

Ethical Progress as Problem-Resolving*

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ELECTION night 2008 marked a historic moment in US history. Not only did the US elect its first African-American president, but it did so at a time when Jim Crow was still within living memory. At the time of President Obama's birth the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was still three years away and his parents, a white woman and black man, were forbidden from marrying in much of the country. So juxtaposed, the election of Obama seems all the more remarkable as it was made possible by extraordinary moral and political change in a relatively short time. Many Americans, no doubt, spent election night reflecting on the ways that our society is clearly *better* today in comparison to fifty years ago.

I take the public understanding of Obama's election to be a story about ethical progress. But in bringing a philosophical outlook to this sort of story we must ask whether it is really compelling—is genuine ethical progress actually possible? What makes us think that the changes to our beliefs, values, and practices regarding race which have occurred since the time of Jim Crow are actually *improvements* and not mere changes of mind or taste?¹ In what follows I want to vindicate our sense that events like the election of the first black President of the United States can indeed be ethically progressive by positing and defending a particular way of conceiving of progress in the domain of values.

Before laying out my argumentative strategy, I want to discuss the motivation of such a project. Why should we focus on a notion of evaluative progress? Answers having to do with confidence in our own values and our ability to understand ourselves as having made and rectified ethical mistakes come quickly to mind. For instance, if we cannot vindicate the idea that some ethical values are better than others, then we seem to lose all ground for thinking that our current racially (more) egalitarian beliefs and practices are preferable to Jim Crow beliefs and practices.

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¹Throughout the article I refer to ethical "beliefs" simply to invoke the ordinary language sense of the term, not to take up a cognitivist metaethical view.

Of course, not just any notion of progress will provide us with the same sort of confidence in our beliefs or with justification for avowing some values and not others. Consider two different approaches to the question of progress—on the one hand what I call utopian views and on the other what I refer to as the evolutionary view. The first kind of utopian conception of ethical progress posits an ideal ethical end-state, claims that this end-state is the one and only one best way for the world to be, and understands progress in terms of coming closer to that end-state.² So, for example, Obama's presidency might be thought to represent an improvement in race relations in the sense that the willingness of millions of Americans to be governed by a black president is one step closer to the ideal state of the world in which race is no longer a socially salient category.

Closely related to this "progress as getting closer to the ideal end-state" view is a second utopian view, whose conception of progress posits not one ideal state of the world toward which we aim, but merely a fixed standard of evaluation by which we can distinguish improvement from mere change or deterioration. So one might alternatively understand Obama's election on this view not as getting us closer to the one best way for the world to be, but perhaps as representing Americans overcoming traditional racial prejudices (where less prejudice is understood to be a fixed criterion of ethical improvement).

These utopian views do seem *prima facie* plausible. It often seems to be the case that we can compare two or more performances or outcomes only if we hold an unchanging standard of evaluation—whether an ideal end goal or a fixed criterion of improvement—at the time of both of the performances/outcomes. The attractiveness of utopian views notwithstanding, there is still room to worry about this way of conceiving of progress. After all, couldn't our standards of evaluation themselves improve and, if so, by what constant (likely higher order) standard could we determine that these changes are improvements? Is it not possible that as we look to higher order standards to understand improvement in lower order standards we will at some point find that there is no constant standard at work? This kind of case—translated into the domain of ethics—will be the focus of much of this article.

An alternative picture of progress which does not assume the existence of such a higher order standard is the evolutionary view, which we are familiar with in philosophy of science in Kuhn's work.³ Applying Kuhn's view to the ethical domain, we can imagine a conception of progress which involves radical moral transformations occurring in times of crisis. If such a view were to stay true to Kuhn's conception of the history of science, this view would hold that no matter how unworkable a traditional ethical view might be, most individuals will not

²Cf. Stan Godlovitch, "Morally we roll along: (optimistic reflections) on moral progress," *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 15 (2001), 271–86.

³Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

abandon that view until a rival framework is provided by a small number of particularly bold individuals who respond to the ethical crisis at hand.⁴ But Kuhn's picture is often accused of failing to sufficiently explain the objectivity and rationality of science; specifically, critics object that he cannot account for the progressiveness of science across paradigm shifts. Thus progress on Kuhn's view is often thought to be secured only in local form—relative to a particular paradigm. Indeed, I will shortly suggest that a similar objection applies to evolutionary approaches to ethical progress as well.

The sort of view I will argue for leans in the direction of the evolutionary model. Like Kuhn's view of scientific progress (and unlike utopian accounts of ethical progress), my account of ethical progress does not posit an ideal ethical end state or a fixed ethical criterion. However, I also take quite seriously the worry that Kuhn fails to sufficiently account for progress through paradigm changes. A major point of this article will be to show that my view can account for progress even through radical ethical changes.⁵

The view I will be offering takes inspiration from the ethical work of John Dewey; like Dewey, I will conceive of progress in terms of resolving problems. This conception allows for the rational revision of ends as well as means, while still providing for the possibility of progress even as our standards of evaluation or the ethical ends toward which we aim change. Such an account of progress offers a response to the sorts of concerns raised above about justification, confidence, and rectifying mistakes.

My overall aim in this article is to elaborate on such an account and, in so doing, to offer a compelling way of understanding events such as the election of the first black President of the US as an instance of genuine progress. In Section I, I clarify the particular goals I aim to accomplish in this article. In Section II, I motivate my interest in a non-utopian account of progress and describe a challenge which all non-utopian accounts face—a tension between maintaining a sense of objectivity and rationality and allowing for radical revisions of value to count as progress. In Sections III and IV, I spell out my own non-utopian account of progress in terms of problem-resolution and respond to two first pass objections to it. I then go on, in Section V, to show how the problem-based view satisfactorily deals with the tension discussed in Section II. Finally, I conclude in Section VI by considering an important lingering worry about the problem-resolving view and gesturing toward a response.

⁴This Kuhnian approach to ethical progress is strikingly similar to the account of progress that Richard Rorty offers by invoking the evolutionary metaphor. See Section II.B.

⁵My view might be seen as a taking up a similar position in ethics as Lakatos' response to Kuhn takes up in philosophy of science. See Imre Lakatos, "Falsification and the methodology of scientific research programmes," *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge*, ed. I. Lakatos and A. Musgrave (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1970), pp. 91–196. Thanks to reviewer Lea Ypi and Dan Peterson for calling my attention to this similarity.

I. CLARIFYING THE PROJECT

I want to begin by clearing away some misconceptions about what I might be up to in this article. I set myself the modest goal of explicating and defending as plausible a particular model of progress in the domain of the good—that is, with regard to questions of how to live and to which ideals to commit.⁶

Additionally, I want to make clear that I am not primarily invested in vindicating the view that *particular* cases of change are progressive. I refer extensively in this article to the examples of the election of Obama, second-wave feminism's transformation of women's relation to work, and a neo-Nazi's turn to tolerance; but this is not an article *about* these recent historical or current events. Rather these cases are of a kind—they are instances of what we take, common-sensibly and with little doubt, to be progressive. It is in this spirit that I refer to them.

