**Why Moral Reasoning is Insufficient for Moral Progress**

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*[Penultimate Version; Forthcoming in the Journal of Political Philosophy.]*

**Introduction**

In the literature on moral progress, a central philosophical puzzle relates to how large-scale behavioral change occurs. What explains the end of slavery, reductions in poverty, extensions of liberty, and greater increased respect for animals and nature? Philosophers have long believed that pure reasoning is key. The articulation of abstract principles and rational arguments helps to reveal inconsistencies and falsehoods in the status quo, counteract unruly sentiments, and open our minds to new possibilities.[[1]](#footnote-1) To the extent that moral beliefs guide moral action, the hope of moral progress is grounded in the acquisition of true moral beliefs.

This hope, however, has been confounded by historians and social psychologists. It has been confounded not because of the fact that moral beliefs are motivationally insufficient for right action; right action, as many philosophers readily concede, requires both right reason and motivation. Rather, hope has been confounded because pure reasoning fails to supply true moral beliefs and counteract unruly sentiments in a reliable fashion. The historical record suggests that moral reasoning, far from preventing phenomena such as the Holocaust, racism, and human chauvinism, has actively rationalized them.

Some moral epistemologists maintain a faith in moral reasoning, but argue that we need to replace “pure” reasoning with modes of “non-ideal” reasoning that are sensitive to the usual ways in which reasons and motivations are corrupted by bias. A potent source of bias, they claim, is power or interests.[[2]](#footnote-2) When moral agents possess power over others, it *distorts* their normativity through rationalization, blinds them to relevant moral information, corrupts their feelings, impoverishes their moral language, and blunts their moral imagination. To overcome the epistemic vices of power, moral reasoning has been “impurified” in various ways: contextualizing deliberations,[[3]](#footnote-3) engaging emotions,[[4]](#footnote-4) employing imagination,[[5]](#footnote-5) and democratizing contention.[[6]](#footnote-6)

While these non-ideal modes of moral reasoning are necessary to help us better understand moral normativity, they are insufficient for moral progress, as I will argue in this paper. My argument is two-pronged. In many cases, moral progress is obstructed not only by power, but also by *unjust social norms*. And to change unjust social norms, we need not only better moral reasoning, but also a distinct form of collective reasoning, which I call *“We”-reasoning.*

To argue my case, I begin from an influential non-ideal account of moral reasoning: Elizabeth Anderson’s “democratic moral inquiry.” She argues that power constrains the understanding of moral normativity through self-serving bias, and that the equal and direct participation of the oppressed in the contention of the validity of moral norms is necessary to correct this bias. Paradigmatic cases of moral progress (e.g. the abolition of slavery), she claims, are proof of the reliability of democratic moral reasoning.

While democratic moral reasoning may explain how moral progress occurred in certain cases, I will argue that it fails to explain adequately how moral progress occurred in one of her central examples, the British abolition of the slave trade. Although Anderson is right that the abolitionist social movement played a key role in challenging moral inaction, she is inaccurate in characterizing this as “democratic moral inquiry.” It was not fully *democratic* because slaves did not participate equally and directly in the movement. Neither was it *moral*, since the movement was largely about national honor.[[7]](#footnote-7) Indeed, moral error was not the cause of moral inaction since it is arguable that slavery was widely understood to be wrong long before the movement began.

Anderson’s potential mischaracterization, I contend, stems from a failure to understand the distinct obstacle that social norms present to moral progress, and the distinct remedy they require. In her view, Britons’ interests in the slave trade were presumed to be the obstacle to abolition, because these interests made their moral reasoning and motivation biased, and thus led to collective apathy. Contra Anderson, I argue that interests were not the problem. Rather, it was the social normativity inherent in social norms which *trumped* moral normativity. Following Margaret Gilbert, I claim that the normativity of social norms is grounded in the normative principle to which a group has committed jointly. This joint commitment gives rise to shared expectations of reciprocal conformity, which demand that members affirm their “We”-identity and reason from a “We”-perspective. In the British case, Britons’ joint commitment to British honor gave them “We”-reason to support the slave trade in violation of moral reason. I argue that parochial reasons and sentiments, rather than interests-based biases, are the obstacle social norms present to moral progress.

This might suggest that enabling moral progress requires the subordination of social normativity to moral normativity. However, I argue that this is neither psychologically feasible nor normatively desirable. Few are moved by the demands of morality alone; on the contrary, most of us are moved by the demands of the groups to which we belong. In addition, the cost of weakening social normativity can be high. It risks sacrificing the membership goods that social norms enable, such as fellow feeling, social trust, and group honor.

Toward the end of the paper, I suggest a constructive solution to the problem. I offer a joint commitment account of “We”-reasoning to change social norms. Distinct from democratic moral reasoning in terms of its structure and content, “We”-reasoning is *communitarian*. Applying my account of “We”-reasoning to the British abolitionist movement, I show how British abolitionists gave fellow Britons “We”-reasons to renew their joint commitment to national honor. It is “We”-reasoning, rather than democratic moral reasoning alone, that explains Britons’ moral progress. By bringing together the literature on moral progress and social norms, I hope to expand the toolbox for practitioners and theorists seeking change.

**1. An Account of Democratic Moral Reasoning**

In this section, I present an account of moral progress that focuses on the idea of unaccountable power. Although many philosophers identify unaccountable power as a major obstacle to moral progress, Anderson provides the most detailed discussion, so I will begin with her account.

**The Epistemic Vices of Power**

A major source of bias is unaccountable power over others…Power makes people morally blind. It stunts their moral imaginations and corrupts their moral reasoning, tripping them up in contradictions and sophistries.[[8]](#footnote-8)

In Anderson’s view, power obstructs moral progress through producing self-serving and biased reasoning. Self-serving bias affects many faculties of the mind, including cognition, affect, perception, and imagination. The argument for her claim is part psychological and part historical. Drawing on Dewey’s account of moral psychology, Anderson argues that it is extraordinarily difficult for individuals to distinguish what they want from what is right when they hold unaccountable power through which to enforce their demands .[[9]](#footnote-9) When our moral beliefs conflict with our selfish desires, we tend to bend the relevant facts or the relevant moral principles to make moral obligations less demanding, inapplicable or excusable, often in ways that we do not even realize.

Anderson claims that the same psychological mechanism that produces moral confusion in powerful individuals also produces it in powerful groups.[[10]](#footnote-10) When a privileged group uses their unchecked social power to impose their views unilaterally on the subordinate group, such “authoritarian moral inquiry” is prone to the “caprice of subjective desires,” “vanity,” “smugness,” and “narcissism.”[[11]](#footnote-11) She offers many historical examples to illustrate this phenomenon.

One case study is the reasoning of Nicolas de Condorcet: a French enlightenment thinker and well-meaning abolitionist. Like many white abolitionists at the time, he argued that emancipation should be gradual rather than immediate.[[12]](#footnote-12) Although France was heavily dependent on slave labor economically, Condorcet did not justify gradual emancipation on economic grounds. He also identified and understood the relevant moral principle: universal human rights cannot justify slavery. Moral distortion occurred more subtly. He bent—or more precisely imagined—facts in order to make the principle inapplicable. He imagined that if slaves were emancipated immediately, they would form mobs, take revenge against former-slave owners, and that the plantation economy would collapse and civilization in the colonies would break down. He further imagined that despite their monstrous acts of rape, robbery, tyranny, and sadistic murder, the former masters could teach slaves how to handle freedom responsibly. As such, slaves were not yet fit for freedom, and gradual emancipation was therefore justified. Anderson claims that Condorcet’s stunted imagination was a result of authoritarian moral inquiry: he was both more privileged than the slaves in the colonies, and isolated from them.

