

Recent work on moral revolutions

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Abstract: In the last few decades, several philosophers have written on the topic of moral revolutions, distinguishing them from other kinds of society-level moral change. This article surveys recent accounts of moral revolutions in moral philosophy. Different authors use quite different criteria to pick out moral revolutions. Features treated as relevant include radicality, depth or fundamentality, pervasiveness, novelty, and particular causes. We also characterise the factors that have been proposed to cause moral revolutions, including anomalies in existing moral codes, changing honour codes, art, economic conditions, and individuals or groups. Finally, we discuss what accounts of moral revolutions have in common, how they differ, and how moral revolutions are distinguished from other kinds of moral change, such as drift and reform.

Keywords: moral revolution, moral change, moral progress, the structure of moral revolutions, the dynamics of moral revolutions.

1 Introduction

Some changes in human history have been characterised as revolutionary. Since the seventeenth century, people have used the term “revolution” to refer to substantial change in political contexts (Cohen 1987, 63–64). Perhaps most famously, the “French Revolution” radically altered the French political and social landscape (Lefebvre 2005). Since then, the concept has been extended to scientific, economic, and other areas of change. For instance, the notion of the “industrial revolution” has been used to characterise shifts associated with industrialisation

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that drastically changed the plight of workers and social hierarchies (Ashton 1997). Likewise, a shift from foraging to sedentary, agricultural lifestyles, undergone by many human groups around 10,000 years ago, has been characterised as the “agricultural revolution” (Braidwood 1960).

Morality—moral attitudes, values, norms, practices, and so on—has also changed in drastic ways throughout human history. The phenomenon of moral change has received some attention in moral anthropology and the philosophical literature on moral progress. Now, an emerging body of philosophical literature invokes the notion of a revolution in the moral context, presenting moral revolutions as a special kind of moral change. Since it brings attention to historical development and descriptive facts about morality, this work on moral revolutions promises to avoid a shortcoming often associated with analytic moral philosophy: that its contributors too often “invent” their moral psychology and anthropology “from scratch” (Darwall et al. 1992, 189). As Appiah (2010, xi) observes, we have learned much about science by studying scientific revolutions; similarly, the study of moral revolutions may offer valuable lessons about morality. At a minimum, the existence of moral revolutions pushes us to view morality—or at least some elements of it—as dynamic (cf. Baker 2019, 203–204). Given that moral revolutions are one way in which important changes in morality and human life can occur, a deeper understanding of moral revolutions can be of aid in transforming practices and societies for the better (see Appiah 2010, xvii, 139-172; Eriksen 2019, 779; Kitcher 2012, 338).

In this article, we review recent philosophical work on moral revolutions.² We begin by characterising the commonalities in recent accounts of moral revolutions and the points on which they differ. Then, we discuss what has been said about

² We focus on philosophical work in the last twenty years that devotes significant, explicit attention to the topic of moral revolutions. We first selected titles based on familiarity with the literature. In addition, we performed a systematic literature search on 29.11.2021. We searched for sources that used the terms “moral revolution*” OR “ethical revolution*” OR “revolutionary moral” OR “revolutionary ethical” in title or abstract and appeared between 2001 and 2021, in the databases Psychology and Behavioural Science Reports and Philosopher’s Index. The resulting list of sources on which we focus consists of Appiah 2010, Baker 2019, Eriksen 2019; 2020, Lowe 2019, Pleasants 2018, and Walden 2015. To a lesser extent, we also discuss Buchanan (2020), whose primary focus is not moral revolutions; commenters on Appiah (2010)—e.g. Kumar and Campbell 2016; and earlier works on the topic of moral revolutions (Parsons 1974 and Palmer and Schagrin 1978).

the causes of moral revolutions, and comment on some open questions and implications for moral philosophy.

2 The nature and significance of moral revolutions

Which elements of morality must change in a moral revolution, and how widespread must the change be?

According to the authors surveyed, moral revolutions may involve changes to ideals, sentiments, beliefs, behaviour, and institutionalised practices, among other aspects of moral life. Several authors emphasise that for something to be a moral revolution, it does not suffice to have only a change in attitudes or only a behaviour change: a revolution will feature change in both (e.g., Appiah 2010, xi). For instance, Danaher (2020) characterises moral revolutions as a “reasonably significant change in social moral beliefs and practices” (n.p).