Nor am I interested in defending a global historical claim about the tendency of humans or of individual societies to progress ethically or otherwise throughout history. My concern instead is the very idea of ethical progress. I aim to show how it is possible (and plausible) that some ethical practices and values are better than others and how we can learn which are which. I attempt to show this by developing a model of what ethical progress might be like. In an important sense, I base this model of ethical progress on a more general model of epistemic improvement. Particularly relevant to my account, then, are questions of when we are warranted in our (ethical) beliefs and how we can justify claims about improvement in those beliefs. The role played by epistemic reasoning and norms in my account will become particularly apparent in Section V as I appeal to a notion of practical or emotional coherence.

With the general aim of this article and the background assumptions a bit clearer, I will now move on to say more about the main challenge for non-utopian accounts of progress which I hope to overcome.

II. NON-UTOPIAN PROGRESS

I have suggested thus far that I will be putting forth a non-utopian model of progress. Let me say a bit more now about what is problematic about a utopian (or quasi-utopian) view.

⁶In narrowing my aim in this way I intend to leave room for a variety of views about how to conceive of the relation between the evaluative and deontic domains. I tend to think that there are important contrasts between the right and the good along the lines T.M. Scanlon outlines; given these differences, I suspect a unified problem-resolving model which applies to each of these three domains can be offered only by importing some modifications of a contractualist sort. Unfortunately I cannot pursue this issue here. See T. M. Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 171–6.

A. AGAINST THE UTOPIAN PICTURE

On the utopian view, progress is a matter of getting closer to our ultimate moral destination, whether understood as an end-state of the world or as a fixed moral criterion which we could eventually fully meet. Michele Moody-Adams voices two concerns about this view. The first is that conceiving of progress in this way might easily lead to skepticism about progress, as a result of skepticism about “proof of access to an objective standard of moral rightness.”⁷ In other words, how can we conclude that some changes are improvements unless we already know what the ideal end-state or the fixed moral criterion is?

I share something like Moody-Adams’ worry, though my concerns are best understood through a pragmatist lens. Like Dewey, I do not find the notion of an independent moral order in the form of an ideal end-state or an ultimate standard of morality plausible. It should be clear why the question of how moral progress is possible becomes pressing for philosophers (like myself) who doubt the existence of an objective moral order of either of these sorts. It seems straight away inconsistent to accept the utopian account of progress, the non-existence of an independent moral order (in the form of an ideal end-state or ultimate fixed moral standard), and that ethical progress can and does occur. My response here is to refute the utopian view.

Those who do not share my doubt about the existence of an ideal end-state or fixed ultimate standard of morality might wonder why they should concern themselves with considering an alternative account of progress when the utopian view seems to do just fine in their estimation given their belief in an independent moral order. In response to this worry I want to stress that my non-utopian problem-solving account of ethical progress is meant not only to make belief in progress consistent with denying the existence of an independent moral order, but also to improve on the utopian account by offering a sort of *usefulness* that the utopian account does not provide.

Consider Dewey’s point that we regularly conceive of progress in a variety of domains even when we do not have a fixed criterion or ideal end toward which we aim. Thus, even if an ideal end-state or unchanging standard of evaluation did exist, it is not obvious that we need to appeal to it as a guide in our actual ethical inquiry. Further, as Moody-Adams points out, it might often be difficult to determine whether a given change in our beliefs or practices is headed in the direction of achieving that fixed end-state or meeting that fixed standard; thus such a conception of moral progress might fail to “have any plausible uses.”⁸ This

⁷Michele Moody-Adams, “The idea of moral progress,” *Metaphilosophy*, 30 (1999), 168–85 at pp. 168–9. One might object here that we do not need *access* to the objective moral order in order for us to make moral progress—it need only be the case that there *is* an objective moral order and that our beliefs and practices are, in fact, getting closer to that ideal. This might be so, but I take it that the underlying concern Moody-Adams is getting at is that many philosophers think there is *not* an objective moral order—at least not of the sort that appears to be presupposed by the utopian account of progress.

⁸*Ibid.*

is because, as Dewey held, ethical inquiry begins when we face a particular trouble in a given context; our concern in actual ethical deliberation is never to find a “finally right” way of living, but rather to solve the concrete troubles we are facing.⁹

Dewey makes this point in the context of health. Consider a doctor who sees that a patient is suffering medical troubles and tries to produce a situation in which these troubles are mitigated. The doctor does not necessarily have in mind some ideal end-in-itself view of health, yet she or he can still determine whether the patient is making progress without having a fixed idea of health as the goal state.¹⁰ After all, in many cases patients have little chance of reaching anything like an ideal state of health and must instead accept trade-offs with regard to different sorts of health-related troubles and goods. There are likely better and worse ways to fail to be healthy—better and worse trade-offs to make—but appeals to an ideal conception of health are unlikely to help in sorting the better from the worse.

B. NON-UTOPIAN PROGRESS AND THE TENSION¹¹

Having motivated my interest in a non-utopian account of progress, let me now say a bit about rival non-utopian accounts and why these are not satisfactory. I suggest that the non-utopian views offered by David Wiggins, Michele Moody-Adams, and Richard Rorty fail where a Deweyan account succeeds—with regard to the tension between maintaining rationality and objectivity in ethics and explaining how radical ethical transitions can be progressive.¹² This tension is a result of the difficulty in constructing a non-utopian account of ethical progress which neither too severely limits what can count as progress, nor too permissively allows almost any change to count as progressive.

In my view, Wiggins’ and Moody-Adams’ views err in the first direction of this tension. According to their views, ethical improvement arises through the deepening of concepts (for Moody-Adams) or the drawing of distinctions within or refinement of concepts (for Wiggins)—not through the introduction of *new* concepts. Moody-Adams denies that progress can be achieved through the introduction of truly new concepts, because, she claims, it is impossible for us to

⁹John Dewey, “Theory of valuation,” *International Encyclopedia of Unified Science*, vol. 2 (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1939), pp. 15–16.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 46.

¹¹This section draws on my “Ethical progress and the goldilocks problem,” *Southwest Philosophy Review* (forthcoming). There, I more fully describe the views of Wiggins, Moody-Adams, and Rorty and the tension I have in mind.

¹²David Wiggins, *Needs, Values, Truth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987). Moody-Adams, “The idea of moral progress.” Richard Rorty, “Dewey and Posner on pragmatism and moral progress,” *University of Chicago Law Review*, 74 (2007), 915–27; “Feminism and pragmatism,” *Tanner Lecture on Human Values* (lecture, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI, December 7 1990).

assimilate new concepts into our web of values.¹³ Wiggins also rules out the possibility of ethical progress taking the form of radical ethical change, for he rigidifies moral concepts to our moral sensibility here and now.¹⁴ This means that were our sensibility to change in the future, the change would fail a priori to be an improvement. Neither Moody-Adams nor Wiggins, then, allows *radical* ethical change to count as progress.