Another case study Anderson discusses is white abolitionists’ evaluation of the success of emancipation.[[13]](#footnote-13) Whites judged both the decline in food production in post-emancipation societies and the former slaves’ refusal to work for long hours as signs of slaves’ incapacity for freedom. This evaluation, Anderson points out, reflects whites’ moral blindness. Whites were morally blind to the fact that they drove slaves into poverty and fatigue in the first place. It was only reasonable that freed people would diversify their farming (from sugar to corn, barley, oats, potatoes, etc.) to meet their subsistence needs, spend more time recovering from injuries, and enjoying family life. Yet, self-serving whites ignored their own causal responsibility in structuring freed people’s interests and attributed these behaviors to laziness instead. While whites held up the republican ideal of freedom (i.e. to be one’s own boss), they failed to apply it consistently to blacks, who clearly adhered to it by implementing subsistence farming and refusing to be dominated by whites. This blatant contradiction would have been readily visible from the outside, yet self-serving bias made it imperceptible from the inside.

**The Epistemic Virtues of Democracy**

Having identified the epistemic vices arising from unaccountable power, the next step in Anderson’s account is to identify the appropriate remedy—namely, democratic moral inquiry. In her view, the democratic contention of the oppressed has the ability to better identify and correct self-serving bias.

By democratic, Anderson means that the powerless must be able to participate equally in moral inquiry. They must be able to make their claims in a moral dispute in such a way that the powerful “cannot ignore or dismiss but must address in their own terms.”[[14]](#footnote-14) This is in part justified by the claim that the powerless occupy a better epistemic perspective on their own condition. Historically, white abolitionists had tended to construe the moral wrongness of slavery in terms of its cruelty and the material deprivation it produced, falsely arguing it was the moral duty of whites to be sympathetic and paternalistic toward slaves. Black abolitionists, however, corrected white abolitionists by arguing that the true goal of antislavery movements should be to recognize that blacks were worthy of freedom and dignity, and correctly demanded full political and legal rights instead of pity and protection.[[15]](#footnote-15) Similarly, while whites considered slaves to be unfit for freedom, the actions of the slaves—in the form of self-emancipation and service in war—demonstrated their competence and dignity to whites. If black people were capable of fighting wars, they were fit for freedom. Such examples served to undermine biased assumptions about black people’s incompetence and inferiority, which had been used to rationalize slavery.[[16]](#footnote-16)

In addition, Anderson places great emphasis on “contention,” arguing that it is an epistemically superior mode of claim-making compared to pure moral argumentation. She explains,

First, contentious politics—active, practical, mass resistance to the moral claims embodied in social institutions enforced by and catering to the powerful—is needed to activate genuine practical reasoning across all levels of society. The powerful won’t really listen to reason—that is, to claims from below—until they no longer have the power to routinely enforce their desires. Second, the subordinated and oppressed must actively participate in that contention. They must manifest in deed and not only words their own interest, capacity, and worthiness for the rights and privileges they are demanding.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Contention is epistemically superior first because of its ability to motivate genuine deliberation (as opposed to self-serving rationalization). Given our selfish desire to protect our pre-existing privilege, we are prone to motivated ignorance. Contentious activities, such as bargaining, demonstrations, disobedience, and rebellion, force the powerful to listen and respond to the claims of the oppressed. Anderson cites the Civil Rights Movement as an example of this.[[18]](#footnote-18) The numerous protests, the occupation of roads, and the major boycotts of stores by blacks disrupted the routine operation of Southern whites’ selfish desires and forced them to sit up and listen to the demands of blacks. Disruptive demonstrations broke through “walls of complacency, insularity and ignorance,” and kick-started a series of negotiations and deals between the authorities and black people.[[19]](#footnote-19) In addition, contention is epistemically superior in conveying relevant information. It makes the claims of the oppressed more vivid.[[20]](#footnote-20) For example, in the French Caribbean and the American South, slaves’ resistance in the form of escape, and through breaking tools and defending themselves against the masters’ violence, forced authorities to see the gross abuses of the masters clearly. It corrected the moral blindness and stunted imagination of the powerful. The authorities ultimately responded to the unrest by granting rights to the slaves, such as the right not to work on Saturday afternoons and the right to issue formal complaints against their masters’ abuses. From these historical episodes, Anderson concludes that moral progress is largely the result of the political struggles of the oppressed and not the conscientious reflection of the powerful.

**2. The Limits of Democratic Moral Reasoning**

While Anderson’s democratic moral reasoning is a major advance over pure reasoning, it remains incomplete as an account of moral progress. To be sure, to the extent that individuals hold unaccountable power, democracy is essential to remedy their self-serving reasoning and motivations. But individuals also find themselves in the grip of unjust social norms. And when this happens, they do not necessarily suffer from moral error. Instead, they allow unjust social expectations to override their moral reason and motivations. In places, Anderson acknowledges this problem of norm-conformity, but she assumes that it, too, is a sort of self-serving rationalization that is reducible to power, and therefore something which can be adequately resolved by democratic moral reasoning. This is a mistake. To illustrate the diagnostic and remedial limits of democratic moral reasoning, let us consider Anderson’s case study: the British abolition of the slave trade.

**The Puzzling Case of the British Abolition of the Slave Trade**

I shall not dispute Anderson’s claims that British abolition is a case of moral progress and that the British abolitionist social movement played a pivotal role. It is widely accepted by historians that the British abolition of the slave trade is a genuine case of moral progress.[[21]](#footnote-21) The parliamentary bill to outlaw the trade in 1807 was not passed for reasons of national economic interest. Nor was it an act of political expediency to manage internal crisis or external threat. It reflected a genuine transformation of normative attitudes about Britain’s involvement in slavery, from collective apathy to collective shame. It is also widely accepted by historians that the abolitionist social movement played a pivotal role. Until the 1770s, opposition to slavery was limited to a tiny fraction among the ruling elites and clergies. The general public took it for granted that the slave trade was a necessary evil to maintain commerce and national prosperity. The social movement began in 1787 with the formation of the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade. Its founders, including Thomas Clarkson, Granville Sharp, and William Wilberforce, mobilized and changed public opinion. They helped to organize and connect antislavery societies in various towns and cities, and held public meetings to enlist support. They united Britons across lines of class, gender, and religion toward this single cause. They publicized the evils of slavery in the West Indies, and of the Middle Passage, by printing pamphlets, publishing testimonies, giving public speeches, and circulating poetry. Millions added their names to abolitionists’ petitions, which compelled Parliament to outlaw the slave trade.

While Anderson is right to argue that unity, commitment, numbers, and worthiness are key features of the abolitionist movement, she errs in thinking that they functioned to correct the self-serving bias of the powerful and yield collective moral learning. Instead, as I will argue below, these are features of “We”-reasoning. For now, let us consider why the movement cannot be characterized as democratic moral reasoning. Anderson writes,

This particular mode of contentious politics known as the social movement is a particularly apt vehicle of progressive moral transformation, because it enables people to undertake three tasks needed to overcome a principal source of bias: the tendency of the powerful to shape and uphold moral norms that confuse the right with what the powerful desire for themselves. Through social movements, people inform the powerful and the public at large of how the needs and interests of the less powerful are ill-served by reigning norms. They demonstrate their own moral worth and commitment, and thereby bolster the moral authority of their claim-making. They expose the powerful and the public at large to the characteristic experiences that stimulate moral conscience and moral reflection.[[22]](#footnote-22)

A closer examination of the movement reveals that the “democratic” element is missing. It may well be broadly democratic in terms of including the broad masses of British society. But that is not the sort of democracy Anderson considers essential to moral learning. Democratic moral inquiry requires equal and direct contention between the powerful group (here the slavers) and the powerless group (the disempowered slaves). In the British abolitionist movement, those affected—the slaves in the colonies—did not participate equally or directly in the British Isles. The majority of participants in the social movement—including the founders of the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, the members who signed the petitions, and the consumers who boycotted such goods as sugar and rum—were white British nationals. It involved at best a *representation* *of* slaves rather than a *contention by* slaves. Slaves did not have an equal opportunity to demonstrate directly their own moral worth and commitment to the British slave traders. As I explain below, this is better understood as a form of communitarian reasoning, rather than as the democratic reasoning described by Anderson.

