throughout this discussion and explanation, the author presents his own (current) approach to morality, which he describes as a local, pluralist species of moral realism, and seeks to apply this approach to a number of contemporary societal issues. In this review, I will first represent some of the claims the author makes. Next, I will raise a few critical questions concerning the (im-)possibility of moral regress in Nagel's conception of morality and moral progress.

## **I. MORAL FEELINGS AND MORAL REASONS**

In line with its title, the first essay, *Gut Feelings and Moral Knowledge*, concerns the relation between our immediate, almost physical, moral intuitions—such as a sense of uneasiness one experiences when telling a lie, or a sense of indignation when easily avoidable harm befalls an innocent person—and moral knowledge: what we know to be right and wrong. Throughout the essay, Nagel contemplates two pervasive, yet often conflicting types of moral intuitions: those generally categorized as 'consequentialist', and those called 'deontological'.

The essay clearly and accessibly explains both approaches to morality, and then invites the reader to consider the merits and limitations of both. It discusses the straightforwardness of consequentialism and aiming for the best outcome, and contrasts this with the deontological emphasis on the autonomy of the individual, and the posing of inviolable boundaries,

instead of seeking to obtain a certain outcome. Rather than arguing for either of the approaches, the author comments on the benefits and shortcomings of both (7–8); and, further, illustrates how neither approach is fully reducible to the other without adopting either framework at the outset (15–16).

For example, he draws upon recent studies in neurophysiology, which show that ‘deontological’ judgments are often made quickly and are associated with emotional neural responses.<sup>1</sup> The author argues that such findings can be interpreted both in favor and against the legitimacy of deontological morality. They can be presented as a redundant vestige of our evolutionary past; as irrational instinctive responses that might prevent us from doing more good.<sup>2</sup> Alternatively, the very immediacy of the response and the accompanying emotions can also be heralded as responses to moral truth—the fact that you intuitively squirm at the idea of murder or torture is simply a physical response to a moral truth.<sup>3</sup> In doing so, he again illustrates the merits of both approaches, as well as the difficulties encountered when trying to determine which viewpoint is better.

Throughout the essay, Nagel emphasizes how, in moral discussions, we “cannot completely withdraw from our own point of view”, since “even when we take up the external point of view, it is still ours” (15). It follows, Nagel argues, that moral intuitions are inevitable in moral deliberations. He is therefore concerned with how to reflect on our—sometimes conflicting—moral intuitions, with the aim of improving our moral knowledge.

In the last part of the first essay, Nagel addresses the notion of moral progress, and asks if a move towards a more consequentialist understanding of morality would count as moral progress. Inevitably—and perhaps ironically—this requires an attempt at “looking at ourselves from outside” (21)—which Nagel has just illustrated remains a difficult, if not impossible, exercise. This neatly opens the stage for the second essay, in which the author seeks to shed light on how the idea of moral progress should be understood.

In the second essay, entitled *Moral Reality and Moral Progress*, Nagel contemplates the right way to think about moral progress. In his answer, he provides a form of *local, pluralist moral realism*. I will first represent

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<sup>1</sup> Also known as ‘System 1’ reasoning, see Kahneman (2012).

<sup>2</sup> For example, Greene (2014) or Haidt (2001).

<sup>3</sup> See Mihailov (2016).

this understanding of moral progress, and the support Nagel provides for it, before raising some questions about it.

Nagel understands moral progress as an advance in understanding or knowledge, which implies a form of realism about moral truth. That is to say: he argues that moral propositions can be true or false in themselves, regardless of whether we believe them to be one or the other. It follows, he argues, that a change in moral belief can be “objectively correct or incorrect” (23). Moral progress could therefore exist in, for example, giving up a false moral belief in favor of a true one.

To clarify his realist understanding of moral progress, the author contrasts it with realism about scientific progress. From a realist view, scientific knowledge is knowledge about reality and its structure, independently of us—scientific facts, for example, about the chemical composition of elements, would have been true even if human beings had never existed. Moral knowledge, instead, concerns *reasons*: reasons are “irreducibly normative truths about ourselves and other persons” (25). Nagel’s realism entails that the truth of such reasons does not depend on whether we believe them to be true.

With this conception in hand, the author considers whether moral truths are timeless, or whether (some) moral truths only become accessible in certain circumstances. Rather than picking a single moral principle—as utilitarians do—and applying it to new non-normative facts, he is concerned with changes in moral outlooks, which stem from changes in circumstances, and the appropriate reasons for action that accompany them.