By “radical” change I have in mind cases in which we replace older values with new contrasting values not merely in order to maintain coherence in our system of beliefs and values, but because the new values are seen to be *better* in some additional sense—because the new values speak to us, answer our concerns, or we are better able to live with them. A radical change, then, goes beyond more minimal moves necessary to preserve coherence in one’s epistemic system and this is the sort of case which I suggest Moody-Adams and Wiggins cannot account for as progressive.¹⁵

In contrast, Rorty’s view appears to lean too far in the direction of the second aspect of the tension. Like Kuhn with regard to scientific progress, Rorty looks to evolution as a proper model for ethical progress. He states, “[p]rophecy . . . is all that nonviolent political movements can fall back on when argument fails” and similarly that “once one sees the need for something more than an appeal to rational acceptability by the standards of the existing community, then . . . an act of imagination is the only recourse.”¹⁶ But this emphasis on imagination beyond argument or rationality implies that progressive transitions are not rational or objective, which seems quite worrisome.¹⁷ If our conception of progress is not constrained by some sense of rationality and objectivity, then how we can distinguish imaginative changes which, say, undermine women’s subordination from imaginative changes which further entrench women’s subordination (other than the fact that the former change is the one *we* prefer)?

Thus, there exists a tension between attempting to account for radical evaluative transitions as progressive versus maintaining a sense of ethical rationality and objectivity for evaluative transitions. Moody-Adams and Wiggins safeguard rationality and objectivity at the cost of severely limiting what kinds of

¹³Moody-Adams, “The idea of moral progress,” pp. 170–3.

¹⁴Wiggins, *Needs, Values, Truth*, pp. 205–6. Cf. Brad Thompson, “Moral value, response-dependence, and rigid designation,” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 36 (2006), 71–94.

¹⁵One way to think about these sorts of radical changes, then, is as revisions to our belief-value system which do not abide by Quine’s principle of conservatism—the principle that in making a holistic revision to our web of beliefs we should make only the most minimal change necessary to maintain coherence. W. W. Quine. *From Stimulus to Science*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 49.

¹⁶Rorty, “Feminism and pragmatism,” pp. 10, 18.

¹⁷Rorty himself is unclear on this point. In “Dewey and Posner on pragmatism and moral progress,” which was originally given as a lecture shortly before his death, he seems more optimistic about the possibility of such ethical transitions being rational. This strikes me as quite a different tone on this topic from that found in his earlier “Feminism and pragmatism.”

changes can count as progressive. Rorty, contrastingly, embraces imagination as the vehicle of progress while seemingly sacrificing objectivity and rationality. I aim to steer a course between those taken by Wiggins and Moody-Adams on one hand and Rorty on the other. After putting forth and defending my problem-resolution account of progress (in Sections III and IV), I show how my view can successfully navigate that path (in Sections V and VI).

III. THE PROBLEM-BASED ACCOUNT

The “units” in which I will be thinking about ethical progress are units of overcome or solved problems. This is a move taken from John Dewey, who is also interested in understanding progress in a non-utopian way. By “problem” I mean to pick out a certain sort of experience of ourselves, our beliefs, our values, and the world. Problems arise when we experience trouble, difficulty, or conflict—when there is disharmony amongst our empirical beliefs, our values, and our experience of living.

Why is it the case (or should it be the case) that “problems” play the role they do in our evaluative inquiry and deliberation? According to Dewey, ethical inquiry is a habit which we engage in when we experience a lack or a need.¹⁸ When we recognize an unfulfilled need or a conflict, we typically search for a way to overcome the conflict or meet the need. As Dewey puts it, a moral situation (a problem) is simply one in which judgment and choice are required to produce action: “[m]oral goods and ends exist only when something has to be done. The fact that something has to be done proves that there are deficiencies, evils in the existent situation.”¹⁹

In addition, Dewey suggests that viewing moral situations as problems that call out for solutions provides a kind of empirical test by which we distinguish a true good from a false good. The test is whether the supposed good solves the problem which prompted our inquiry in the first place.²⁰ Here Dewey does not have in mind grand, abstract sorts of potential “goods” such as pleasure or happiness; rather, he refers to concrete ideals, courses of action, and ways of living which we must understand in their particularity within the problem-situations in which they arise as potential solutions.

For all that I have said about Dewey’s pragmatism and problem-solving thus far, it might seem that problem-solving (and hence ethical progress) is just a matter of technical or instrumental reasoning such that when we are solving a problem we are just determining the best means given a fixed end or even multiple

¹⁸Dewey, “Theory of valuation,” pp. 15–16.

¹⁹John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), pp. 163, 169. A similar pragmatic picture of ethical inquiry can be found in Hugh LaFollette, “The truth in ethical relativism,” *Journal of Social Philosophy*, 22 (1991), 146–54. Thanks to Nathan Nobis for drawing this article to my attention.

²⁰John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1922), pp. 210–11.

fixed ends.²¹ Take, for example, Dewey's roast pork case in which one considers placing pigs inside one's house and then burning it down as a means to the end of having roast pork for dinner.²² The folly of such a pursuit is obvious—surely having roast pork for dinner is not an end which exists in isolation from other ends. Any deliberation we undertake about which means to take in pursuit of a given end must take into consideration to what extent the possible means are compatible with our other ends. But this point (if this is what Dewey has in mind) need not generate any objection from a sophisticated instrumentalist—certainly the shelter and financial asset provided by a house will outweigh any value provided by a roast pork dinner.

However, Dewey's roast pork case can also be understood as illuminating aspects of his view which would indeed give instrumentalists pause. An important aspect of the roast pork example, which Richardson emphasizes, is that ends and means ought to be revised in light of each other. The point is not merely that it is crazy to burn down one's house in order to eat roast pork *given one's other more important ends*—the point is that if that is what it would take to have roast pork, then roast pork is not worth wanting (in this situation) in the first place. Rather than understanding the situation in terms of some ends being more important than other ends, Dewey's point is that the means to an end can inform us about whether that end is worthy.²³

Another way to put this point is in terms of our preference-ranking. Dewey's point is that we cannot trust a hypothetical ranking of preferences which we bring to deliberation. Rather, part of what we do in deliberation is change our preferences given the concrete problem situations that we face. Problems, after all, do not typically come to us as fully formed and unrevisable. When I suggest understanding ethical progress in terms of problem-solving I have in mind a dynamic account of deliberation such that *within a given case of deliberation* ends or problems themselves can be revised and reconceived.²⁴

Consider, for example, "the problem of teenage pregnancy." Presumably, most Americans would agree that "teen pregnancy" is a problem. But agreement fades once we try to conceive of this problem with any degree of concreteness or to place the problem in a context which would guide us in thinking about what sorts of solutions are apt.

²¹Henry Richardson suggests that some of Dewey's rhetoric supports this interpretation of Dewey. See Henry Richardson, "Truth and ends in Dewey," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 24 (1998), 109–47.

²²Dewey borrows the following story of the supposed origin of roast pork from Charles Lamb: One day a pig wandered inside a house and the house subsequently burned down. While the owners were searching for belongings in the charred remains, they burned their fingers touching the well-done pigs. When they brought their fingers to their mouths to soothe them they had their first taste of roast pork. (Dewey, "Theory of valuation," pp. 40–1.)

