Moral Traditions and Moral Revolution: A Conceptual Analysis

Let us approach our topic by a methodical stab at its component parts, moral tradition and moral revolution, each of which also has its constituents: moral, tradition and revolution. Since tradition appears to be central, I start with an analysis of the term. Then I argue simply that a moral tradition is not self-justifying and certainly not just on account of its longevity. My major issue however is with the concept of moral revolution and its relationship with scientific revolution. I will argue that the analogy is a little misconstrued. The lesson from Kuhn’s *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* is not easily adaptable to an understanding of moral revolutions.

The standard definition of a tradition is that it is a customary system of doing things that is unique to a group; a customary way of life. Following the Latin root of the term, i.e. *traditum*, sociologist Edward Shils defines tradition as “anything which is transmitted or handed down from the past to the present”. (Tradition, 1981, 12) The emphasis here is on “anything”, but it could also be “anyhow” meaning that there is no restriction as to the nature of what is handed down or how it has come to be what it is before its being handed down. “The decisive criterion (of its traditionalism) is that having been created through human actions, through thought and imagination, it is handed down from one generation to the next.” Of course, being handed down does not entail being accepted. A tradition is a tradition only because it is accepted by the next generation which also passes it on.

In *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* Alasdair McIntyre identifies some elements of traditions including, among others, extending over time and locatable in a persistent historical narrative; embodiment in specific social contexts; i.e. they have particular spatial locations and even when traditions share similar traits, they do not therefore become one tradition; a fundamental interpretiveness in the sense that, while traditions may share some similarities, each is unique in its fundamental understanding of such shared goods; and an embodiment of “continuities of conflict” rather than static stability. There are two major types of tradition: traditions of enquiry or thought and traditions of conduct, and while each can be identified separately in terms of its core focus as enquiry or conduct, they are united in the fact of their being both cultural practices as well as outcomes of those practices.

Tradition of Enquiry or Thought: A tradition of thought or discourse is a cultural practice that includes within its group a family of practices which contribute to the advancement of a specific pattern of ideas within a branch of study. Thus there is a utilitarian tradition within ethics; just as there is a social contract tradition within political philosophy. A tradition of enquiry or discourse is not isolated from the form of life which it explains, justifies, critiques, or defends. Indeed, the form of life gives rise to, or provides an impetus for the tradition of enquiry that makes it its focus. There is a deep sense in which, even as intellectuals, we are the offspring of our traditions.
One such tradition is democracy. We tend to idolize it without paying attention to some of its fundamental flaws and how it could be improved. Is winner takes all that eternally marginalizes the minority the best we can have? It is this kind of consideration that informed Alain Locke’s observations in “Pluralism and Intellectual Democracy”:

What intellectuals can do for the extension of the democratic way of life is to discipline our thinking critically into some sort of realistic world-mindedness. Broadening our cultural values and tempering our orthodoxies is of infinitely more service to enlarged democracy than direct praise and advocacy of democracy itself…. The democratic mind needs clarifying for the better guidance of the democratic will. (The Philosophy of Alain Locke: Harlem Renaissance and Beyond, 1989, 63)

McIntyre suggests, in connection with the traditions of enquiry that he analyses, that in “each of them intellectual enquiry was or is part of the elaboration of a mode of social and moral life of which the intellectual enquiry itself was an integral part.” Take for instance, the social contract tradition of inquiry. David Gauthier, is a seminal paper many years ago suggests that the social contract tradition had a special affinity to the social and political tradition of the Western world; that it sought to capture the thought pattern that was recognizable in the manner that egoistic maximizers dealt with each other; and that in the end, what saves the social relation that the theory sought to project was that a segment of the same society could not be adequately represented in its light. In other words, not every member of the Western world behaved as utility maximizers or as social contractors.

‘Tradition of Conduct’ refers to a habit of conduct; an enduring pattern of behavior that has become institutionalized among a people, e.g. gift giving; debt payment, etc. In any civilized society, there is a tradition of borrowing and paying back, a tradition of gift giving and gift exchanges with variations from culture to culture. There is a tradition of marriage, of rule-making and of punishment for rule violation. There is also a tradition of buying and selling, and of cooperative enterprises among a people. Michael Oakeshott marks a useful distinction between two types of traditions of conduct: enterprise association and overarching institution.