Nearly all recent accounts present moral revolutions as involving a moral change at the collective level.³ For Baker (2019) a revolution only occurs if a moral community (or its leaders) embraces a moral paradigm shift. Eriksen (2019, 783) writes that a moral revolution is a change at the societal level, for instance, in the form of shared practices. Lowe’s (2019) account refers to a threshold for change within a group: “A *moral revolution* occurs just in case a substantial majority of a society, culture, or subculture comes to accept a general moral belief that had been previously rejected by a substantial majority of that society, culture, or subculture” (Lowe 2019, 7). The focus on the collective level is sometimes left only implicit (Appiah 2010; Pleasants 2018; Kitcher 2012). For example, Kitcher (2012, 336) suggests that revolutionary change occurs at the level of codes, and ethical codes are collective. There is general agreement that for a moral revolution to occur, it need not be the case that all of humanity nor every individual in a moral community has undergone the moral change (e.g. Pleasants 2018, 568).

What is it that makes moral revolutions interestingly different from other kinds of moral change at the collective level (such as non-revolutionary change

³ Walden 2015 is one exception: he uses the language of revolution to characterize a type of fundamental, reconfiguring change in moral view, which could occur at the individual level. Danaher n.d., 4 is another: he characterizes a case in which an individual switches from believing torturing criminals is permissible to believing it is impermissible as a “personal deontological moral revolution.”

like moral drift, which we discuss below)? For the authors surveyed, part of what makes revolutions distinctive is the *radicality*, *depth*, or *fundamentality* of the moral changes involved. An element of radicality appears in Baker's account when he presents moral revolutions as involving an "inversion" of morality, "in which what was once morally commendable or acceptable becomes morally unacceptable or deplorable" (or the converse), and there is a shift to an "alternative paradigm incompatible with the established paradigm" (Baker 2019a, 42). Likewise, Eriksen (2019, 783) posits an aspect of "radicality" as a necessary condition for moral revolutions that demarcates it from other types of collective moral change and suggests that the change pertains to "fundamental" aspects of morality. Lowe (2019, 2) observes that moral revolutions tend to involve changes in "fairly fundamental moral beliefs such as one's conception of justice." Relatedly, when Buchanan (2020, 133) argues that there has been a revolutionary shift to viewing non-human animals as having moral standing, he invokes a notion of *depth*: he writes that this shift was "a true moral-conceptual revolution because it was a change at the deepest levels of morality: an expanded understanding of the kinds of beings that have moral standing." Fundamentality also plays a crucial role in Walden's (2015) account of individual moral revolutions. He suggests that changes in our beliefs about a subject are revolutionary when they are due to a "change in background framework that conditions our thinking about that subject" (Walden 2015, 283). On Walden's view, an individual's moral framework is an eclectic amalgam involving standards of coherence, rules of inference, and conceptual schemes, among other things. Changes in that framework may include reprioritisation of existing values, addition or deletion of moral concepts, changes to the rules one applies to make inferences in a domain, or changes to evaluative criteria for beliefs or practices.⁴ Although fundamentality, depth, and radicality are recurring themes in the literature, what these ideas mean in detail appears to differ substantially by author. Further work clarifying how varieties of moral change can be more or less radical and fundamental would be valuable.

⁴ It is also worth noting that Walden talks about *pervasiveness* as a variable that determines the extent of a revolution—a change to a single concept would be less revolutionary than a change to many concepts.

With the idea that moral revolutions involve radical or fundamental change often comes a point about *moral incommensurability*, in the sense that the moral aspects changed by the revolution are incomprehensible, unjustifiable, or incompatible with the pre-revolutionary situation. Appiah suggests that post-revolution, the evaluative judgements of pre-revolutionary times seem odd (Appiah 2010, 66), to the extent that we might wonder, “What were we thinking? How did we do that for all those years?” (Appiah 2010, xi–xii). Kitcher writes that moral revolutions come with shifts in attitudes and desires so that the behaviour of pre-revolutionary times seems not only unreasonable but “appalling” and “puzzling” (Kitcher 2021, 47). The revolutionary change may also not be “justifiable” from the point of departure (Kitcher 2012). Pleasants (2018, 574) maintains a similar line, using the metaphor of a “Gestalt switch”: people see the world differently after a moral revolution. According to Baker (2019), moral revolutions involve incommensurability because of a radical change of evaluative criteria: the revolution brings about a new moral paradigm, which “requires new concepts or redefinitions of older concepts, which [...] adherents justify using [...] different and typically incommensurable criteria, which they also deploy to critique the older, established paradigm” (Baker 2019, 42). Thus, the earlier paradigm will come to seem “unthinkable” after the revolution (2019, 42). Thus, these authors do not defend the same idea of incommensurability related to moral revolutions. Difficulty in *comprehending* or *understanding* the behaviour, beliefs, and attitudes of pre-revolutionary times (“What were we thinking?”) need not imply that new concepts or evaluative criteria have arisen, and vice versa. Further work on the kinds of incommensurability and their relationship to moral revolutions, as well as other types of moral change, is warranted.