The notion of *reasons* is crucial in Nagel’s conception of moral progress. Nagel believes that moral judgments can be correct or incorrect; and whether they are one or the other depends on their “appropriateness as responses to those very circumstances” (29). Thus, the correctness of moral judgments does not derive from a “single governing moral principle” (27), which could merely be applied to novel external circumstances, but instead depends on whether there were appropriate reasons to act a certain way; and whether these reasons were accessible to the subjects. Thus, an action might not be universally or timelessly wrong, for example, because the reason against acting that way was inaccessible to the subject. However, when the reason is accessible, the action is wrong, regardless of whether the subject *believes* the reason to be there. In this sense, Nagel suggests that moral truths are *local*—as they should be viewed in

light of particular circumstances—leading to his local, pluralistic moral realism (30).

At this point in the essay, Nagel takes care to distinguish himself from moral anti-realism. As mentioned previously, he argues that the correctness of moral judgments is independent of our belief in them. What matters for the truth or falsehood of moral propositions, according to Nagel, is the *accessibility* of reasons. Whereas, for example, migratory birds cannot be said to have a ‘reason’ to fly south in the winter, human beings do have reasons for their actions: they could be made to understand that they have a reason to believe a certain moral proposition—even if they end up not believing in it. Thus, *accessibility* is a necessary condition for having a moral reason; and accessibility means having the capacity to understand that the reason applies, regardless of whether one acknowledges or realizes it.

In the last sections of the essay, the author considers several societal domains that have recently undergone, or which he expects will undergo, moral change or progress in the future, and seeks to anticipate some of the potential changes. In particular, he considers possible changes in societal views on property rights, as well as on world governance.

Although the outcome of such changes cannot be known beforehand, the author discusses the importance of critical, ongoing moral reflection, and recommends taking a similar approach to our current moral knowledge as to our current scientific knowledge, recognizing that our current understanding will be subject to change, as novel conditions and findings present themselves (79). The next section delves into some of the societal domains the author applies his local, pluralist, moral realist understanding of moral progress to, and considers whether this conceptually allows a development to be seen as moral regress, as opposed to moral progress.

## II. CONCEPTUAL (IM)POSSIBILITY OF MORAL REGRESS

Despite the clarity of its writing, and the pleasant flow of the text, there are nevertheless some apparent inconsistencies in the book, and at times, it feels as though certain moral claims—in stark contrast with the rest of the essay—are brushed over too quickly. I will attempt to illustrate this by asking two related questions, after which I will make some general comments about Nagel’s conception of morality.

The main question I have is whether, within Nagel’s conception of morality and moral progress, it would conceptually even be possible to point

to a form of moral *regress*. In other words, I wonder if, in Nagel's local pluralist moral realism, it is conceptually possible for an outcome to be seen as anything *but* progress. It appears to me that this question can be answered in two ways.

The first way is to answer in the negative. Since the correctness of a moral proposition depends on the appropriateness of certain reasons given the circumstances, it would follow that, without appeal to a transcending moral principle, whatever a community agrees upon becomes—at least temporarily—the appropriate reason.<sup>4</sup> Nagel explains the impossibility of fully moving beyond our own particular moral outlook. In line with this, a Reflective Equilibrium,<sup>5</sup> which Nagel repeatedly recommends for moral deliberations, can lead to improved coherence between moral intuitions and moral beliefs; however, without appeal to an overarching moral principle, it is not clear to me how the outcome of such a reflection can be conceptualized as anything but progress. If there are no external, transcending moral notions to appeal to, then moral deliberations so described can only lead to increased coherence between our intuitions and our moral knowledge. There seems to be no way this increased coherence can be criticized without referring to an external value or moral principle, as this would defeat the *local* component.

For example, Nagel refers to the rapid increase in tolerance towards homosexuality within Western societies in the 1970s, and claims that the rapidity by which this change was adopted into society indicated that the suppression of homosexuality had been “wrong all along” (39). However, if the speed of a societal change in moral outlook is always indicative of something having been right or wrong all along, then any rapid development would have to be called progress—which Nagel does not seem to believe in.