‘Enterprise Association’ refers to a group of people guided by a specific purpose or goal that is common to all. As they strive to achieve their common purpose they establish a tradition of behavior which then sets up the framework in which they carry out their aims: association of profit maximisers, universities, etc.

‘Overarching Institution’ refers to the moral, legal, or political institution that procures the necessary conditions for enterprise associations to continue to exist and thrive. One such institution is morality or the moral life; another is the legal system. A moral tradition of conduct belongs to this category or class of tradition.
Moral Tradition: One way to think of a moral tradition is to identify it as a customary institution of moral beliefs, moral rules, moral principles, moral judgments, from which moral problems and moral issues develop from time to time for individuals and the group respectively. Moral tradition in the sense of a moral life is a habit of affection and conduct as Oakeshott puts it. It involves no serious reflection: we generally behave in accordance with the tradition in which we were brought up. Surely, moral education is important even with this customary moral life: it is the way in which the tradition sustains itself and ensures its survival into the future. But moral education in this sense is not moral theorizing, and so moral theory is not a part of the moral tradition of conduct; it is implicated rather in the tradition of moral enquiry. With the kind of education that moral tradition embraces, individuals are empowered to act within the norms of the tradition without asking questions and without a shred of doubt about the rightness of their conduct. Of course, this kind of education also does not give individuals the ability to explain their “actions in abstract terms or to defend them as emanations of moral principles.” (Oakeshott, 63) Rational morality makes possible the kind of individual critique of a moral tradition.

Oakeshott does not see moral tradition as a habit of affection as a failure because it is a form of morality which gives “remarkable stability to the moral life” of either an individual or society. It will not countenance large and sudden changes in the kinds of behavior it desiderates. Even when a few parts of a moral life in this form of morality collapse, it does not readily spread to the whole because the habits of conduct which compose the moral life “are never recognized as a system.” (63-64) But if we pay close attention to Oakeshott’s view of a habit of behavior which is never at rest (as prices in a free market), how do we understand the idea of moral revolution vis-à-vis a moral tradition?

Oakeshott’s point is that there is not much of moral self-criticism going on. The internal movement (never at rest) that characterizes the moral life of a tradition is not vigorous enough and is not based on reflection or on principle. But because of this, it is easy for this moral life as habit of conduct to degenerate into superstition and as such may be unable to withstand or resist a crisis situation that eventually ensues. This is one way moral revolution occurs.

A second form of moral life is derived from a self-conscious appeal to or focus on principles and ideals — the reflective application of a moral criterion. It starts with an identification of the ideals or principle in words; then a conscious defense of them; and third, a determination to translate them into action. While this form of moral life also depends on education, it is education as knowledge of ideals, rules, and principles. The role of principles and ideals is to enable the individual to constantly use them to critique behavior. Reflection is the key here. But this is what makes this form of moral life dangerous for individuals and as folly for society, according to Oakeshott because, marred by inflexibility, it may degenerate into superstition and idol worshipping.
Still, neither the first nor the second can be successful by itself. Both morality of habit and morality of reflection are needed in varying proportions. Oakeshott argues that a mixture in which the habit of conduct is predominant can ensure a stable moral life with a reflective capacity which assures its continuity due to rational critique, while a mixture which privileges rational critique can stifle the moral life because reflection can get in the way of action. (78-79)

Here is a concise account of moral tradition provided by John Kekes, who acknowledges a debt to McIntyre and Oakeshott:

A moral tradition is the network of a certain sort of customary conduct that exists in a society. A society is an association of people; it has a history; most of its members are born into it; it occupies a more or less clearly defined geographical area; its members speak the same language; and they participate in common political, legal, and moral practices. (Kekes, 255)

It is tempting to think that a moral tradition is self-justifying simply because it is a moral tradition. We can maintain reasonably that individuals stand to benefit for the existence of a moral tradition that connects them with their folks; that there is an intrinsic value to having a moral tradition. Indeed, we may go further to claim that a moral tradition is an indispensable institution of any society because of the external and internal goods that are associated with it. This of course does not guarantee that particular moral traditions will provide these goods or worse not militate against them. Where a moral tradition negates the possibilities of fulfilling human life for its members, then it lacks the basis for a justifiable existence, and a critique and repudiation of the tradition is justified.