The focus on incommensurability also reveals another commonality in the literature on moral revolutions. Nearly all the accounts of moral revolutions surveyed invoke an analogy between Kuhnian scientific revolutions (Kuhn 1966) and moral revolutions (Appiah 2010, 11; Lowe 2019; Kitcher 2012, 2, 333; Pleasants 2018; Baker 2019, 2–53).⁵ The Kuhnian analogy effectively takes up a

⁵ Discussion of incommensurability in the literature on moral revolutions has been inspired by the literature on scientific revolutions. Incommensurability was originally used in mathematics

theme from a brief episode in the 1970s that preceded contemporary discussions of moral revolutions. Parsons pioneered the work on moral revolutions (1974) by distinguishing moral reform—change within a moral paradigm—from a distinct phenomenon she dubbed “moral revolutions”—transitions between incompatible moral paradigms. She proposed understanding the functioning and nature of moral revolutions by analogy to Kuhn’s seminal work on scientific revolutions. Her primary example was the “women’s revolution” of the nineteenth century in the United States. Parsons’ (1974) Kuhnian analogy was subsequently challenged by Palmer and Schagrin (1978), based on arguments to the effect that the components of a Kuhnian scientific revolution, such as the existence and subsequent replacement of a *moral paradigm* in response to a *moral anomaly* that generates a *crisis*, could not be transposed into the moral domain.⁶

Among the recent works on moral revolutions, Baker (2019) presents the most explicit and extensive use of the Kuhnian analogy, suggesting that there are moral analogues to scientific anomalies, crises, paradigms, and dissidents, which make up the elements of moral revolutions. However, other authors, too, employ Kuhnian concepts in their analysis. For instance, both Kitcher (2012; 2021) and Pleasants (2018) adapt terms like ‘normal science’ and ‘paradigm’ for the moral domain, talking about the ‘normal course of morality’ and ‘moral paradigms.’ Interestingly, however, in the contemporary discussions of moral revolutions, Palmer & Schagrin’s (1978) objection to applying Kuhnian concepts like paradigm and anomaly in the moral domain has been largely neglected, with Pleasants (2018) being the exception.⁷ He aims at showing that Palmer & Schagrin’s criticism is based on an outdated, overly stringent conception of ‘normal science,’ which, once corrected, would reveal closer similarity to the analogous normal morality. Moral paradigms are best seen, suggests Pleasants, as a shared “everyday moral practice” of ordinary people, rather than shared research aims

to mean ‘to have no common measure’. Feyerabend and Kuhn independently expanded the use of the concept by applying it to scientific theories (Khalidi 1999). Within the work of Kuhn and between the work of Kuhn and Feyerabend, there are already multiple interpretations of what incommensurability involves.

⁶ Beatty 1976 also challenged Parson’s account, in more substantive terms.

⁷ Baker mentions Palmer & Schagrin’s (1978) critique, but does not respond to their objections to the Kuhnian analogy.

and assumptions amongst professional ethicists, as Palmer & Schagrin assumed (Pleasants 2018, 578). Pleasants contends that the level of commonality in moral perceptions and practice is high enough that we can speak of normal morality within moral societies. Indeed, recent cultural anthropological work emphasises moral commonalities as opposed to divergence (cf. Klenk 2019). Still, the (empirical) extent of moral disagreement remains disputed, and more could usefully be said on the conceptual question of how much and what types of moral commonality are required before we can characterize a population as engaged in normal morality. Thus, questions remain about how well the Kuhnian perspective fits the moral case regarding both the nature and causes of moral revolutions. Furthermore, many criticisms of Kuhn's theory of scientific revolution, specifically about the fruitfulness and clarity of terms like paradigm, anomaly, and crisis, will also pertain to a theory of moral revolutions that relies on an analogy to Kuhnian scientific revolutions.

