Why Moral Progress is Annoying

By Evan Westra and Daniel Kelly

Ugh.

Here you are, just trying to eat your BLT in peace, and someone at your table starts going on about being a vegan. Your eyes roll as your blood pressure rises. You wish they would just shut up.

It's not that you don't care about animal suffering. In other contexts, you actually care quite a bit – you would definitely do something if you thought a neighbor was mistreating their dog. You're a good person—an animal lover even! But it's hard to care *that* much about the ethics of meat-eating when these vegan types are just so *preachy* and *annoying*.

This is, we suspect, a very common experience. When we're told that something we see as *ordinary*—like eating meat—is actually *wrong*, our first reaction is to get irritated and dismissive. If it's not about bacon, it's about plastic straws. Or a phrase we've been using for years but that's now considered offensive. Or having to share your pronouns.

This is nothing new. In the 1990's, nascent attempts to combat casual forms of sexism, racism, and homophobia – such as calls to end so-called "ethnic parties" on a university campus or efforts to use the term "survivor" instead of "victim" when referring to people who have been sexually assaulted – were also seen as preachy and annoying, and were often derided as 'political correctness' run amok. Women complaining about sexual harassment in the workplace used to be met with a similar reaction. For instance, a 1975 article in the New York Times reported that such women were told by their employers that they were being prudish and couldn't take a joke. A 1980 article about new federal guidelines on workplace sexual harassment quotes "an indignant personnel vice president" complaining that these regulations would cause men to "be afraid to speak to a woman in the office without first speaking to a lawyer."

Today these reactions land a bit differently. Most would agree that even if those activities were once common, they were never okay. That we no longer consider them acceptable is actually a form of moral progress. It's good that we take sexual harassment in the workplace more seriously than we used to! It's a step forward that we no longer find casual homophobia funny and that we try to be more considerate when we talk about sexual violence. "Ethnic parties," it turns out, were always stupid and offensive. This all might seem obvious now, but many people at the time probably weren't expecting things to turn out this way. They listened to their guts, and their guts said "*Ugh.*"

What is happening here? Why, rather than taking the moral concerns behind social reforms seriously, do we so often respond with this kind of petulant, knee-jerk defensiveness? It's not that we don't care about right and wrong—far from it! But cases like these can feel like a far cry from the sort of moral issues that we're inclined to take seriously—you know, like murder and human rights and the like. In

fact, we seem to have an unspoken expectation that when we're confronted with genuine, true and important arguments for moral change, they'll be self-evident, easy to recognize. Probably they'll be accompanied by a flash of righteous anger, or a pang of compassion. And of course we will rise to the occasion. When we experience annoyance and irritation, though, we seem to take it as a sign that the concerns aren't that big of a deal, the arguments mere quibbles that we can safely dismiss.

Call this **eyeroll heuristic**: *if it's preachy and annoying, it's okay to ignore it.*

As philosophers who work on moral cognition, we think that the eyeroll heuristic can be a serious obstacle to moral progress. In fact, we expect that many genuinely good arguments for moral change will be initially experienced *as annoying*. Moreover, the emotional responses we feel in these situations are not, we suspect, typically produced by psychological processes that are closely tracking argument structure or responding directly to moral reasons. Instead, we think that these responses stem from psychological mechanisms that enable us to adapt to local norms—what we'll call our **norm psychology**. While this aspect of the human mind is a critical part of our facility for navigating our social world on a day-to-day basis, it can also make us resistant to social *change*—even when that change is for the better.

Let's start with a quick primer on what we mean by norms and norm psychology. Think about all the things we *could do* on a daily basis, but don't. We don't wear our underwear on the outside of our pants, we don't hold hands with strangers on the bus, we don't write work emails in iambic pentameter, and so on. Most likely, these actions would never even occur to us. But why not? There are so many possible ways we might conduct ourselves in social environments, yet in practice we don't even consider the vast majority of them. Instead, we mostly stay within the bounds of the local **norms** – the intricate fabric of social rules that structure human cultural environments, dictating which behaviors are permissible, impermissible, or obligatory. This includes everything from how we're supposed to behave in different public settings (e.g. what it's appropriate for a person to say, wear, or do while at work, school, church, on public transit) to how we're supposed to act around our friends and family members (send Mom flowers on Mother's Day, offer to help your friends when they move). Sometimes, these rules are explicit ("Don't chew gum in class!"), but very often they're implicit and unspoken (how close you should stand to a new acquaintance you're chatting with at a party, which topics you should avoid, and so on).

Our norm psychology consists in a cluster of emotional and cognitive mechanisms that helps us handle all these rules, allowing our actions to be steered by them, often effortlessly and without rising to the level of awareness. When our norm psychology is working properly, we glide through the norms in our social environment like fish swim through water, barely noticing their existence. How much do you leave for a tip? Why, 20% of course. *Of course* you don't wear shorts to a funeral. You can curse around your friends but shouldn't when you're talking to your grandmother. In familiar environments, navigating norms like these is second nature.