To illustrate, in the first essay, Nagel claims that certain apparent cases of moral progress are “clearly false” (18), referring to Bolshevism and fascism. Calling such a development “false” progress only seems to make sense with reference to a transcending moral principle. After all, the people who presented Bolshevism as progress were, Nagel argues, wrong; but this can only be determined by appeal through a temporally later moral outlook, or by appeal to a transcending moral principle. If

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<sup>4</sup> Nagel argues that moral truths are not timeless or universal. Yet if the only standard for assessment is what a community agrees with—that is, without an external standard of assessment in the form of a transcending moral principle—then such evaluation can only be self-referential. Hence, any development would be deemed progress.

<sup>5</sup> As specified by Rawls (1999, 20).

moral truths and reasons were truly exclusively local, then any development would have to be called progress. However, this would seem to make the term redundant.

The second of the two possible ways of answering, then, is positive. I assume this would require an appeal to some transcending moral principle or value that helps assess whether a development is progress or not.<sup>6</sup> And, reading between the lines, this appears to be the approach Nagel takes. When he speaks of “great injustices [being] overthrown” (37) as the clearest examples of moral progress, or when he refers to the rapidity of increased toleration towards homosexuals as indication that their suppression was ‘wrong all along’, it seems as though Nagel assesses this by some form of universal or fundamental truth, that is independent even of the specific circumstances and the accompanying appropriate reasons in response to them.<sup>7</sup> After all, there have been many rapid historical developments that strongly contradict previous developments.<sup>8</sup> Without an appeal to such a value or principle, it is not clear how to distinguish appropriate reasons from inappropriate ones.

This leads me to my second, related question. Returning to the example of tolerance towards homosexuality: although the majority of modern Western Europeans have embraced this tolerance, there is, unfortunately, still a substantial minority of people who harbor intolerance towards homosexuality. Does this mean that there are both reasons to be tolerant and to be intolerant? If so, how to weigh mutually exclusive reasons, without making a normative distinction?<sup>9</sup> Again, speaking of ‘appropriate reasons’—which requires some standard of assessment—only seems to make sense with reference to a higher moral principle in the absence of a full consensus. Otherwise, there is no way to determine what reason is more appropriate, or on what grounds.

Thus, at different moments in the essays, Nagel appears to appeal to a transcending or ‘timeless’ moral truth. Despite his claims about the locality of moral truths, both temporally and spatially, he nevertheless appears to rely on something that is beyond the morally local. This is further evidenced when he writes that there is “clearly a need for greater world

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<sup>6</sup> To clarify: if the appropriateness of reasons is not fully determined by whatever happens in a society, then it needs some external standard of assessment. Since it concerns moral truth, it would have to be an ‘extra-local’ principle or standard; something beyond the merely morally local.

<sup>7</sup> The alternative would be that it only relies upon his own, temporally bounded moral outlook, which brings us back to the first question of the possibility of moral regress.

<sup>8</sup> Think of, for example, the French Revolution; or, as was mentioned above, Bolshevism.

<sup>9</sup> See Davidson (1982).

governance” (69), or when he refers to the “freedom and happiness of individuals, whoever they are” (39), as important values. These “confessions of the originator” (Nietzsche [1886] 1997, 4) suggest that, despite attempts to transcend the path-dependent moral intuitions of his time, the author nevertheless relies on his own moral outlook in his assessment.

All of this is completely appropriate for a moral argument—as argued at the start of the book, one can hardly engage in moral reasoning without relying on one’s moral convictions and intuitions. Engaging in reflective equilibrium and discussing one’s beliefs and the reasons for them is, as far as I can imagine, among the best ways to elucidate the moral landscape. In that regard, Nagel’s book is nothing but commendable.

However, at times, it is confusing that the author is not more explicit about his moral convictions: given the profound explanation of the limitations of detachment from our personal outlooks, and the subsequent plea for careful scrutinization of both our moral beliefs and our moral feelings, such undeveloped moral claims feel somewhat out of line with the rest of the book. It would have been more appropriate if the author had made his moral convictions more explicit; this would, in accordance with the book’s emphasis on moral reflection, have been more conducive to future moral deliberation.

Despite its brevity, Nagel’s *Moral Feelings, Moral Reality, and Moral Progress* is an insightful, thought-provoking work. In 70 short pages, it provides the reader with a thorough appreciation of the intuitive motivations behind two often conflicting types of moral reasoning, touching upon important moral themes; it presents an original conception of moral progress; and it raises numerous important questions and considerations. Although its short size and accessible style make it a quick read, the questions it raises remain in one’s mind long after, encouraging the reader to keep returning to it.

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