One might argue, however, that I have underestimated the role of slaves, fugitive slaves, emancipated slaves, and other people raced as black, who stood in direct contention of slavery in the trans-Atlantic British empire.[[23]](#footnote-23) Slave uprisings in the colonies and resistance on slave ships won the hearts and minds of some ex-seamen and ex-slaveholders, who later became activists. Furthermore, many arguments made by British abolitionists relied on their interviews or other personal encounters with ex-slaves.

However, such an objection misses my point here. There certainly was a broadly democratic moral reasoning in the more geographically and temporally extended British empire. But Anderson’s object of study is the abolitionist social movement. Slaves and other subjugated people have rebelled throughout history: this rebellion was not limited to the crucial twenty years of this particular social movement (1787–1807). Democratic moral reasoning alone cannot explain the breakthrough. One might respond by citing slaves’ participation in the social movement itself. Ex-slaves Ottobah Cugoano, Olaudah Equiano and others formed the abolitionist group, the Sons of Africa. Their works helped refute claims about the inherent slavishness or incapacity of slaves.[[24]](#footnote-24) Their contribution should of course be acknowledged, but black abolitionists remained a minority in the movement. Unless we are ready to do violence to the idea of “equal” participation, their participation cannot be meaningfully called democratic. More importantly, if, as Anderson herself suggests, unity is a definitive feature of social movements, then black abolitionists’ participation does not fit the description. Black abolitionists were not trying to unite with British abolitionists or Britons as one voice. For example, Cugoano did not self-identify as British in his works, but instead identified himself clearly as “African.”[[25]](#footnote-25) His commitment to the abolition of slavery, which was more radical than the abolition of the slave trade, also made him an outlier in the movement.[[26]](#footnote-26) A better way to acknowledge slave participation is not to conflate it with the social movement, but to explain how the two worked in tandem.

Not only is the democratic element of Anderson’s story missing, the “moral” element is also mischaracterized. According to her interpretation, the public apathy before the movement was an indication of moral unreflectiveness, and this unreflectiveness was in turn a result of the self-serving bias relating to the power that Britons enjoyed over slaves. Anderson claims that repeated petitions, large-scale boycotts, rhetorical speeches, and sensational poetry successfully triggered “moral reflection” among the unreflective masses. The use of testimonies vividly informed an ignorant public of the brutality of slavery. Anderson’s evidence is the personal story of John Newton, a former captain on slave ships, who witnessed the evils of cruelty for decades but did not have any scruples about this until the abolitionists confronted him.

But Newton’s story does not demonstrate that the social movement functioned as a vehicle of collective moral learning. First, it has been argued (albeit contentiously) that Newton transformed his moral conviction before the movement began.[[27]](#footnote-27) He broke his silence in 1788 by publishing a pamphlet repenting his sinful involvement and giving an eyewitness account of cruelty on ships. But daring to speak up against a prevailing social norm is not the same as changing one’s private conviction. Second, while it is highly probable that people like Newton, who benefited directly from the trade, suffered moral blindness as a result of self-serving bias, there is little historical evidence to suggest that this also applied to the wider public . In fact, a closer look at the historical record reveals that the sort of moral error Anderson has in mind did not actually exist. Drawing on historian Seymour Drescher, Anderson herself acknowledges that self-serving moral distortion was not the primary factor motivating British pro-slavery interests and the wider public during the social movement.[[28]](#footnote-28) Unlike their American counterparts, Britons with pro-slavery interests did not resort to unsound moral arguments—such as “slaves are unfit for freedom”—to rationalize the slave trade. Racist ideology lacked moral authority in the British Parliament in the early nineteenth century.[[29]](#footnote-29) Those with pro-slavery interests shunned questions of morality and justice and focused instead on British economic interests in sustaining the trade. Human bondage and suffering offended both secular and religious sentiments.[[30]](#footnote-30) As Adam Hochschild (whom Anderson cites) remarks, eighteenth century British attitudes included a combination of “scorn,” “condescension,” “kindness,” and, most predominantly, a “naïve, puzzled curiosity about people who looked so different.”[[31]](#footnote-31)

By now it should be clear that the obstacle to moral progress to the case of British slave trade was not the failure of moral reasoning. The British public knew that slavery was evil long before the abolitionist movement began. The case further shows that moral reasoning was insufficient for moral progress. Knowledge of the wrongness of slavery was met with public apathy. I will argue later that apathy is not symptomatic of interests-based bias but of parochial reasons and sentiments rooted in social norms.

In places, Anderson acknowledges the role of social norms. She says,

Even after most individuals are persuaded that slavery is wrong, that is not enough to change habits of conduct underwritten by shared expectations and attitudes.[[32]](#footnote-32)

However, in her work on moral progress, Anderson says very little about the nature of these shared expectations. Citing Margaret Gilbert, Anderson briefly explains that these shared expectations are generated by the social norms of a group which obligate its members to act in accordance with them on the condition that other members do too.[[33]](#footnote-33) These shared expectations obstruct moral progress when they conflict and override individual private moral convictions:

Collective moral beliefs are sustained by reciprocal expectations, an individual can privately dissentwhile still participating in the practices that sustain the belief for the group. Hence, merely changing an individual’s mind through moral argument need not change the collective belief. Furthermore, individuals may resist acting on their personal conclusions because a belief is held collectively.[[34]](#footnote-34)

But this introduces a new puzzle for moral progress in general. In what do these shared expectations or social norms consist? How do they relate to power and morality? Why do individuals feel compelled to follow their peers for the worse?

Anderson sometimes suggests that people trust their peers’ judgment over their own.[[35]](#footnote-35) But why would they deem their peers more reliable than themselves? If they are seeking moral guidance, shouldn’t they seek it from the oppressed or perhaps from moral philosophers? Is this some sort of parochial bias, with people tending to care about the opinion of their peers simply because they are *their* peers? Or are we guided by self-serving bias, since we can benefit from conforming to the status quo? Anderson does not address these questions.

Social norms also introduce a new puzzle for the case of British abolition in particular. What were the social norms at stake that silenced the majority of Britons? And what reasons were given by British abolitionists to persuade their fellow Britons to abandon or change these social norms? If those reasons were not new moral reasons, what reasons were they? Instead of addressing these puzzles, Anderson subsumes the problem of social norms into one of the self-serving bias of power.[[36]](#footnote-36) The consequence is unfortunate. Having misdiagnosed the problem as one of biased moral reasoning rather than social norms, she then offers the wrong remedy: namely, democratic moral reasoning. But as we have seen, the British abolitionist movement is not described accurately through her model of democratic moral inquiry. And we are still left without any account of how to remedy harmful social norms. Before I propose the remedy of “We”-reasoning for social norms, we must first have a better understanding of social norms, to which I will now turn.