Another commonality concerns the novelty of the concepts, views, or behaviours that come to prominence as part of the revolution. There is a change in any moral revolution, but must a revolution always involve the introduction of something novel? Early talk of political revolutions, drawing on the astronomical concept of revolution, involved a notion of cycles and return to something that previously existed (Arendt 1990, 42). This connotation has since been largely discarded. Whether in the context of political, scientific, or economic revolutions, the prevailing view now is that revolutions bring about something entirely new (MacFarlane 1986, 147). The alleged novelty that results from a moral revolution may help explain why moral revolutions are characterised by incommensurability or incompatibility between old and new. Many examples of moral revolutions that authors use are indeed cases in which something novel is introduced, like a new concept or a new way of living. For instance, Appiah's (2010) duelling case involves the rise of a new interpretation of gentlemanly honour. On Baker's analysis, moral revolutions involve new moral paradigms with "new concepts/terminology or redefinitions of older concepts/terminology" (2019, 51). And according to Lowe (2019), a hallmark of revolutions is the acceptance of a new norm in social discourse. At the same time, most authors surveyed do not explicitly exclude the

possibility that a moral revolution may involve a reversion to something that occurred earlier. Baker's account of moral revolutions makes room for a distinctive type of revolution—counter-revolutions—which constitute a return to an earlier held moral paradigm.

We have now looked at some of the common themes in the literature. However, it is striking that there is also quite a lot of disagreement about the properties of moral revolutions.

3 Points of disagreement

One might expect accounts of moral revolutions to require a fast pace, considering that this is a feature often associated with political revolutions, but there is a lack of agreement on whether speed is necessary or even common in the moral case. Appiah (2010, 172) suggests that a revolution is “a large change in a small time.” Indeed, his three historical examples support that view, suggesting that they occurred with “astonishing speed” (Appiah 2010, 170).

However, other accounts of moral revolutions do not present speed as a criterion for revolution. Baker (2019, 216) notes that many generations may pass between a revolutionary idea in the mind of individuals and behavioural change at the level of the moral community. Pleasants (2018, 586) thinks that revolutionary change is often slow, especially from individuals' perspective, and often proceeds in a piecemeal fashion. Kitcher (2021, 13) writes that some paradigmatic revolutions “were not only slow but could also easily have gone otherwise.” Perhaps some of the apparent tension between these comments on the speed of revolutions may be resolved by acknowledging that a moral revolution can be slow in the making (the challenging of moral codes, the presentation of an alternative, the individual activism, etc.) while the behavioural change can be sudden.

One might also wonder how long a moral change must last for it to count as a revolution—would a widespread, radical moral change count as a revolution if it were very short-lived? This question is generally not discussed explicitly amongst the authors surveyed. However, it is worth noting that one of the criteria that Baker associates with moral revolutions is a degree of institutionalisation: Following a moral revolution, the moral community *typically* adopts new customs,

rules, or laws which are associated with the new moral paradigm and which “obsolesce or force changes in incompatible customs, rules, and laws associated with the disestablished paradigm” (Baker 2019, 43)

The surveyed authors also disagree about the demarcation of moral revolutions from other types of collective moral change. The disagreement takes two main forms.

First, there is disagreement on whether revolutions are characterised, at least in part, by the intentional efforts of revolutionaries. Here, we take this disagreement to be about the nature of moral revolutions, i.e., their essence, or intrinsic properties (we discuss whether individuals play an important causal, though not necessarily characteristic or essential, role in the next section). The purposeful involvement of individuals plays a prominent role in Baker’s (2019) taxonomy of moral change. He distinguishes between moral revolutions, reform, and drift. The demarcating factor between drift, on the one hand, and revolution and reform, on the other, is whether the moral change was brought about intentionally by “dissidents’ conscious intent to alter the community’s sense of morality” (Baker 2019, 21). In cases of drift, “transformational moral change” occurs in the absence of the efforts of individuals to advocate the change (Baker 2019, 27). The role of “dissidents” is also accorded pride of place by Pleasants (2018, 581), who suggests that those individuals question conventional assumptions and thus set moral revolutions in motion. Other authors do not treat the involvement of advocates as a necessary element of moral revolutions. Eriksen (2019; 2020) suggests that some moral changes are aptly described as revolutionary despite being unintentional. Her claim seems to gain support from Appiah (2010), whose examples of moral revolutions such as the abolition of foot-binding or the demise of duelling are not presented as intended outcomes of someone’s (a group or individual) plan. An open question is whether the three categories of revolution, drift, and reform exhaust the varieties of moral change that are worth distinguishing. Danaher (2020), for instance, suggests that in addition to moral revolution, drift, and reform, there may also be a type of moral change that is not driven by the intentional actions of agents, and yet is adaptive in an evolutionary sense, and so is to some extent “directed” (by pressures in the