Of course, we sometimes notice norms. The loud talker at the table next to us in the restaurant grates on our nerves not just because they're distracting, but because they're breaking one of these hidden, unspoken rules. **Norm violations** grab our attention, and even when they are perfectly harmless, they can still trigger a flash of irritation. This is because our norm psychology tunes our emotions to our social expectations. When those expectations are met, it feels fluent and smooth. When we are

surprised by a rule breaker, we experience it as an emotional signal that something in our social environment has gone awry.

Consider another example: Alice is visiting a foreign and unfamiliar country for the first time. She is mostly loving it, relishing all the new, mind-expanding adventures she was hoping to have on her travels. She mostly finds her fish-out-of-water experiences enjoyable. She knew she was going to be a stranger in a strange land and is thrilled to learn all the little—and occasionally bigger—ways they do things differently in the new (to her) culture.

But she also notices that common activities take a lot more out of her than they do back home. Ordering at a restaurant, taking the subway, even walking down a crowded street are all opportunities to be slightly out of step with others' expectations. Even when she pulls them off without a hitch, social interactions take a lot more effort and attention. When there is a hitch, the missteps can be jarring and fraught, and by the end of many days she feels a little worn out by her clumsiness.

Alice feels discomfort because her norm psychology is **misaligned** with her social environment. The norms from her *own* culture that she has internalized and that she is naturally inclined to follow do not match the norms of the locals she is interacting with on her trip. She is normatively and socially a little out of step with the culture she is exploring.

When a person's norm psychology is out of alignment with the rules and customs around her, norms make their presence acutely felt. Alice is traveling, but her situation is not the only kind that can produce misalignment, of course. It is also the experience of the recent immigrant, yanked from familiar waters and thrust into a strange social environment where the rules are suddenly different. It can be the experience of first-generation college students learning the ropes and values of higher education. It can just be the experience of a tween staying over at a friend's house for the first time and discovering how other families have different rules than the ones he is used to at home. Moving from one social world to another throws off the predictions of our norm psychology. This, in turn, colors our experiences. Instead of fluency, we have disfluency. Anyone who has gone through this knows that it can be stressful, frustrating, and exhausting—just ask any North American tourist who has failed to look to their right when crossing a street in the UK, been cursed at by a Berlin cyclist after wandering into a bike lane or been panicked by their first encounter with a squat toilet. Call this **affective friction**.

Affective friction can also strike closer to home. Even within a culture, times change, currents shift, and old norms give way to new ones. As this happens, some individuals can find that their norm psychologies have fallen out of sync with their *own* culture. This can gradually create the same kind of misalignment that happens to travelers like Alice all at once when they arrive in a foreign country. The experience of affective friction is similar as well: a loss of fluency combined with negative emotional signals arising from the gap between social expectations and realities. Even when the difference between an old norm and a new one replacing it seems trivial, the disruptions caused by the shift can create feelings of anxiety, awkwardness – and anger.

Take, for example, recent changes in the norms surrounding pronouns. It is now standard practice in some circles for people to share their preferred pronouns, and for people who identify as nonbinary to use they/them. The cost of abiding by this relatively new norm and adopting use of people's pronouns is small – though, of course not negligible, as it can take time to break a long-entrenched

pattern in one's own behavior. But (we would argue) the benefits are of considerable moral significance. Making this minor change in how we address people is a relatively easy way of showing respect and promoting inclusivity. Still, the norms that have historically governed pronoun use are learned incredibly early, and so they are often deeply internalized in individual norm psychologies. For those who have not yet adjusted to new pronoun norms, trying to follow them can feel a bit like a North American remembering to look right for traffic instead of left while visiting the UK. A behavior that was once ordinary, fluent, and automatic is suddenly effortful and fraught – and prone to error. In short, even seemingly trivial changes in norms can be the sources of minor bursts of affective friction.

Then there's also all the ways that the **social enforcement** of norms can aggravate affective friction. Norm psychologies incline people to react disapprovingly towards whomever breaks one of these unwritten social rules. We've all had the experience of unwittingly committing a faux pas only to be abruptly corrected – or worse, *judged* – by our peers. This can feel pretty lousy. Now, on top of the awkwardness of trying to adjust to a new, unfamiliar norm, you're also embarrassed and made to feel ashamed of your mistakes. While expert familiarity with local norms is a sign that you're a member of the community, being singled out for violating a norm can make you feel alienated, like you don't belong.

This sort of experience can lead to resentment. It can sow the seeds of backlash, especially in situations where a new norm is not spreading uniformly within the community. In cases where norm diffusion is patchy, the differences between early adopters of a new norm on the one hand, and those holding onto the old norm on the other, often fall along familiar social divisions. In situations where socioeconomic status, race, age, gender, and political affiliation loom large, the activation of psychological responses sensitive to social identity and group membership can add more layers to the experience of affective friction. For example, many cases of social change split populations along generational lines. Members of an older generation run afoul of a new norm championed by younger generations, which leads to members of the younger generation correcting or even mocking their norm violating elders. In such cases, the older folks can easily slide into interpreting the norm-enforcing behaviors of the youth as a threat from a hostile outgroup. A common response in these circumstances is for those who feel under threat to commiserate and seek support from others in their own group, solidifying their bonds in the face of the perceived opposition. Once they've circled up the proverbial wagons, breaking the new norm they feel is being imposed on them – maybe especially breaking it loudly and proudly – can begin to function as what evolutionary anthropologists call an 'ethnic marker': a kind of rallying cry and public affirmation of shared group identity. Under these conditions, attempts to spread a new norm can start to backfire. When its proponents respond to violators negatively, they fail to "correct" anything. Rather, they end up further entrenching the very behavior they were attempting to discourage.