**3. Social Norms as Obstacles to Moral Progress**

As the British abolition of the slave trade illustrates, a complete account of moral progress must explain how progress was obstructed by social norms. In this section, drawing on Gilbert’s joint commitment account of social norms, I claim that social norms constitute a distinct form of normativity grounded in “We”-identity and reason. The ought of sociality extends beyond the ought of prudence and stops short of the ought of morality.[[37]](#footnote-37) Anderson agrees with this description of social norms.[[38]](#footnote-38) However, I believe she misses the full implications of this analysis for the issue of moral progress. In particular, she ignores that these “social oughts” can trump “moral oughts.” This conflict between social and moral normativity, I argue, is the fundamental obstacle that social norms present to moral progress, and it is a conflict that admits no easy solution.

**Social Norms as Social Oughts**

In Gilbert’s view, a social norm is a principle of action jointly committed to (or accepted by) a group with respect to how one is to act in certain situations.[[39]](#footnote-39) The group has jointly committed to a principle when each individual member has expressed “readiness to be bound” with all other individual members of the group and this becomes common knowledge for all members.[[40]](#footnote-40) The readiness to be bound need not explicitly come in the form of a voluntary agreement. It can be implied from one’s continued behavioral conformity.[[41]](#footnote-41) Furthermore, norms are essentially “collectivity-involving.” A group that develops a norm through jointly committing their wills becomes by that very fact a “collectivity,” a “We.”[[42]](#footnote-42) In the situations where the principle governs, individual members are obligated to set aside their “I”-perspective and act from a “We”-perspective. This “We”-perspective constituted by the joint commitment is the source of normativity. It does not merely engender shared *predictive* expectations of conformity among members. It engenders shared *normative* expectations.[[43]](#footnote-43) In other words, members do not merely expect that one another *would* conform but that *we* *should*. The shared normative expectations are even authoritative, functioning as “sufficient reason to perform conforming actions.”[[44]](#footnote-44) They do not simply provide an additional consideration for the subject to weigh in the balance of reasons, but are taken to be conclusive. Consider the norm of wearing black to funerals. I do not feel that it is up to me to choose to wear red to funerals; I feel that I ought to wear black. Conformity is obligated by one’s acceptance of the norm.

Gilbert’s obligation view contrasts sharply with the conventional Lewisian view of social norms. The latter holds that social norms are *oughts of prudence*. As such, they are mere conventions created by individual rational agents to solve coordination problems, e.g. driving on one side of the road. They are nothing more than behavioral regularity accompanied by the predictive expectations of conformity, i.e. the beliefs about what one *would* do in the situation. They do not engender normative expectations of conformity, i.e. beliefs about what one *should* do in the situation. There is no preemptive obligation to conform to oughts of prudence. I conform if and only if it serves my self-interest.

This Lewisian account clearly fails to explain conformity to norms which are against our immediate self-interest (e.g. Female Genital Cutting, recycling, queuing). Some have sought to understand conformity in such circumstances in terms of the self-interest of avoiding social sanctions (e.g. social criticism, social exclusion). While social pressure may indeed play a role, it cannot account for this phenomenon entirely. First, not all social norms carry social sanctions, although most of them do. Second, we conform to social norms even if social sanctions are unlikely. Imagine a situation where there is no one around, and you are tempted to throw a plastic bottle into the garbage bin instead of finding a recycling bin. You might hesitate to do it because you feel ashamed of violating the social norm, not because you will be ostracized for violating it. More importantly, why would we care to impose sanctions and enforce them on others if we did not care about the social norm in the first place? Social sanctions can only function to stabilize a new social norm or to maintain it at the margins.[[45]](#footnote-45)

So, for Gilbert, the “ought” of social norms is different from a merely prudential ought. Gilbert also distinguishes the ought of sociality from the ought of morality. Although both are sources of authoritative reasons, the former is distinguished from the latter by two pertinent features, which she labels “content-independence” and “directedness.”[[46]](#footnote-46) I think these terms are potentially misleading, so I will relabel them as “expectation-dependence” and “membership-dependence.” Let me explain.

In Gilbert’s view, social norms are “content-independent” because they bind irrespective or their rightness or wrongness. Social norms can be morally desirable (e.g. recycling, queuing, gift-giving), morally benign (e.g. wearing black at funerals, shaking hands with acquaintances), or immoral (e.g. mutilating genitals, eating animals, corruption). What produces all of these social norms, despite their differing moral content, is their ground: joint acceptance. For example, the validity of the norm of wearing black to funerals is irreducible to the merits of wearing black at funerals. If a member of the community is required to offer a justification, it is perfectly reasonable for her to say: that is the socially acceptable thing to do. By contrast, moral norms are content-dependent. You cannot have a valid moral norm requiring cruelty, slavery or domination. Even if a criminal gang has jointly accepted among themselves that killing each other for fun is appropriate, it does not become a valid moral norm. If a member is required to offer a justification for killing someone for fun, it is not sufficient for her to say: it is socially acceptable.

One might object to the plausibility of the content-independence thesis. The moral content almost always explains, at least in part, why a group accepts a principle of action.[[47]](#footnote-47) If true, social norms are not entirely distinct from moral norms. Consider the norms of group honor. Many groups confer status to those members who comply with the particular honor codes the groups accept. But groups rarely accept honor codes they consider grossly immoral. It would otherwise be difficult to maintain a high level of self-regard. Not only do social norms usually have to pass through a moral filter as in the case of group honor, they often instantiate moral values. Consider the norm of FGM. Sudanese women practiced FGM not only because it was socially accepted, but also because it expressed the moral virtue of female chastity.

While this objection to the content-independence thesis is forceful, it does not demonstrate that social norms are indistinguishable from moral norms. Social norms can still be distinguished from moral norms, even if we reject the content-independence thesis, because social norms are, typically, *expectation-dependent*, whereas moral norms are, typically, expectation-independent. Moral norms such as those against murder and rape are justified without any reference to expectations of reciprocity.[[48]](#footnote-48) The fact that more people accept murder or rape can never justify the act. The validity of moral norms is determined solely by objective moral principles. In contrast, even those social norms with moral content are typically expectation-dependent. For example, honor codes might need to pass through a moral filter, but that moral filter does not occupy all the normative space. It is up to the groups in question to fill in the rest of the space with their parochial reasons. A nation can choose to pride itself on prosperity or humanitarianism. The citizens’ expectations are sufficient reason to choose one over another, although objectively speaking, either option is equally fit for the purpose. For those social norms instantiating moral values, it is again up to groups to determine how to instantiate them. Consider FGMC again. Even though it is grounded in part on the moral virtue of chastity, the abstract moral virtue of chastity under-determines what particular practice is the most appropriate expression of it. There might well be other reasonable alternatives (e.g. foot-binding) to express chastity, but Sudanese expectations of reciprocal conformity to FG was sufficient reason for the Sudanese to adopt FG. Therefore, social norms can be content-dependent and still distinguishable from moral norms due to their expectation-dependence.

Another distinct feature of social norms, Gilbert rightly argues, is directedness. Social norms are directional in the sense that the obligation to conform is incurred by members of the joint commitment and owed specifically to co-members of it. As such, social norms are membership-dependent. The reasons to conform are “We”-reasons and not everyone’s reasons. They are from “us” to “us.” For example, the Chinese commitment to foot-binding as an expression of beauty and class honor created an obligation to conform only for the Chinese. The Chinese did not expect foreigners to bind their feet, and nor did foreigners feel the obligation to do so. By contrast, moral norms are universal in the sense that the obligation to conform to the requirement of morality is incurred by being a member of the moral community and owed specifically to all members of the moral community. For example, if a Chinese person murders a foreigner in China, she is liable to moral censure by anyone, Chinese or not.