environment)—he calls this “evolutionary moral change.” Moral revolution has also been distinguished from the phenomenon of moral disruption. Hopster (2021) writes that moral disruptions, in contrast with moral revolutions, “need not be intentionally driven.” Nickel et al. (2022) also suggest that there is a type of revolutionary moral change driven by moral uncertainty rather than individual change-makers.

Second, there is disagreement on whether there is a gradual or categorical distinction between moral revolutions and other types of moral change. For Baker, the difference between moral reform and revolution hinges on whether the moral change is a change in moral paradigms (Baker 2019, 21, 49). A moral reform is thus a change within the same moral paradigm.⁸ Kitcher (2012, 333) suggests a type of moral change that proceeds by “puzzle solving,” analogous to the process and procedure of Kuhn’s (1966) normal science.⁹ This may be similar to what Baker calls a moral reform. When Walden (2015) distinguishes between moral change by accretion and (revolutionary) moral change by reconfiguration, he suggests that the difference between moral revolutions and other types of change is gradual rather than categorical, with the “pervasiveness” and fundamentality of the change determining whether it comes off as (more or less of) a revolution. Pleasants (2018) suggests that moral change *within* a paradigm is non-revolutionary, as opposed to revolutionary moral change marked by inter-paradigmatic change. He specifically discusses how a concept’s extension is broadened (e.g. to apply to encompass objects or acts it did not apply to before) within a moral paradigm as an example of non-revolutionary moral change (Pleasants 2018, 582). Kumar and Campbell (2016) are not explicit regarding their view about the relation between revolutionary and other types of moral change. Their work does suggest that they recognise a difference, but it leaves open what the difference is supposed to be.

⁸ Baker’s view on this point aligns with that of Parsons 1974.

⁹ What moral puzzle solving consists of is an interesting question. We speculate that it may be the solving of a first-order normative question about what to do, in a given moral community. For example, whether or not to allow abortion, legalise drugs, implement a minimum wage, and so on. That means, a moral question is posed that remains unanswered for some time, until an answer emerges.

We suggest that the disagreements discussed above mostly concern disagreements about the nature of moral revolutions. But there is also considerable divergence of views about the causes associated with moral revolutions, to which we turn next.

4 How moral revolutions happen

Suppose we want to know whether a moral change can be characterised as revolutionary. On some views, a particular set of causes is a defining feature of revolutionary change. An example of this can be found in Baker (2019). As we have discussed, on Baker's view a moral change does not qualify as revolutionary unless it is caused in a particular way—namely via the efforts of moral dissenters, who experience a moral anomaly and then take action to bring about moral change. Like murder, an act partially characterised by a particular cause (the intention to kill), a moral revolution is thus partially characterised by another particular cause (the intention to bring about radical change).

Apart from these constitutive causes we may inquire about causes that are not constitutive of moral revolutions. This section focuses on typical causes of moral revolutions that are not necessarily taken to be constitutive of them. With an account of moral revolutions like Baker's, for instance, although an explanation of a moral revolution will include something about how intentional action causally contributed to a moral change, there will also be more to say, such as about what causes led dissidents to promote moral change. An alternative way to think about the involvement of dissidents would be to view it not as necessary for moral revolutions but as generally causally important. Unlike Baker, Kitcher (2012, 185) is doubtful about the causal efficacy and importance of individual moral insight or epiphany to bring about a moral revolution; he makes this point in the context of the case of the abolition of chattel slavery. Nonetheless, Kitcher (2021) does support the idea that arbiters of change, "exceptional people" and "brave" individuals, may draw attention to a problem that the current moral code cannot adequately resolve and thus spark a public debate which, eventually, may cause a moral revolution. Pleasants (2008) also mentions these activities, carried out by "moral entrepreneurs." Also, Kitcher suggests that something like uncertainty about what to do may prompt individuals to amend their moral codes in