²³Richardson, "Truth and ends in Dewey," pp. 116–18.

²⁴I develop this dynamic conception of deliberation further in my "Dynamic deliberation of ends: a case study" (unpublished manuscript, January 2011).

A common progressive approach conceives of teen pregnancy—along with STD transmission—as a public health issue. Teen pregnancy requires adolescents who do not have the benefit of emotional or intellectual maturity to make very adult decisions about abortion, adoption, health, and parenting; and even the best-made decisions of these sorts will often involve substantial costs in terms of a teen’s emotional health as well as their educational opportunities and future financial well-being. But, of course, we have the technology to prevent pregnancy—we need only provide easy access to effective birth control and convince teens to take control of their reproductive health and diligently use it.

In contrast, a typical traditionalist approach offers a quite different take on the problem. While certainly the emotional, educational, and financial costs of teen pregnancy matter, other values at stake in teen pregnancy are seen as equally or more important. Teen pregnancy, after all, is just one symptom of a much deeper problem having to do with the breakdown of the traditional family and the upending of conservative (often religious) views about sexual purity outside of marriage. On this understanding, the liberal attraction to the public health approach is itself just another symptom of the modern misvaluing of sexuality and the only promising type of solution is, then, one that involves a transformation of cultural sexual values.

Still other ways of formulating the problem might find both the progressive and traditionalist approaches lacking. For instance, we might focus our attention on the demographics of teen pregnancy, single motherhood, and marriage and divorce rates. We might thus realize that the suggestion to engage in sex only within marriage is a particularly problematic suggestion amongst demographic groups for whom marriage rates have plummeted in recent decades. Similarly we might notice that pregnancy at a young age among some low-income teenagers is a deliberate choice given an accurate assessment of their socio-economic chances in a markedly racially and socio-economically stratified society.²⁵ Thus we might think that only a multi-faceted approach to the problem of teen pregnancy can succeed given that the motivations and expectations of teens when it comes to sex, marriage, and parenthood differ significantly with race and socio-economic status.

Thus, in contrast to the common view that Americans disagree as to how to solve problems such as teen pregnancy, I suggest that we do not even agree about what the problem is.²⁶ It is only when we recognize the role of problems in ethical

²⁵Arline Geronimus and Sanders Korenman, “The socioeconomic consequences of teen childbearing reconsidered,” *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 107 (1992), 1187–214.

²⁶This difficulty goes beyond mere contrasting views about how to interpret a problem which we all agree exists—for “teen pregnancy” is much too vague to be a description of a problem. And once an attempt to specify a problem is made, the apparent agreement about “teen pregnancy” fades. To see this, consider a case of 17-year-olds who decide to marry and become parents immediately after high school. In such a case the traditionalist values of upholding the importance of heterosexual marriage and abstinence until marriage are not at stake, though the progressive values having to do with emotional maturity and educational and future financial opportunities are still in play regardless of whether teen sex and parenthood takes place within or outside of marriage. Thus progressives

inquiry that we can fully appreciate contemporary political disagreements about issues such as teen pregnancy and explain why otherwise reasonable individuals can seem to act in completely unreasonable ways when confronting such issues.

IV. SOME FIRST-PASS WORRIES

Having just laid out and motivated the problem-solving account, I would like now to consider two intuitive objections to this model: the modest proposal worry and the scope of problems worry. My intent here is to show that these objections do not cause serious difficulties for the problem-solving account and, in so doing, to further develop my view. I begin with what I call the modest proposal objection, which is substantially related to the previous discussion of Dewey's roast pork story and teen pregnancy.

A. THE MODEST PROPOSAL OBJECTION

Given what I have said in the previous section—that problem-resolving is a matter of overcoming problems and that part of what we do in ethical deliberation is reconceive problems—one might worry that on my view *any* change which makes it the case that a trouble is no longer pressing counts as a resolution to that problem. But couldn't we sometimes make a trouble no longer pressing in morally abhorrent ways? Consider a sort of "modest proposal" in response to the problem of teen pregnancy: legally require all children as they reach puberty to undergo sterilization.²⁷ Couldn't such a proposed solution be a true solution to the problem of teen pregnancy—at least on the progressive conception of the problem—and hence be an instance of ethical progress as I have characterized it? But isn't it absurd to suggest that sterilizing all teenagers would be ethically progressive?

Indeed, the idea that forcibly sterilizing all children at puberty could be ethically progressive is completely implausible. Fortunately my view does not have any such consequence. Rather, this objection stems from a misunderstanding about the nature of problems and problem-solutions as they figure into my view. I want to respond to this misconception by emphasizing two aspects of the problem-solving view—first, that a way of overcoming a problem counts as a real solution (and hence as progressive) only if it does not create more serious or intractable problems, and second, that what can count as a problem-solution depends importantly upon background values.

likely think there is a problem in this case—one they might still call "teen pregnancy"—which traditionalists might not recognize as a problem. Cf. Naomi Cahn and June Carbone, *Red Families v. Blue Families: Legal Polarization and the Creation of Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). Thanks to reviewer Lea Ypi for pressing me to clarify this point about interpretive differences versus problem-setting.

²⁷I allude here, of course, to the satirical modest proposal offered by Jonathan Swift, *A Modest Proposal and Other Satirical Works*, ed. Candace Ward (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1996).

Take first the point that overcoming a trouble is a problem-solution only if it does not produce new, more difficult problems. We can see this in the teen pregnancy case if we consider the consequences of sterilizing all teenagers—would this not create a new problem having to do with how to replace the country's population as Americans naturally age and die without the ability to reproduce in the usual way? And at stake here are not only the costs to Americans as citizens of a country which will have to creatively replace its population, but also to Americans as individuals, many of whose meaningful life-plans of becoming parents will be thwarted. These are problems that are unrelated to the original teen pregnancy problem, but are more intractable difficulties of significantly greater magnitude. Surely causing oneself massively larger problems cannot be the best way to solve a problem.

But what if we revise the original suggested problem-solution? What if, instead of permanent sterilization, adolescents are required to receive semi-permanent birth control which can be removed for medical reasons or upon reaching the age of majority? This solution would avoid the significant problems mentioned above, but remain almost as effective as permanent sterilization. What can be said, on my view, against this (still intuitively unconvincing and perhaps revolting) response to teen pregnancy counting as progressive?

Here I want to invoke the second point mentioned above regarding understandable misconceptions about the problem-solving view. How we conceive of a problem and what can count as a solution to a problem given a particular conception depends upon background values. As I suggested earlier, a diverse set of values leads Americans to find teen pregnancy to be troubling, but common to most everyone who finds it worrisome are concerns about the wellbeing of the teenagers themselves—whether this is understood in terms of physical or emotional well-being and health, having decent life-chances, or being morally pure.