One may object that the membership-dependence is subject to counterexamples. Consider the norm against nudity in Australia. It is a joint commitment of Australians but its application is not limited to Australians: tourists would surely be criticized by Australians for going naked. One way to think about such cases is that the ground of criticism is different. If an Australian goes naked, she is socially wrong by virtue of her membership of the joint commitment against nudity. She should have recognized it. If a tourist goes naked, she is morally wrong in virtue of the universal principle of respect. There may be moral reasons for all individuals to respect the “We”-reasons of others—for example, there may be reasons to comply with another culture’s code about appropriate dress at funerals—even if one does not understand the “We”-reasons for this code.[[49]](#footnote-49)

**An Obstacle to Progress: Social Oughts Trump Moral Oughts**

In short, social norms are: (a) matters of social, not just prudential, ought; (b) expectation-dependent; and (c) membership-dependent. Since social norms are distinct from moral norms on this account, an important implication is that social norms can potentially conflict with moral norms. In her work on moral progress, Anderson has offered a compelling account of how powerful individuals distort moral reasoning to fit with their selfish desires. But the psychology of power is only one obstacle to moral progress. The normativity of sociality is another. Anderson has failed to consider how groups of “We” can conform to social norms in violation of moral reasons, not because of selfishness, but due to parochial reasons. Our path to moral progress is rife with conflict between these two sources of normativity.

Consider foot-binding, a practice in Imperial China that crippled girls for a thousand years. As Anthony Appiah shows, many parents—as individuals—knew that it was cruel to bind their daughter’s feet.[[50]](#footnote-50) The practice was even illegal. Yet the social norms of chastity and class honor at the time held that small feet were a symbol of beauty, chastity, and wealth. Most parents acted in accordance with “We”-reasons for beauty, chastity, and wealth against moral reasons of humanity. Their decision was conscious, and not based on unreflective habits of reasoning. The parents had moral reasons to not bind their daughters’ feet, but the moral reasons were overridden by “We”-reasons to act as a “Chinese elite” and “good parent” and to affirm their identity as such. Nowadays, even in the liberal West, individual parents know that free play away from adults is important for children’s social and emotional development. Yet parents conform to the parental norm against free play. They fear that by failing to act in accordance to “We”-reasons, they would be judged by other parents to be an “un-We-reasonable” parent.[[51]](#footnote-51)

Consider racism. To be sure, power has obstructed progress on racial equality. But one may be surprised by the extent to which sociality has played a role, too. Cass Sunstein provides a telling example.[[52]](#footnote-52) During the Jim Crow era, many profit-making companies such as restaurants and hotels adopted racist policies. One might think that this is an example of moral beliefs being distorted by self-interest. In fact, however, they had neither a moral commitment to, nor a self-interest in, discrimination. They could have made more money if they had been prepared to serve anyone who was willing to pay. In Sunstein’s term, they had a hidden “antecedent preference” not to discriminate, yet they acted otherwise in public. Why? Racism was a social norm of racial honor at the time. Whites were expected by fellow whites to refuse to serve blacks. Any whites who violated this shared expectation would appear to their fellow whites as disloyal, or greedy for blacks’ money. Some of these racist restaurants and hotels later in fact lobbied vigorously for the Civil Rights Act of 1964 that forbade discrimination on the basis of race. As Sunstein aptly puts it, social norms produce “divisions in the self”: “people act and talk publicly in ways that are different from how they actually think, or from how they act and talk privately.”[[53]](#footnote-53) Our social self, moral self, and selfish ego can all diverge, and when they do, we often tend to prioritize the social self above morality and self-interest.

Christopher Freiman, in his article “Why be immoral?,” examines a range of immoral practices, including the Nazi execution of soldiers and Zimbardo’s Stanford Prison Experiment, in which participants playing the role of “guards” tortured those playing the role of “prisoners.”[[54]](#footnote-54) Contrary to common assumptions, some did not enjoy it; they even felt that they had to act contrary to what they wanted. Nor did they have anything to gain. They also had the choice to cease. The prosaic reason for these moral crimes was simply that they could not violate the expectations of their peers. They had to live up to the expectations of a “good” soldier, a “good” guard, etc. Here again, “We”-reasons outweighed both selfish desires and moral reasons.

Can the puzzling apathy of early eighteenth century Britons toward slavery be explained by such conflicting normativity? I think so. As I have suggested above, the public’s apathy to slavery was not rooted in self-serving moral rationalization. To be sure, sugar colonies were economically critical to British well-being. But it would be an oversimplification to think that the practice of slave trading was merely a prudential ought. Instead, it was a social ought rooted in the British honor code of the time.[[55]](#footnote-55) Before the 1770s, Britons were jointly committed to a very different conception of what it meant to be an honorable Briton. It was defined, in Drescher’s words, by “sanctity of private property, the economic value of slave labor, and the national interests in sustaining valuable Atlantic trades and products.”[[56]](#footnote-56) It is important to emphasize that this conception of national honor reflects not only the expectations of those with pro-slavery interests, but the majority of Britons. Robert Bisset, a Scottish writer at the time remarked,

Not merchants only, and planters, but the statesmen and lawgivers of England, sanctioned the idea that Negroes might be subjects of property, and that it was both expedient and necessary to employ them; the whole nation agreed in the same opinion; and at the same period of an ardent zeal for English freedom, no opponent of arbitrary power ever questioned the justice of Negro slavery.[[57]](#footnote-57)

The slave trade was socially accepted as a necessary evil in the service of national prosperity. Prosperity was valued not for its own sake, as if it were merely prudential that individual Britons supported the trade, but rather, it was valued for the greater glory of the British empire. The value of national glory gave the British-We a reason to support the trade.[[58]](#footnote-58) Britons also felt obligated to defend the sanctity of free trade, which they believed to be enshrined by English law and custom. These “We”-reasons trumped moral reasons, because the British cherished an identity as glorious and freeborn Britons over an identity as conscientious individuals. The absence of public objection was evidence of the strength of this joint commitment to national honor. True, the Quakers freed slaves in private and objected to slavery in their circles. But their opposition gave no We-reason to other Britons to change the norm. The Quakers appealed to religious grounds, talked only to their peers, and adopted manners and a way of life that few Britons shared.[[59]](#footnote-59) They were ridiculed as rebels.

This suggests that, if we wish to achieve moral progress in cases where moral obligations conflict with social obligations, we need to think about how to change these social obligations. We need to effectively intervene in the space of “social reasons,” and not just in the space of moral reasons. I will explore some possibilities in the final section. However, I will first consider an alternative solution to the conflict of normativities—namely, that we should simply reject the idea that social norms have any genuine normative force.

**Subordinating “We”-reason to Moral Reason?**

I stated above that social norms generate “social oughts” that are distinct from both prudential self-interest and moral oughts. But should we really feel any sense of obligation to comply with social norms? Some people deny this. For example, Freiman argues that sociality—our tendency to conform to peer expectations—is a form of servility. Fellow-feeling is an enemy to morality and we should weaken it.[[60]](#footnote-60) For some, the conflict between sociality and morality is simply fictitious. Cristina Bicchieri, for example, thinks that social norms are merely “felt” to be important, but do not in fact enjoy deep normative foundation.[[61]](#footnote-61) As such, so-called “We”-reasons are merely motivating reasons. Moral reasons are the only genuine normative reasons for acting.