independent, but similar ways. If there is, furthermore, a collective discussion, where, Kitcher suggests, social critics and philosophers play a role, then moral dissenters may also contribute to moral change through their actions at the group level. Pleasants (2018) emphasises that *lack* of an alternative paradigm may hamper a revolution; in such cases, individuals who articulate an alternative paradigm can play an enabling causal role in bringing a revolution about.

Kumar and Campbell (2016, 158) highlight the role of consistency reasoning and emotional responses in moral revolutions (see also Campbell and Kumar 2012). The authors offer a different perspective compared to the other referenced scholars by highlighting the aspect of individual moral reasoning in sparking moral change. If revolutions are phenomena that can occur because of uncoordinated change, then in principle all causes of individual moral change may be relevant to consider in an assessment of the causes of moral revolutions. However, they do not claim that consistency reasoning and emotional responses are typical or necessary or especially powerful causes. In this vein, the role of art in moral revolutions discussed by Walden (2015) can be seen as one of the many ways in which individuals may change their moral views, as well as one of the routes by which individuals may facilitate changes in others' moral views (cf. Lowe 2019, 3). Whatever position the authors take on individuals' role in revolutions, one point of agreement amongst the authors surveyed is that moral revolutions never happen by “cogent, rational arguments” alone (Appiah 2010, 41; cf. Pleasants 2010).

Appiah (2010) puts honour codes at the heart of his theory of how moral revolutions happen. In his view, a shift in honour codes, with a reinterpretation of what is required for members of an identity group (e.g., gentlemen, workers, upper-class Chinese women) to warrant honour, plays the central role in bringing about moral revolutions.

In contrast, Eriksen (2019; 2020) puts forward a pluralistic theory of the dynamics of moral revolutions. She argues that the causes of moral revolutions across different arenas of human life are diverse and that moral revolutions can unfold with different structures. Therefore, there is no hope for explaining why moral revolutions generally happen with reference to only one or a few “recurring

fundamental dynamics” (Eriksen 2019, 780). However, according to Eriksen, we can possibly use existing and new empirical knowledge to ascertain which factors are more likely than others to cause moral revolutions in demarcated areas of social life, such as, e.g., legal systems or schooling practices (Eriksen 2019, 790; Eriksen 2020, 79).

There has been comparatively little attention to the role of factors like technological change, religious, economic, and political conditions, and other features of the environment in facilitating or impeding moral revolutions. For example, though Kitcher, at one point, mentions the important role of technology in contributing to moral change (concerning ideals of courage in ancient Greece) he does not elaborate on the details (Kitcher 2012, 185). Baker (2019) also pays some attention to the role of technologies. For instance, he argues that the new technology of stethoscopes and microscopes played a causal role in the immoralization of abortion in the US in the nineteenth century. So, though there has been some emphasis on the role of technology as relevant for the unfolding of particular moral revolutions, there has been little sustained attention to what role technologies might play in sparking, facilitating, hindering or playing other causal roles in moral revolutions.¹⁰

While accounts of social revolution emphasise – to varying degrees – the impact of political and economic (e.g. standard of living) variables (cf. Tiruneh 2014), the accounts of moral revolutions do not substantially draw on that literature. For instance, recognition of how living standards relate to political revolutions may fruitfully be invoked to ask how, exactly, living standards play a role in moral revolutions, too. The work of Pleasants and Baker often touches on the point that such material and social considerations may contribute to a moral ‘crisis’—this could be a valuable starting point for further integration between these two literatures.

Based on the existing literature, there are at least three models on the table for how moral revolution might come about. The model championed by Appiah sees honour as a central driver of moral revolution, which he underscores with several case studies. Another model, most extensively defended by Baker, presents

¹⁰ See, for further discussion, Hopster et al. 2022, Danaher 2018.

moral revolutions as led by individuals whose actions cannot be explained by materialistic or political interests, but may instead be the product of a diverse range of other processes, including moral reasoning, changes in moral perceptions and sentiments ('epiphanies'), and collective discussion. A third model may be built on existing work on revolutions in other contexts (e.g., political, cultural, religious, and industrial revolutions), which heavily emphasise economic, political, and material factors as playing a substantial causal role. One question here is how to work toward an integrated view that takes into account various factors in relation to the causation of moral revolutions.