But will these very concerns not lead us to reject the idea of legally forcing the placement of semi-permanent birth control on adolescents? We should expect that for many physically or psychologically immature pubescent children, the exams and procedures necessary for receiving birth control will be embarrassing or painful. Since puberty is occurring at younger ages, many children will not be emotionally capable of understanding themselves as potentially sexual or procreative agents at the time they will begin receiving birth control.²⁸ In other words, giving all pubescent children birth control does not appear to be something that coheres with the sort of values that lead most Americans to find teen pregnancy worrisome in the first place. Put another way, so long as we take

²⁸Traditionalists will also worry that providing even older teens with birth control will encourage sexual activity. Progressives will object to the state's violating the sexual and reproductive autonomy of children and teens. And those who look at the issue through the lens of racial and socio-economic justice will point out that in general preventing the worst-off teens from getting pregnant will not actually improve their life chances.

teen pregnancy to be a problem (at least in part) because of concern for the interests and well-being of children and teenagers themselves, problem-solutions will have to stand up to these values. Potential solutions which violate these values will simply fail to pass Dewey's test for distinguishing a true solution from a false one.

Is this to say, though, that whatever background values we begin with are fixed? Am I suggesting that it is impossible to realize that we were mistaken about some values? No—the considerations of the interests, rights, and dignity of teens need not be understood as fixed or absolute considerations. Rather, they are to be understood as those values which we actually have that prompted us to see teen pregnancy as a problem. We do not start our ethical inquiry from scratch, questioning which if any values are worth caring about; rather we always must begin from where we are.

What I am suggesting, then, is a kind of holism about our ethical inquiry; all of the various aspects of our system are revisable. Our goals, our values, our epistemic norms, our theoretical beliefs—all must face the test of experience.²⁹ If we think that we have a grasp upon a problem, but we find that the means needed to solve it are morally abhorrent or have failed to perform as expected in practice, then we likely have incorrectly identified our problem and further specification or revision may be needed.³⁰

In the course of specifying and revising our problems, however, there always remains the brute fact of value—that, as Dewey puts it, “judgment at some point runs against the brute act of holding something dear as its limit.”³¹ All values are revisable—all must face the test of experience. But it is not the case that all values can be revised or up for grabs at once. In any given attempt to conceive of a problem or search for a solution, some values will go unquestioned.³² In any particular case of deliberation, then, values which we hold in this brute way will tell against many potential problem-resolutions.

One might wonder, what determines whether in a given case of problem-solving we should reaffirm values, revise them, or reject them? To shed some light here I want to introduce some technical terminology. I propose that we let the technical term “problem-resolutions” be the units of ethical progress and

²⁹One question here is whether it can really be the case that *all* aspects of the system are revisable. Consider the epistemic norm of coherence—could we revise this norm or is it rather constitutive of rationality? In my view coherence is both constitutive of rationality *and* a revisable epistemic norm. Given what we understand rationality to be, pervasive incoherence in one's system of beliefs and values is obviously irrational. And yet, in saying this, we need not thereby also claim that this understanding of rationality and the resulting commitment to coherence is unrevisable. It is not true a priori that coherence is constitutive of rationality.

³⁰It is worth noting the heavy burden that coherence is bearing here. Cf. Richard De George, “Ethics and coherence,” *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, 64 (#3) (1990), 39–52.

³¹John Dewey, “The logic of judgments of practice.” *The Middle Works 1899–1924*, ed. J. A. Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1979), vol. 8, pp. 14–82 at p. 46.

³²In the teen pregnancy case one of the values that seems to go unquestioned—or perhaps is reevaluated and reaffirmed—is the concern for teens' emotional and psychological well-being.

that we distinguish this term from looser speaking about solutions or overcoming problems. The term “resolution,” I think, strikes the right cord. Consider a typical discussion of a situation in which we say that a particular individual has “unresolved” family issues.” With this phrase we seem to imply that the person feels that s/he has suffered an unacknowledged wrong or has not been given his/her due. With regard to problem-resolving, then, for a way of dealing with a problem to be worthy of the term “resolution,” each relevant value must be given its due. This contrasts with merely “overcoming a trouble” which does not similarly imply giving each value its due; after all, we sometimes overcome a trouble by “getting over it” or by repressing feelings of resentment and anger, but this is not really the same as *resolving* it.

The trick, of course, is determining what that due is for any suggested value. It is not always easy to determine which potential values matter in a given situation or how much they matter. But at a minimum one thing that “giving due” requires is actually responding to the concerns that spring from values which we already hold. For the sake of coherence and consistency, we must either live up to those values, appropriately revise the values, or reject the values if we find them not worth holding after all. Thus we will want to avoid what Charles Taylor refers to as “special pleadings” or “rationalizations” in the form of ad hoc exceptions; and we might think, as Taylor suggests regarding Nazism, that these sorts of pressures toward coherence and consistency can go a long way in showing the irrationality of many morally abhorrent events in recent history.³³ So, resolving a problem, on my view, requires overcoming troubles in a way that does justice to all of the relevant values to which we remain committed and, if we revise or reject values, being capable of offering a non-ad-hoc justification for that revision or rejection.

B. THE SCOPE OF PROBLEMS OBJECTION

Having responded to the “modest proposal” worry, I now want to attend to the “scope of problems” concern. How do we distinguish one problem from another? When seemingly unrelated difficulties we encounter are caused by an underlying situation, do we have two problems or only one? If we manage to overcome a trouble only to then be affected by another similar trouble, have we really solved the problem, or are we just masking symptoms?

Here I think we should look again to Dewey’s example of health problems. The importance of going beyond treatment of symptoms and discovering the relevant underlying trouble is obvious in medical cases. If physicians concern themselves only with overcoming symptoms, they risk allowing serious

³³Charles Taylor, “Explanation and practical reason,” *The Quality of Life*, ed. M. Nussbaum and A. Sen (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), pp. 208–231 at p. 209.

underlying health problems to fester. But of course, what is a symptom and what is an underlying trouble is not always clear. Take a patient suffering fatigue, dizziness, and a blood count consistent with iron deficient anemia. For some patients, the iron deficiency itself is the underlying problem and iron supplementation is the solution.³⁴ But for others the iron deficiency can be both a cause of symptoms like fatigue and dizziness as well as a symptom of a more serious issue such as an intestinal bleeding disorder. We expect medical professionals to consider and rule out underlying conditions as ultimate causes; intuitively we recognize that a physician who attends to fatigue and dizziness but who fails to discover and treat intestinal bleeding has not resolved the patient's problem.

Similarly, in the case of ethical, social, and political problems, accurate identification of the scope of a problem is likely to be one of the main challenges to resolving problems. Take, for example, the work-related troubles faced by many women in the US in the 1960–70s. A major difficulty (for middle-class, white, heterosexual women, in particular) was lack of access to education at many elite institutions and to prestigious and well-paying positions in non-traditionally feminine career-paths.³⁵ One way to conceive of the problem these women were facing—a conception which I believe did gain significant traction at that time—is in terms of constricting gender norms (especially those which relegated women to the role of homemaker and mother), overt discrimination denying women educational and employment opportunities, and hostile treatment toward women in the workplace.