But it is not clear why social norms cannot carry normative force. Following Anderson and others, I argue that social norms are value-reflecting reasons. “We”-reasons are reasons reflecting the value grounded in social relationships, identities, and meaning. Joint commitment is normatively significant because joint commitment constitutes and expresses who “We” are and what “our” perspectives are, and without this our life would be void of meaning and values. Anderson herself acknowledges this link between reasons and social identities. She writes,

To count as a reason for action, a consideration must appeal to a person’s self-understanding…It must fit in to her understanding of her identity. Most people’s identities are largely, although not exclusively, constituted by their membership in social groups or collective agents.[[62]](#footnote-62)

To decide what to do, we must appeal to our identity as a citizen of a state, an employee of a firm, a member of a church, or a relative in a family. Each group is jointly committed to different principles of action. The principles of action embody the shared intentions and values of all members. By affirming these shared intentions and values, we are able to express meaningfully our social identities as a citizen, an employee, a member of a church, a parent. These shared intentions and values are the “We”-reasons for action.

In a similar spirit, Brennan, Eriksson, Goodin and Southwood argue that the value of a social relationship grounds the reason for the members to affirm the norm, and constitutes and expresses their membership.[[63]](#footnote-63) To use Brennan et al.’s examples, Oxford dons obey the social norm of passing port to the left not simply because it avoids their running into each other; and Australians obey the social norm against beach nudity not simply because of the valuable consequences of refraining from nudity. They do so because it embodies a standard that, through identification, obligation or habituation, they have come to accept. It is their practice, their standard, and reflects their identity. Conformity to norms makes and unites a group. Only by identifying oneself as a member of a group can one experience a sense of solidarity, belonging, and trust.[[64]](#footnote-64)

I should note that Brennan et al. do not think that these “We”-reasons grounded in valuable social practices and identities can override moral reasons. They assert that social norms are only *prima facie* reasons to act. As such, “We”-reasons ought to be overridden if they stand in the way of moral progress.[[65]](#footnote-65) But this lexical priority is far from self-evidently true. Is being a righteous man always more important than being a patriot or a loving parent? I think we should at least contemplate the incommensurability of moral values and social values. The value of group belonging is fundamental for parochial beings like us. If the conflict is genuine, then we face a standoff between promoting sociality and morality. By promoting sociality, we promote the membership goods, such as group cohesion, social trust, fellow-feeling and national honor, that are embodied in joint commitment. But at the same time, we risk promoting the potentially immoral content that underlines these membership goods.

Given these considerations, it may be fruitful to explore an alternative way out. Instead of subordinating “We”-reasons to moral reasons, we can try instead to embed moral reasons into “We”-reasons. Instead of reasoning from an impartial standpoint and then filling out the content of social norms from a parochial standpoint, I offer a bottom-up approach: I begin from the parochial standpoint and then fit moral content into our social norms.

**4. “We”-reasoning Our Way to Moral Progress**

The preceding discussion has shown that the evils of social norms cannot be subsumed into the evils of power. Power distorts moral oughts for the powerful via self-serving bias. By contrast, social norms operate to trump moral oughts via peer expectations. If true, it is the peer expectations, and not (or not only) the biased reasoning of the powerful, that we need to change. Anderson does not give us a remedy specific to immoral peer expectations. In this final section, I propose one. Using the logic of joint commitment, I propose a distinctly communitarian account of collective reasoning, namely “We”-reasoning, that is “from us to us about us.” To illustrate how it can change unjust social norms, and change them in a way that democratic moral reasoning alone cannot, I apply it to the case of the British slave trade. While the account of “We”-reasoning outlined here is by no means complete, I hope it is enough to motivate further research on a new form of collective reasoning that serves both morality and sociality.

Let me begin by noting certain similarities between “We”-reasoning and Anderson’s model of democratic moral reasoning. First, they are both deliberative in form, involving the exchanging of reasons and evidence. Participants in “We”-reasoning make claims to each other to show why a practice is compliant, or non-compliant, with their joint commitments. Similarly, participants in democratic moral reasoning make claims to each other to show why a practice is compliant, or non-compliant, with moral principles. Also, both can be contentious in form. Just as democratic moral reasoning can involve protests and resistance, so too can “We”-reasoning. When one of us betrays our joint commitment, we can hold that person accountable by shaming them, or even excluding them from our community. What distinguishes “We”-reasoning from democratic moral reasoning is typically its *structure* and *content.*

The structure of “We”-reasoning is communitarian and not necessarily democratic. The reason for this distinction is that social normativity, unlike moral normativity, is membership-dependent. Recall that moral norms (e.g. the norm against murder) obligate everyone and the obligation to conform is owed to everyone. Any moral subject can be affected, and anyone who is affected has a stake in the proper interpretation and application of the relevant moral norm: one’s group membership is irrelevant to one’s equal moral standing *qua* moral subjecthood. By contrast, social norms (e.g. the norm of FGMC) obligate members, and the obligation to conform is owed to co-members. Only members have a stake in the joint commitment, and thus have social standing to contest how it is to be interpreted or re-interpreted, or how it has been fulfilled or compromised.

Put differently, to change a social norm, reasons must come “from us.” Indeed, in many cases of successful social norm change, “norm entrepreneurs”—a term often used in the literature to refer to those individuals or sub-groups who envision grounds for change and are willing to lead the change—are often trusted members of the referent community.[[66]](#footnote-66) Reasons must also be addressed “to us.” It makes no sense to address “We”-reasons to non-members, unless you seek to invite them into your community. So even if our unjust social norm affects non-members, it does not entitle them to address us or to be addressed by us. This is why “We”-reasoning can be undemocratic. Of course, the affected have the moral standing to challenge immorality, but they do not have the social standing to challenge our joint commitment.

I concede that this possible curtailment of participation on the grounds of social standing is a serious limit to “We”-reasoning. If all members of a community are ignorant of the immorality of their joint commitment or are not courageous enough to speak up against the status quo, there is no built-in impetus for change.[[67]](#footnote-67) Under these circumstances, democratic moral reasoning may be required to supplement communitarian “We”-reasoning. But this concession simply reinforces my overall argument that we need both types of reasoning: multiple obstacles to moral progress require multiple remedies, as was the case with British abolitionism.

Another distinctive feature of “We”-reasoning is its content. The content of “We”-reasoning must be sharable expectations from a “We”-perspective. This is due to the fact that social normativity is expectation-dependent. What could be the possible “We”-reasons for changing an unjust social norm? Here are some possibilities. It could be that a practice has deviated from our shared expectation(s). It could also be that circumstances have changed so that that a practice can no longer express the shared value or meaning of the group. Another possibility is that a practice was a result of misinterpretation of the shared meaning or value of a particular joint commitment, or the relative ranking of joint commitments.

This content-restriction applies even when social norms have clear moral content. Say, for example, new moral knowledge invalidates the moral content of the social norm. Even in this case, it is insufficient for a norm entrepreneur to simply explain how it is immoral. She must also explain why being immoral matters to us, how it fails to express what we value or mean. “We”-reasoning is always “about us.”

This requirement to refer always to pre-existing shared expectations from the “We”-perspective is missing in democratic moral reasoning, since moral normativity is expectation-independent. As explained, moral normativity is not determined by whether a practice is or is not expected by the members of a group. Only moral reasons grounded in valid moral principles have normative force.

Although the account of “We”-reasoning sketched above is rough, it has great explanatory power as to how unjust social norms are changed in practice. To illustrate, I will apply it to the case of the British abolition of the slave trade.