Moral critique of a moral tradition can come from within or without its borders. From within its borders, such a critique presupposes the existence of alternative views about conditions necessary for the flourishing of members. The various cases that Antony Appiah cites in his seminal book, including foot-binding, slavery, dueling, etc. are cases that negate the flourishing of human beings. Moral critique is itself a first stage of moral revolution.

Moral revolution

But what really is a moral revolution and how analogous is it to, say, a scientific revolution? This question is relevant because Appiah opens his book with reference to Thomas Kuhn and Paul Feyerabend, scholars of the seventeenth century Scientific Revolutions. The reference is not totally out of place if paying attention to one revolution provides an insight into elements of the other. But there are disanalogies.

Scientific revolution is pursuant to or the outcome of a crisis in thought, leading to a shift in paradigm. There is always a world out there that science seeks or attempts to capture. There are thoughts about the various attempts and outcomes of such attempts of science. For the traditional thought about the matter, there is a temporal succession of theories which follow earlier theories
and are consistent with them. For Kuhn, however, changes occur in science by leaps and bounds to new paradigms and new ways of seeing the world. What is important to note here is that both of these views are views about theoretical attempts to capture reality. That reality is not an illusion even if it turns out that, as Kuhn alleges, the traditional views of science don’t capture the path that theories of science follow.

To put it in another way, let me use the language of Appiah to describe the ‘disanalogy’ that I have in mind here. According to Appiah, “historians and philosophers have discovered a great deal about science through the careful study of scientific revolutions.” (xi, italics mine) Now what Appiah wants to use this insight of science to understand is something about morality. And so his question is “what can we learn about morality by exploring moral revolutions?” The disanalogy is obvious when rendered in this way. First, reference to morality here is ambiguous between morality as theory or principle, and morality as practice. I think Appiah has morality as practice in mind because he goes on to discuss dueling, foot-binding, slavery, and honor killing. Second, reference to moral revolution is also ambiguous between revolution in thought about morals and revolution in moral practice. Again, a careful reading of Appiah suggests that he has the latter in mind.

The issue is simple. Even though we may learn something about practical moral revolution from a focus on moral theorizing, (cf. John Locke and the American Revolution or Rousseau and the French Revolution), there is no guarantee of a one-to-one relationship between the two. Even if we concede the obviously trite observation of Appiah that “at the end of the moral revolution as at the end of a scientific revolution, things look new” (xi); it seems clear that different categories of things “look new” in each case. In the case of scientific revolution, it is our thinking that looks new; in the case of moral revolution, it is our practice that appears new. When there occurs moral change, the practice of morality changes. Moral reality—what counts as moral or immoral behavior—changes. And this moral change is effected through the instrumentality of a moral revolutionary, a role model, or a combination of factors, including those that Appiah explores. On the other hand, when scientific change is effected, the world of science that changes is the theoretical world. The world of reality that science attempts to capture doesn’t change. Rather it is the approach of the scientist to that world that changes.

Some years ago, this issue was the focus of a debate between Kathryn Parsons and David Palmer and Morton Schagrin. In her “Nietzsche and Moral Change”, Parson argues that Nietzsche was a moral revolutionary who went beyond a focus on moral reform. The latter, according to Parson, focuses on bringing “our activities into conformity with our principles, as change to dispel injustice, as change to alleviate suffering.” (Parsons, 168). But there is another form of moral change, which Nietzsche captures, and that is moral revolution:

Moral revolution has not to do with making our principles consistent, not to do with greater application of what we now conceive as justice. That is the task of
moral reform, because its aim is the preservation of values. But the aim of moral revolution is the creation of values. (169)

So Parson views Nietzsche’s ethics as being about moral revolution, the creation of values, while traditional ethics is about preservation of values. And just as Kuhn argues that traditional views on science misconstrue both scientific revolution and “normal science”, so Parson argues that traditional views in ethics cannot account for the behavior of the moral revolutionary as moral.”

Suppose we accept the last claim of Parsons: traditional ethics cannot account for the behavior of the moral revolutionary as moral. What does this say about the analogy with traditional views on science? I argue that it does not say much because, again, the analogy is misconstrued. Whatever traditional view on science fails to understand about scientific revolution bears no resemblance to what traditional ethics fails to understand about the moral revolutionary. One is about theory, the other is about practice.