An appropriate sort of resolution to this problem-so-conceived is just what the women's movement of the time managed to accomplish: the broadening of socially appropriate roles for women, legal protection against many forms of sex/gender discrimination, and the social and legal recognition of sexual harassment. And these changes do, in fact, appear to have radically transformed the situation of many American women in regard to work.

Yet it also seems clear that even today, middle-class, white, heterosexual women—those most likely to be helped by the changes of the 1960s and 70s—continue to face significant work-related troubles. The nature of these troubles, though, has significantly changed. American women no longer have trouble obtaining elite educations in comparison to American men (and, in fact,

³⁴Some mostly innocuous potential causes of iron deficiency are hereditary disposition, vegetarianism, and heavy menstrual periods.

³⁵It is important to note that for many low-income women and women of color, lack of access to higher education and prestigious careers was as much a function of their socio-economic class and race as it was a function of their sex/gender. Similarly, gender norms assigning women to homemaking were likely much less binding on black and poor women who would have needed to work (likely in low-paying pink collar jobs) even as their middle-class white counterparts might have felt compelled not to pursue a career. Cf. Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), esp. ch. 2.

are increasingly outnumbering men at many elite liberal arts colleges and universities), are protected from sex-based employment discrimination, and have legal recourse if subjected to sexual harassment. But a significant problem for many women pursuing professional careers today has to do with how to successfully combine the pursuit of such a career with being a mother. At issue is how to equitably share domestic and parenting duties with one's partner—particularly given that professional women still tend to shoulder a greater proportion of these duties than professional men—and how to prevent those responsibilities from negatively impacting one's career—particularly given the long hours that many professional positions require.³⁶

How should we understand the relation between these two kinds of trouble? We could think of the work difficulties of the 1960s-70s and the difficulties of today as two distinct problems—one which was successfully solved in the 1970s and one which is still ongoing. Reflecting on the anemia example, however, I suggest instead that we think of these troubles as symptoms of the same condition—that is, different manifestations of the same root problem. On this understanding we can say that it was faulty to conceive of the (middle-class, white, heterosexual) women's work problem as having to do with constricting gender norms, discrimination, and hostile work environments. Feminists and law-makers were right to think that the resolution of that problem-so-conceived was legal change and revising of gender norms. But we are now in the position to see a better way of conceiving of both the current trouble and the earlier trouble as importantly related.

The root problem of the troubles of the 1960s-70s, we might conclude, was not just that women were not treated equally when it came to opportunities for education and career. Rather, the problem was (and is) that treating men and women equally in the sphere of work will continue to disadvantage women so long as women and men do not equally share duties in the domestic sphere and so long as the work sphere is organized on the basis of a presumption of a gendered division of labor at home. In other words, the structure of much professional work in the US seems to have developed with a certain sort of person in mind—a main breadwinner whose body is not subject to pregnancy, childbearing, or breastfeeding and whose domestic needs (including producing and rearing children as well as reproducing his labor potential) are met by someone else (a wife). Though women have now entered professional careers in massive numbers this basic structure of work—and in important ways, the basic

³⁶Joan C. Williams, "How the tenure track discriminates against women," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 27, 2000. Joan C. Williams, Jessica Manvell and Stephanie Bornstein, 'Opt out' or pushed out?: how the press covers work/family conflict (Center for WorkLife Law—UC Hastings College of the Law, 2006), <http://www.uchastings.edu/site_files/WLL/OptOutPushedOut.pdf>. Mary Ann Mason and Marc Goulden, "Do babies matter? The effect of family formation on the lifelong careers of academic men and women," *Academe* (Nov-Dec 2002); "Do babies matter (part ii): Closing the baby gap," *Academe* (Nov-Dec 2004).

structure of home—has not changed as significantly.³⁷ The underlying “disorder” causing women’s work troubles during the second-wave, then, goes far deeper than the second-wave attempts at solutions acknowledged and we have still not managed to resolve that problem-properly-conceived.

There is an important worry here, however, about this take on the scope of the problem of women and work. If we say that the troubles of a few generations ago and those today are symptoms of the same problem, then it looks as if we have not managed a resolution. And since I have argued for understanding ethical progress in terms of problem-resolutions, it follows that we have not made any progress on this issue. But how can this be? Is it not obvious that revising constricting gender norms, ending *de jure* sex discrimination, and protecting women from sexual harassment was progress?

One way to account for this intuition is in terms of diagnostic progress. We have the insight we do about how to properly conceive of women’s work and family troubles only as result of our prior attempt at conceiving and solving this problem; it was only as a result of making previous insufficient changes that we now can better grasp our problem and what a solution would require—thus, those changes are a necessary step along the route to progress.³⁸ But doesn’t our sense of how the changes discussed above were progressive go beyond mere diagnosis? Indeed, by insisting that in our attempts to resolve problems, we must look to the underlying cause of troubles, I do not want to suggest that responding to symptoms cannot be progressive in its own right. Again, there is a parallel with the anemia case. A doctor might manage to successfully treat a patient’s fatigue and dizziness even as s/he has not yet managed to treat the underlying intestinal disorder causing the patient’s iron deficiency. In such a case, wouldn’t we say that the patient really is better off without suffering from fatigue and dizziness even if the underlying health problem continues?

This is just to say that what counts as a medical problem and how best to conceive of a particular medical trouble is tricky business. But the slipperiness of problems—and the manner in which, at different stages in the diagnostic and treatment process, a health difficulty might either be viewed as a problem in itself or as a mere symptom—in no way undermines our belief that there can really be better and worse ways to conceive of medical problems and more and less successful ways to overcome them given our health-related values. In these cases, the end of overcoming a symptom functions very much like a Deweyan end-in-view. At any given time, we are aiming toward that end both for its own

³⁷Consider that it is still quite rare for men to be homemakers or stay-at-home-parents, but not uncommon for women to do so. This means that a good number of (heterosexual) male professionals experience the career benefit of their female partner’s taking on the homemaking/primary care-taker role (even if only for a short period) while significantly fewer (heterosexual) professional women experience this benefit.

³⁸This is not all that different to the way a physician might go about treating anemia and anemia-related symptoms—trying out a simple treatment (iron supplements) and investigating further only if that treatment is unsuccessful.

sake and for the sake of other ends (as in when we aim to overcome the patient's fatigue for its own sake as well as for the sake of making a more precise diagnosis). Just as it is with the domain of health, so I suggest it is with the domain of ethics.

V. ETHICAL VALUES AND RADICAL REVISIONS

In the last two sections I laid out the problem-resolving account and considered a number of potential objections to that view. I would like now to return to some claims I made at the outset of this article. First, I suggested that the views offered by Wiggins, Moody-Adams, and Rorty are unable to successfully navigate the tension between maintaining rationality and objectivity and accounting for radical revision of values. Second, I claimed that my view can do better. I would like now to say something about how my account can make good on the latter claim. That is, I want to put forth a case of radical transition in values which still maintains a sense of rationality and objectivity. So in the rest of this section I will lay out some details of an example of a radical transition and then go on to characterize that transition as the result of a kind of learning process.