**Solving the Puzzle: Why the British Slave Trade Ended**

As we have seen, Anderson’s account of democratic moral reasoning fails to describe and explain the success of the British abolitionist social movement, which neither followed her model of democratic contention, nor corrected moral error. In my view, “We”-reasoning offers a better description of what happened. Furthermore, I argue that the definitive features of social movements, i.e. unity, numbers, worth, and commitment, are features of “We”-reasoning. British abolitionists were successful because they gave compelling “We”-reasons to Britons to redefine the social norm of British honor.

Contra Anderson, I argue that the structure of the movement was communitarian rather than democratic. Claims were not addressed by the powerless slaves to the powerful slavers. Rather, claims were addressed by Britons to Britons. The Quakers learned from their earlier mistakes and left behind their religious identity as they formed the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade. Instead of holding themselves out as rebels against British norms, these norm entrepreneurs addressed themselves as Britons in writing and speaking. As historian David Davis notes, the group further enhanced their social standing when speaking to Britons by deferring to Parliamentary leadership, so that they were seen as “patriots” rather than the “independent” or the “defiant.”[[68]](#footnote-68) They also tried to undermine the standing of the planters and merchants by implying they were “foreigners,” calling them “colonials” and the West Indies “dominions.” Indeed, the abolitionists demonstrated “worth” in the social movement, as Anderson notes. But this “worth” was not the moral standing or dignity of the slaves but their own social standing, their ability and willingness to meet the joint commitments of Britons. The movement fostered a sense of “unity,” but this was not unity based on the democratic contention of slaves against slavers. It was, rather, unity based on the community of Britons. A vast number of poems and pamphlets published during the movement were addressed distinctly to a united identity, i.e. “Britons,” and not just to any person of conscience, or particular class or religion.[[69]](#footnote-69) A united British “We” was crucial to “We”-reasoning because it provided a shared parochial standpoint from which Britons could reason together.

British abolitionists did not rely on expectation-*independent* moral reasons (e.g. the evils of slavery) alone to convince Britons to end the slave trade. They offered mainly expectation-*dependent* “We”-reasons to Britons: namely, that the practice of slave trading violated British joint commitment to national honor, and was therefore un-We-reasonable. Both the abolitionists and those with pro-slavery interests agreed that freedom defined British honor, and they held themselves out as patriotic defenders of British freedom. The point of contention was therefore the proper interpretation of freedom. For the pro-slavery interests, freedom meant freedom of trade. Chattel slavery was thus justified by the absolute ownership right to use and transfer private property. On the contrary, for the abolitionists, freedom meant freedom from arbitrary power. The unchecked power of one person (i.e. the master) over another (i.e. the slave) was antithetical to freedom. But how did the abolitionists prove they had the “truly British” interpretation? Democratic moral reasoning could not help here. The African understanding of freedom was not identical to the British understanding of freedom. Abolitionists therefore sought the support of a source that was seen as highly authoritative amongst the British “We”: namely, the Court. Granville Sharp brought a case before Lord Mansfield, the father of English commercial law, regarding the right of a slave owner to deport his fugitive slave back to the colony. Mansfield ruled that no man could be rendered property under English law. The ruling bolstered the abolitionists’ case. The British public took Mansfield to declare that slavery was a colonial innovation and a corruption of English law and tradition. The sort of freedom to which the British were truly committed, and in which they took pride, could not be the freedom to trade humans.[[70]](#footnote-70) With the frame of “We”-reasoning, we can see that British abolitionists did not “stimulate moral conscience and moral reflection” of the British public. Rather, they stimulated a communal reflection of national honor. By reinterpreting British freedom, which in turn redefined the norm of British honor, freeborn Britons had “We”-reasons to shame and exclude those who violated it, namely, the disgraceful colonials.

In addition, British abolitionists argued that Britons’ joint commitment to humanitarianism outweighed their commitment to avarice and class interest.[[71]](#footnote-71) Before the movement, humanitarianism was not embedded in the norm of national honor. It was a mere expectation-independent moral reason of individuals. It was therefore easily overridden by the expectation-dependent “We”-reason to uphold national prosperity. Through rhetoric and petitions, British abolitionists successfully weaved humanitarianism into British joint commitments, turning it into a shared expectation of Britons. Sharp did not just call slavery a sin but “a national sin,” reflecting poorly on the mother country.[[72]](#footnote-72) Hannah More’s *Slavery, A Poem* (1788) did not just criticize oppression and tyranny, but claimed that oppression and tyranny caused by avarice insulted her readers’ beloved Empire.[[73]](#footnote-73) Through and through, British abolitionists reasoned from the parochial perspective of Britons. British abolitionists did not argue that humanity trumped British honor. Rather, they argued that British honor was violated by inhumanity. And it was the demand of British honor, not the demand of morality alone, that moved millions to boycott sugar and rum and add their names to the petitions. Numbers matter here, because they are solid proof that British abolitionists’ expectation to end the slave trade was widely shared.

It is important to emphasize again that in this case—and in other such cases—democratic moral reasoning worked in tandem with “We”-reasoning. Without the ongoing slave resistance which taught whites that a black was also “a man and a brother,” Mansfield would not have decided that fugitive slaves deserved freedom under English law because they were persons, not things. Without moral reasoning that slavery is evil and inhumane, there might not be a reason to reflect on British honor. But moral reasoning was not enough. The moral knowledge that slavery was wrong was already present before the 1770s. More was needed to translate such moral learning into the grammar of British society. “We”-reasoning, in the form of social movements, performed this task. Perhaps, for the leaders of the abolitionist movement, their reasoning was primarily moral. But for the majority of Britons, their reason for joining the movement was fundamentally patriotic.

**Conclusion**

This paper is an answer to calls by Anderson and other non-ideal theorists of moral progress to move beyond pure reasoning. They are right to claim that pure reasoning is too feeble to correct biases rooted in power. But they have neglected the fact that even democratic moral reasoning is too weak to overcome the parochial reasons and sentiments rooted in social norms. “We”-reasoning, as I have shown, is also necessary. To improve our collective thought and action, the powerful need to learn from the oppressed. But the moral lessons must also infiltrate into the social grammar of communal life. And, for the latter task, the burden falls on the members of the powerful group themselves.

1. I’m grateful to Bob Goodin, Will Kymlicka, Jared Houston, and three anonymous referees for their very helpful comments on earlier versions of this article. Thanks are also due to the audiences at the MANCEPT workshop on Social Norms (2016) and the Summer School of Social Epistemology, Autonomous University of Madrid (2017) where versions of this article were presented, and in particular to Emily McTernan and Sandy Goldberg for their comments on those occasions.