5 Further open questions and implications for moral philosophy

We briefly discussed several open questions concerning the nature and significance of moral revolutions. For instance, do moral revolutions involve incommensurability, and if so, of what kind? How should we understand the relationship between moral revolutions and other varieties of moral change? We also raised questions about the drivers of moral revolutions, notably how individuals and alternative paradigms play a causal role in the unfolding of moral revolutions.

Several more tangential questions warrant attention. A recurring question concerns the moralised nature or evaluative status of moral revolutions, i.e. whether they are or should be seen as morally positive changes akin to moral progress. Pleasants (2018, 589-9) suggests that revolutions are conceptually linked to progress. Accordingly, on Pleasants' view, moral revolution could be viewed as a thick moral concept (in this case, a type of moral change that is also positive, morally speaking). Other authors are careful to state that they do not view moral revolutions as essentially positive phenomena (e.g. Eriksen 2020, 6; Baker 2019; Danaher n.d.). Baker (2019, 211) does not claim that there is "a single, authoritative set of moral concepts and norms that is universally applicable" that could serve as a general standard for assessing all moral change. But he also subscribes to a functionalist view according to which the "common goal of morality" is to facilitate cooperation and minimise conflict (Baker 2019, 212), and so it could be possible to assess moral revolutions as positive or negative by this standard. For instance, Baker (forthcoming a) suggests that morally horrible

changes – he discusses Nazi medical ethics – may count as revolutions, albeit not as ones that serve the goal of morality well. This particular revolution did not, argues Baker, serve the cooperative function of morality well and is, for that reason, a negative moral revolution.¹¹ Nonetheless, since some authors (e.g. Pleasants) suggest that alternative paradigms contribute to the unfolding of a revolution as a cause (rather than or as well as being a characterising feature), there may be a sense in which revolutions are rational, inasmuch as they depend on the new beliefs or behaviour being backed up by a consistent framework.¹² Have most moral revolutions been changes for the better? With the exception of Baker’s (forthcoming a) discussion of Nazi medical ethics, most examples discussed in the moral revolutions literature concern instances that the authors seem to view as examples of positive moral change, but there is likely selection bias in the examples used to study moral revolutions (see e.g., Eriksen 2020, 4–11). It may thus be interesting for philosophers to do a more systematic study of moral revolutions through history. For one possible source of further examples of moral revolutions philosophers might consider whether some political revolutions were also moral revolutions. For instance, Keane (2016, ch. 7) talks about an “ethical revolution” associated with Marxism in mid-twentieth-century Vietnam.

A major theme that we did not cover concerns indicators for moral revolutions and thus ultimately methodological questions about the study of moral revolutions. Both Appiah (2010) and Eriksen (2020, 16) suggest that revolutions are often, though not necessarily, reflected in the law. Also, according to Baker, following a moral revolution, the moral community typically adopts new customs, rules, or laws which are associated with the new moral paradigm (Baker 2019, 43). If that correlation holds, it could be a viable way to trace moral revolutions in the judicial record after the fact.

Finally, the question about the extent to which moral revolutions involve a characteristic element of incommensurability could be interesting for the debate about the significance of moral disagreement. Two focal points in the latter debate

¹¹ See also Baker forthcoming b. The functionalist assumption is also endorsed, in broad outline, by Kitcher 2012; 2021.

¹² The causal contribution may be explained by people’s need for moral sanction (see Fiske and Tague Shakti 2014), and consistency reasoning (Kumar and Campbell 2016).

concern the normative question of whether (a given type of) moral disagreement is epistemically significant in principle and the empirical question of whether there is any such disagreement ‘out in the wild’ (cf. Rowland 2020). The detailed accounts of moral revolutions surveyed above may provide fodder on the latter point, suggesting concretely how the moral views of today are – in any of the ways supposedly characteristic of moral revolutions (e.g., significant, radical, or incommensurable – different from the moral views of pre-revolutionary times. Potentially, this may imply that some views about the extent or very possibility of moral knowledge come under pressure.¹³

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