Consider the story of Tim Zaal as an example of this sort of ethical transition.³⁹ Zaal is a former racist skinhead who currently works with the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles providing educational programs promoting tolerance. Zaal became part of the skinhead movement as a young adult and eventually entered into a relationship with a woman he met through the movement. When the couple became parents, they introduced their son to neo-Nazism early on such that his first words were “nigger” and “kike.” Meanwhile, Zaal and his partner were preparing for the Aryan war—hiding thousands of rounds of ammunition under the child's crib, initiating young teens into their Nazi organization, and assaulting gays in the streets.

What was the turning point for Zaal? There does not seem to have been any one event that provided the critical moment, but there were a number of interrelated events that led Zaal to begin to see himself and neo-Nazism in a new light. One such event occurred when his partner came to suspect that their child might have American Indian ancestry; she insisted that if this were true, she would kill the child herself. This came as a shock to Zaal, as he realized he did not share his partner's willingness to kill the child if he turned out to be of less than “pure” blood. After other incidents involving threats to his son's safety, Zaal began to question his lifestyle. He also came to doubt the justice of the Aryan code, which asked Zaal to take great risks while leaders remained safe from the eye of the law. Within a few years of breaking off the relationship with

³⁹Yolanda Sansegundo-Montero, “From vengeance to tolerance,” *Tusk: The Student Magazine of Cal State Fullerton*, 6 (2006), <<http://tuskmagazine.fullerton.edu/tusk2005/vengeance/vengeance1.html>>.

his partner and leaving the movement, Zaal had begun dating a Jewish woman and volunteering for the Museum of Tolerance.⁴⁰

How can we, on a non-utopian view of ethical progress, make sense of a story like Zaal's as an instance of a warranted ethical revision? One path to take is to rationally reconstruct Zaal's revision of his values on the basis of some type of epistemic value such as explanatory success or coherence. Surely Zaal's views were flawed on grounds of coherence; for instance, he likely believed anti-Semitic and racist stereotypes despite also having available the empirical evidence to show the falsity of those views. Yet this type of empirical deficiency does not fully explain Zaal's radical transition and problem-resolution; the transition which actually occurred was very different from the minimal transition that was required to overcome such an empirical conflict. Zaal could have retained his commitment to the goals of neo-Nazism, yet decided that it was not worth endangering his son or going to jail for him to be an active part of trying to achieve those goals. But Zaal did not make these more minimal changes to his values. Instead, he undertook a 180° change with regard to his worldview.

Why did Zaal choose such a radical way of solving the problem of conflict within his system of empirical beliefs and values? I think the answer is that the last sentence offers too shallow a conception of what Zaal's problem was. His problem, I suggest, was not just a matter of how to maintain epistemic coherence in his belief and value system—his problem was how to have a belief and value system *that he could live with*.

Here I am emphasizing the idea of being able to “live with” our values and this gestures toward a kind of coherence that goes beyond the usual conception of epistemic coherence which I have been appealing to up until this point in this article—that is, coherence understood in terms of a fit between empirical beliefs and (affirmed) values. I have in mind a kind of emotional incoherence which we can see when we consider Zaal's point of view as he and his partner suspected that their child might be part of an “undesirable” race. We might say that Zaal here found a conflict between the value of being a good father and being a good neo-Nazi (or member of the Aryan community) as he understood those values.⁴¹ Of course, this sort of a conflict could be solved by revising the values in question—for example, by understanding a good father within the context of neo-Nazism. But these revisions, I propose, were not the sort of revisions that Zaal could live with. Though they may have strictly speaking restored *epistemic* coherence between his beliefs and values, they could not restore a kind of practical or emotional coherence.

In my view Zaal came upon a kind of evidence about what is good—what is worth pursuing, what ways of life are valuable—in finding himself emotionally

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹Another way to put this is that Zaal came to see that the way of life he thought he had—as a good father and a good neo-Nazi—was not possible. And seeing the impossibility of the way of life he thought he was living sent Zaal searching for another way to live.

and psychologically unable to live in certain ways.⁴² The point here is similar to a point we might draw from work on moral psychology and the committing of atrocities, which describes how various psychological mechanisms and social arrangements were necessary for many actual perpetrators of atrocity to be able to take part. Specifically, these mechanisms and arrangements allowed individuals to take part in these atrocities while avoiding being honest with themselves about what they were doing and what they really valued.⁴³ The inability to be honest with oneself about what one is doing, or the inability to live with the values to which one thinks one is committed, can be understood as a sort of evidence. Certainly this type of evidence does not fit into our usual way of thinking about evidence and confirmation of theories, in part because it is irreducibly first-personal. On this view, a reasoner who has actually been a neo-Nazi can know not only the same third-personal sociological and psychological facts that the rest of us can know, but can also know what it is like “for *me*” to take part in neo-Nazism.

This first-personal sort of evidence is particularly important when we face questions having to do with our good, in contrast to questions of the right—for example, what we owe to each other. In the case of the good, it is of utmost importance what it is like for *me*—for each of us—to live in different ways; after all, it might be that the sort of life that is a good life for me is not good for others.⁴⁴

I am suggesting that we can reconstruct the learning process by which Zaal came to solve his problem by rejecting neo-Nazism. And we understand his own experience of living as a neo-Nazi as a kind of first personal evidence, which eventually demonstrated that such a life was not for him because that life was not a practically or emotionally coherent one; Zaal simply could not live with the beliefs and values such a life demanded. If this is so, then there need be no difficulty in allowing such a radical transition—from neo-Nazi to tolerance

⁴²We might say that Zaal took part in a sort of “experiment in living.” Cf. Elizabeth Anderson, “Reply to critics of my ‘Uses of value judgments in feminist social science,’” *Symposia on Gender, Race, and Philosophy*, 2 (#1) (2006) <<http://web.mit.edu.proxy.lib.umich.edu/sgrp/2006/no1/Anderson0106.pdf>>; “John Stuart Mill and experiments in living,” *Ethics*, 102 (1991), 4–26.

⁴³Jonathan Glover, *Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999). Glover describes how, in the case of the Nazis, these mechanisms included increasing bureaucratization and division of labor in running the death camps, “cold jokes,” and purposeful humiliation. Primo Levi recalls an instance when Jews who were released after days of being stuffed into rail-cars relieved themselves in plain sight. Nazi guards and bystanders “openly expressed their disgust: people like this deserve their fate, just look at how they behave. These are not *Menschen*, human beings, but animals” (Glover, p. 342). Glover also quotes Franz Stangl, the commandant of Treblinka, who explains the point of such humiliation as aiming “[t]o condition those who actually had to carry out the policies. To make it possible for them to do what they did” (Glover, p. 343). Laurance Thomas puts this same point in terms of respect—by forcing the Jews to live in subhuman conditions it became “very nearly impossible for Nazi soldiers to experience the Jews as worthy of respect.” (Lawrence Thomas, “Morality, consistency, and the self: a lesson from rectification,” *Journal of Social Philosophy*, 32 (2001), 374–81 at p. 376.)