   For proponents of this view, see Peter Singer, *The Expanding Circle: Ethics, Evolution, and Moral Progress* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011); and Dale Jamieson, “Slavery, Carbon, and Moral Progress,” *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 20 (2017), 169–83. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In this paper, I use “power” and “interests” interchangeably. For accounts of epistemology of power, see Elizabeth Anderson, “The Social Epistemology of Morality: Learning from the Forgotten History of the Abolition of Slavery,” in *The Epistemic Life of Groups*, ed. Miranda Fricker and Michael Brady (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 75–94; Elizabeth Anderson, "Moral Bias and Corrective Practices: A Pragmatist Perpsective,” *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association,* 89 (2015), 21–47; Elizabeth Anerson, "Social Movements, Experiments in Living, and Moral Progress: Case Studies from Britain's Abolition of Slavery,” *The Lindley Lecture*, University of Kansas, Feb 11, 2014; Allen Buchanan and Russell Powell, *The Evolution of Moral Progress: A Biocultural Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Rainer Forst, "Noumenal Power,” *Journal of Political Philsophy*, 23 (2015), 111–27; Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); and Kai Spiekermann, "Four Types of Moral Wriggle Room: Uncovering Mechanisms of Racial Discrimination,” in *The* *Epistemic Life of Groups*, ed. Michael Brady and Miranda Fricker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 173–90. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Alison Jaggar and Theresa Tobin, “Naturalizing Moral Justification: Rethinking the Method of Moral Epistemology,” *Metaphilosophy* 44 (2013), 409–39; Alison Jaggar and Theresa Tobin, “Situating Moral Justification: Rethinking the Mission of Moral Epistemology,” *Metaphilosophy* 44 (2013), 383–408. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Richmond Campbell and Victor Kumar, “Moral Reasoning on the Ground,” *Ethics* 122 (2012), 273–312. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Michele Moody-Adams, “Moral Progress and Human Agency,” *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 20 (2017), 153–68. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Anderson, “The Social Epistemology of Morality,” “Moral Bias,” “Social Movements.” [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Honor combines “We”-reason and moral reason in ways that I will explore later on. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Anderson, “The Social Epistemology of Morality,” 93. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid., p. 91. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid., pp. 78, 93. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid., pp. 81–3. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid*.*, pp. 89–92. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid., pp. 93–4. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Anderson, “Moral Bias,” pp. 35–6. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Anderson, “Social Epistemology of Morality,” p. 86. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Anderson, “Moral Bias,” p. 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Elizabeth Anderson, *The Imperative of Integration* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), pp. 95–9. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Anderson, “Moral Bias,” p. 38; Anderson, “Social Movements,” p. 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. See David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution 1770–1823* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Seymour ﻿Drescher, *The Mighty Experiment: Free labor versus Slavery in British Emancipation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Adam Hochschild, *Bury the Chains: Prophets and Rebels in the Fight to Free an Empire’s Slaves* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Anderson, “Social Movements,” p. 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. I thank an anonymous referee for raising this important objection. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. See Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative and Other Writings*, ed. Vincent Carretta (New York: Penguin Books, 1995); Ottobah Cugoano, *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species* (London: T. Beckett, 1787). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. See Cugoano, *Thoughts and Sentiments.* [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Hochschild, *Bury the Chains*, pp. 147–9. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Ibid., pp. 88–9. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Anderson, “Social Movement,” p. 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Kwame Anthony Appiah shows compelling historical evidence for this in Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Honor Code: How Moral Revolutions Happen* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010), pp. 110–11. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Hochschild, *Bury the Chains*,pp. 146–7. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Anderson, “Social Movements,” p. 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Ibid., pp. 3 and 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Anderson, “Moral Bias,” p. 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Ibid., p. 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Anderson, “Social Movements,” pp. 3–15. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. There are a variety of accounts of social norms that seek to capture this normativity, not all of which attach the same weight to identity as Gilbert does. See, for example, the more generic account of social norms in Geoffrey Brennan, Lina Eriksson, Robert E. Goodin and Nicholas Southwood, *Explaining Norms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). I believe that the core arguments of this paper are compatible with these other accounts. However, for the purposes of this paper, I shall focus on Gilbert’s joint commitment account, partly because it is one that Anderson herself endorses, but also because the “We”-identity reasons that Gilbert identifies help to illuminate the specific obstacles to moral progress in Anderson’s own examples. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. See “Beyond Homo Economicus: New Developments in Theories of Social Norms,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 29 (2000), 170–200, at p. 191. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Margaret Gilbert, *Joint Commitment: How We Make the Social World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 401. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. I think that the “all members” condition is too strong. “Enough of the group” would suffice. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Margaret Gilbert, *A Theory of Political Obligation: Membership, Commitment and the Bonds of Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 168. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Gilbert, *On Social Fact*, p. 377. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Margaret Gilbert, *On Social Facts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 373. In this paper, I use “shared expectations,” “social norms,” and “joint commitments” interchangeably. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Gilbert, *Joint Commitment*, p. 401. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. For a critique of the sanction view, see Anderson, “Beyond Homo Economicus,” pp. 181–4. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Gilbert, *Joint Commitment*,pp. 296–323. Brennan et al. similarly argue that social norms are distinguished from moral norms in terms of their “practice-dependent” justificatory ground. See Brennan et al., *Explaining Norms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 57–89. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. I thank an anonymous referee for the objection. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. I acknowledge some moral norms are expectation-dependent (e.g. paying tax). Hence, I say moral norms are “typically” expectation-independent to indicate the fuzzy boundary between moral and social norms. I thank two anonymous referees for helping me see the fuzziness of the boundary between two kinds of norms in practice. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. I thank an anonymous reviewer for pressing me on this point. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Appiah, *The Honor Code*,pp. 53–100. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Peter Gray, “Social Norms, Moral Judgments, and Irrational Parenting,” *Psychology Today*, Mar 19, 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Cass Sunstein, “Unleashed,” Aug 22, 2017. Available at SSRN: https://ssrn.com/abstract=3025749. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Cass Sunstein, “Social Norms and Social Roles,” *Columbia Law Review* 96 (1996), 903–68. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Christopher Freiman, “Why Be Immoral?,” *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 13 (2010), 191–205. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Appiah would agree with me on historical grounds. But he does not have an account of social norms. Nor does he think that the norm of honor offers authoritative reasons. Honor is just a motivationally sufficient emotion. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Seymour Drescher, *Abolition: A History of Slavery and Antislavery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 210. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Robert Bisset, *The History of the Negro Slave Trade*,Vol. 1 (London: W. McDowall, 1805), p. 46. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. I thank Bob Goodin for pointing out the identity-based reason in the notion of national prosperity. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Hochschild, *Bury the Chains*, pp. 92–3. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Freiman, “Why be Immoral?,” p. 197. Another solution is perhaps to universalize fellow-feeling. By joining disparate groups of “We”s into a super-ordinate “We,” fellow-feeling will be felt among all. While I cannot explore this possibility here, I think Bob Goodin for suggesting it. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. Cristina Bicchieri, “Norms, Conventions, and Power of Expectations,” in *Philosophy of Social Science*,ed. Nancy Cartwright and Eleonora Montuschi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 208–29, at p. 210. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Anderson, “Beyond Homo Economicus,” p. 192. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. See Brennan et al., *Explaining Norms*, pp. 76–81*;* Samuel Scheffler, “Membership and Political Obligation,” *Journal of Political Philosophy* 26 (2018), 3–23. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Brennan et al., *Explaining Norms*, p. 80. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. Ibid., pp. 88–9. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. For a discussion of norm entrepreneurs and the role of trust, see Cristina Bicchieri, *Norms in the Wild* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 163–207. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. I thank an anonymous reviewer for raising this worry. I address this worry elsewhere in Author, *A Case for Social Epistemic Trust* (submitted manuscript, 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. Davis, *The Problem of Slavery*,pp. 436–7. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. For literary evidence, see Srividhya Swaminatha, *Debating the Slave Trade: Rhetoric of British National Identity, 1759–1815* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), Chapter 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. Davis, *The Problem of Slavery*, pp. 377–85. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. Ibid., p. 453. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. For an account of how Sharp employed a patriotic rhetoric to incite indignation and fear in British audience, see Swaminathan, *Debating the Slave Trade*, pp. 61–76. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. For more examples of poetry of this nature, see Swaminathan, *Debating Slave Trade*, Chapter 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)