As Palmer and Schagrin also argue, for a moral revolution to succeed, all that is required is effort and the exercise of power. When the effective agent from a single tyrant to a total society creates the new social world, the revolution succeeds. The failure of a moral revolution is a failure of will. But the failure of a scientific revolution is a failure of thought. (265)

The authors go on to suggest that “scientific revolutions are preceded by a crisis period.” And such a crisis in science may occur when there is observed an “unexplained departure from expected regularities.” (265) Usually it is in the context of normal science that such “crisis-producing observations” occur and what they do is trigger “revolution” in thought. Using Kuhnian terminology, the authors aver that “a crisis in science occurs when a puzzle comes to be seen as a problem.” (265-266)

On the other hand, however, a moral crisis is not provoked by the observation of an “unexplained departure from expected regularities”. Indeed, it is dissatisfaction with expected regularities (in conduct and attitude) that triggers a moral crisis when a moral revolutionary dissatisfied with the status quo practices develops a new moral paradigm and manages to convert others to it: “The adherents of the older morality are never aware of the “problems” until the moral revolutionary provokes the discontent. And this discontent can only be felt by one who has the conception of a not yet existent, alternative, social order.” (266)

Scientific revolutions also differ from moral revolutions in the sense that the former is an outcome of the existence of different scientific communities with differing approaches, methods, training with different historical and professional connections. There are no such moral communities (except as utilitarians, Kantians, etc.) But this latter cannot trigger a revolution, except in an indirect way. Furthermore, different scientific communities can appeal to “common
transcending values” (simplicity, precision, etc.) which can be accessed in reconciling or at least tempering their differences. Palmer and Schagrin argue that no such transcending values exist between moral communities.

Is there then a moral community that has some affinity to a scientific community? We may talk of moral traditions in the sense discussed above, and as such we can identify such moral traditions as African, American, Western European, Eastern European, Christian, Judaic, Islamic, Buddhist, etc. Granted, not all within these traditions see the world from the same lenses. Yet, there are more commonalities within each of them than between them and other traditions. It is also true that within these traditions, many of the members are oblivious of any problem with their tradition until one or a group of them or an external agent nudges them. Focusing on these types of communities, we may say that moral revolutions occur and are progress, as Appiah suggests.

In such communities or traditions, positive morality is the customary morality of the group. We acquire the moral outlook of our cultures. Traditions create us as Marcus Singer states in *The Idea of a Rational Morality*. (8) When we talk of morality as in institution, we mean this tradition of positive morality. Because it is customary, it can be unbending and cruel. But as social life becomes complex, discontent with the requirements of positive morality ensues. Through various avenues, reason, emotion, interaction with others, we engage tradition and its requirement in rational discourse. Sometimes changes occur this way and may be piecemeal or fundamental. When moral education is effective, it is not sheepish imitation but it involves active participation in the social life of the tradition. By itself it is capable of triggering moral reform if not moral revolution.

**Conclusion**

Normative Ethics is the branch of philosophy that deals with the question of rightness or wrongness of actions and policies and the goodness or badness of character or states of affairs. There are traditional ways of going about this task, including analysis of concepts, proposal of rules and principles for the guidance of conduct, and evaluation of conduct by reference to such rules and principles. There are also non-traditional ways of practicing ethics, including the Nietzschean approach which queries traditional ethics itself as arid and boring. What Appiah tries to do in *The Honor Code* is a hybrid of both traditional and non-traditional approaches. On the one hand, Appiah is apparently concerned about the prevalence of immoral and inhuman practices in the name of honor and he chose to bring them to the light of philosophical scrutiny. But rather than evaluate those practices by reference to principles and rules which have been in the books of moral philosophers since time immemorial, Appiah chooses to ask the question: how do such practices get changed and moral revolutions happen?
“Is this still moral philosophy?” some traditionalists would ask. If the evaluation of conduct through the instrumentality of principles and rules, or the analysis of ethical concepts exhausts the preferred methods of moral philosophy, then it is not. But if Lucius Outlaw is right, and there is no eternal timelessness to what defines philosophy, then there is also no eternal timelessness to ethics and the discourse it provokes. We are enriched by Appiah’s insights into the question of honor code, which as he admits, is not necessarily a moral code.

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Bibliography