⁴⁴There is room for views about the good life to differ amongst different individuals, but there seems to be a much greater pressure toward convergence in the case of the right.

educator—to count as progressive while maintaining a sense of rationality and objectivity, for Zaal’s transition solved a significant problem he was facing.⁴⁵ In the face of conflict, Zaal had to reevaluate his beliefs and values and we can imagine that in doing so he found that above all he was committed to being a good father and to loving and valuing his son. Rejecting his previous neo-Nazi beliefs and values, then, resolved Zaal’s problem by giving proper due to the commitments Zaal found worthy and by restoring both emotional and epistemic coherence to Zaal’s system of beliefs and values.

I have been arguing that we can see Zaal’s transition in terms of his determining what sort of life was best for *him*. But I think we can also use this problem-resolving lens to see how *we* resolve problems about how to live with one another. Recall the example I mentioned at the outset of the article—the end of Jim Crow and the election of an African-American president. It is clear that during the civil rights movement Americans found they were unable to live with one another in the old ways—just consider the black protests, the violent reaction of southern law enforcement, and the need for the intervention of the National Guard in southern cities.⁴⁶ And note that many white individuals, particularly northern whites and white southern moderates, found that they were unable to live with the values they had previously—perhaps passively—espoused as they saw the fruition of those values playing out in the form of fire hoses and dogs being used against peaceful black protesters.⁴⁷ A radical change to the old way of life—a change that we might see as having led to the very possibility we have now actualized, that of a popularly elected black president—was required to restore peace and order. So, while I have been emphasizing the first personal aspect of problem-resolution, there is also, I think, much to be said about the second personal aspects of problem-resolution—about how we resolve problems together.⁴⁸

⁴⁵To reiterate my claim from Section II, this way of conceiving of ethical progress in terms of radical value transitions steers a path between Moody-Adams’ and Wiggins’ views on one hand—which, I argued, are committed to limits on how radical a value transition may be while still potentially counting as progress—and Rorty’s view on the other—which will seemingly allow for any degree of radicalness, but only at the cost of undermining the sense of rationality and objectivity of the transition.

⁴⁶Jason Sokol, *There Goes My Everything: White Southerners in the Age of Civil Rights, 1945–1975* (New York: Vintage, 2006). Sokol highlights the extent to which the demonstrations of the civil rights movement interrupted the dominant narrative about race relations. According to the dominant narrative, segregation was good for everyone because blacks required white paternalism and blacks were happy with their position in society (p. 14). But Sokol describes how when King and the SCLC came to Albany, Georgia, “Whites felt themselves besieged by ‘outside agitators,’ and . . . could barely believe their eyes when the ‘good Negroes’ of Albany—‘their Negroes’—demonstrated that they were anything but content. In the face of black protest, the white myth of ‘good race relations’ blew away with the wind” (p. 12). The need for a new narrative to account for the unfolding events was pressing. Thus, one need not have begun with racially-egalitarian sympathies in order to have encountered a problem during the civil rights movement.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁴⁸Of course, to talk of situations in which we solve “our” problem of how to live together is to venture into the arena of the right. As I stated earlier, fully developing the problem-resolution account with regard to the right goes beyond the scope of this article.

VI. CONCLUSION: A LINGERING WORRY

In conclusion, I want to flag an important worry with regard to Zaal's transition and gesture toward a response. I have argued that we can understand Zaal's way of resolving his problem as the outcome of a sort of learning process—and hence as maintaining a sense of rationality. However, to show that Zaal's way of resolving his problem was rational is not yet to rule out alternative ways of resolving that problem which are equally rational. Why, one might wonder, couldn't a transition go in the other direction and still make a claim to being progressive? For instance, when Zaal finds himself having emotional trouble dealing with the idea of killing his son despite his commitment to the abstract goal of exterminating "impure" groups of people, couldn't he resolve this conflict in favor of the abstract goal rather than in favor of his repulsion at the thought of killing his son? For instance, if Zaal could successfully repress the emotions in question, couldn't he then "live with" his neo-Nazi lifestyle? And wouldn't that, then, be a resolution to his problem and so a case of ethical progress?

Here I think it must be stated up front that I cannot deny that this is *possible*. Whether one can resolve a problem of emotional incoherence by repressing the emotions in question depends on both empirical facts and values. This proposed problem-resolution will fail, of course, if an individual cannot undertake it without violating background values to which they continue to affirm or if the course of action leads to even worse and more intransigent troubles than the original problem. I think there is significant reason to think that in actual cases of Nazis or neo-Nazis the proposed problem-resolution would fail for one or both of these reasons.

Consider, for instance, the sorts of values which would speak against suppressing normal human emotions—the desire to experience typical familial bonds, romantic love, or affectionate friendships and perhaps the desire to maintain an Aryan community in which loyalty and compassion (for other Aryans at least) is important. An individual who is considering this course of action will have to ask themselves: if this is what I or we have to do in order to make the world pure, is it worth it?

We cannot rule out a priori, of course, that someone could answer that question in the affirmative and could go on to bear the costs. However, one who does so still remains rationally criticizable for any glaring incoherencies, special pleadings, or refusals to acknowledge evidence within their system of beliefs and values. Thus, if Taylor is correct in his view that Nazi beliefs and values can only be supported by special pleadings, such ways of living will still fail to be rational. Hence such ways of living cannot make a claim to be equally as good as the contrasting tolerant way of life (so long as the tolerant way of life avoids or overcomes the special-pleadings and incoherencies that the intolerant way of living commits). There are, after all, many dimensions of criticism available here, including dimensions of rational or epistemic criticism.

This way of responding to the worry, however, still leaves open the question of whether a Nazi or neo-Nazi lifestyle might be *ethically* criticizable in a way distinct from criticizing the norms of reasoning involved in such a lifestyle. If a person finds that they can live with the Nazi/neo-Nazi lifestyle *and* that they can live with the overt irrationality in their reasoning which the lifestyle requires, would this not still be a good life for him or her? I think that it might, in fact, turn out in some cases that a good life—or at least *one* kind of a good life—for a particular individual is a morally horrendous life.⁴⁹ If there are individuals who cannot find tolerant, compassionate ways of life livable or who find themselves truly able to live in violent, cruel, hardened ways, then indeed it does seem hard to see how that the latter way of life would fail to be good for such persons.⁵⁰

Given Dewey's pragmatist underpinnings which I appealed to in developing my view, however, there need not be anything worrying about admitting as much. After all, as Dewey insists, we learn about the good from trying out ways of life and seeing if they are satisfying. What else could a pragmatic kind of evidence for goodness be? On the sort of pragmatist-inspired view I am offering, the ultimate *ethical* authority can be no one and nothing but our own experiences of trying to live.

⁴⁹I should note again that I am primarily concerned in this article with the good. Even if it turns out that for a particular individual a *good* life is one of Nazism, surely it does not follow that the practices involved in Nazism are morally permissible or can be justly permitted by the state.

⁵⁰Of course, it is a matter of empirical fact how often this is the case; I suspect that it is rare. Assuming, however, that some individuals do truly find themselves able to live in these ways, it is hard to see what evidence or experiences could show such a person that she is mistaken. This, of course, does not preclude the rest of us from continuing to strongly disapprove of her values.