This is a dark trajectory. Misalignment creates disfluency, which leads to feelings of awkwardness and discomfort. When new norms are enforced by the community, it can add fuel to the fire, leading to feelings of embarrassment and alienation, which can deepen social divisions and quickly tip into feelings of fear, anger, and outright hostility.

This picture of norm psychology highlights several ways that norms can act as obstacles for those who seek to bring about positive moral changes in society. Often, real moral progress means

[replacing harmful norms with positive ones](#). But the characteristics of our norm psychologies that enable social fluency and effortlessness when we are aligned with our social context are the very same characteristics make them resistant to social change. Worse, the affective responses that our norm psychologies produce can contribute not just to moral recalcitrance, but to backlash. Understanding the psychology of norms is crucial for pursuing social justice.

A modest first step will be for everyone to recognize that the eyeroll heuristic we began with is deeply unreliable. The fact that some new norm strikes us as annoying, or that those advancing it strike us as self-righteous, preachy, or otherwise off-putting, tells us nothing about whether the norm is an improvement or not, whether it represents moral progress or moral backslide. The negative experience affective friction caused by the new norm isn't evidence that the norm itself is bad or that we shouldn't adopt it. Reactions involving feelings of awkwardness, irritation, and even resentment are precisely what we should expect *even in* cases where old, unjust norms are being replaced with new, fairer ones. These feelings have their roots in norm psychology. And though they are very much a reflection of the genuine challenges of adapting to new and changing social environments, they are *not* sensitive to the merits of moral arguments or the moral value of different social norms. Far from it: our norm psychology helps us to track and adapt to *whatever* norms happen to structure the social interactions in our communities and cultures. And, crucially, it does this regardless of whether those norms and conventions are just or unjust, harmful or beneficial, serious or [silly](#).

Knowing this fact about yourself should lead you to pause the next time you reflexively roll your eyes upon encountering some new, annoying norm and the changes its advocates are asking you to make. That irritation is not your bullshit detector going off. As tempting as it can be to interpret the unpleasant feelings as your moral compass ringing alarm bells, your annoyance is just a feature of your norm psychology becoming misaligned and reacting to the unfamiliar. A better response would be to treat your feelings of irritation as a cue for further reflection. Instead of simply going along with your immediate gut reaction, you can step back and take those feelings under advisement, along with any other relevant factors, and then consider whether your response is reasonable: "Is this new thing actually bad, or does it just feel that way because it's unfamiliar?"

At this point, a fair criticism of our story is that we've focused too much on the experience of the people who are largely comfortable with the status quo. For those privileged members of a community who have gotten used to enjoying advantages in virtue of their social position, social changes that are genuine instances of moral progress—new norms that reduce overall suffering or make a society more fair—are likely to be experienced not just as novel and unfamiliar but threatening to their immediate self-interest. This provides another reason to be skeptical of *their* use of the eyeroll heuristic, of course.

However, taking a different perspective, you might think that affective friction and misalignment can mean something very different for members of oppressed groups. Most of us are familiar with feelings of social awkwardness, but philosopher [Celine Leboeuf](#) calls our attention to a particularly insidious variant of it. Leboeuf suggests that in the United States, racialized individuals often experience a distinctive form of social friction – what she describes as 'bodily alienation'. After spending too much time having to navigate white spaces, non-white people can come to see themselves through the eyes of their oppressors. This bodily alienation, which LeBoeuf links to what [W.E.B. Du Bois](#) called *[double consciousness](#)*, can create feelings of awkwardness that disrupt social fluency, making it hard for racialized individuals to smoothly navigate their social environments. It can also produce feelings of anger, and

one way out of it, LeBoeuf suggests, is to draw on that very emotion. Anger can spark people to action. It can inspire racialized individuals to reject oppressive norms and motivate people to pursue justice.

LeBoeuf's account of the progressive potential of anger may appear to sit uneasily next to our story about affective friction. We've expressed skepticism about the eyeroll heuristic and argued that irritation, anger, and other negatively-valenced feelings stemming from misalignment are not reliable trackers of morality. LeBoeuf argues that anger is often a fitting response to oppressive social circumstances, one that can play an important role in changing them.

Note that the experiences of bodily alienation that drive this kind of anger and the feelings of affective friction that we have in mind stem from very different sources. Bodily alienation is a response to relatively *stable* features of one's home culture. The social disfluency LeBoeuf highlights in racialized individuals is caused by their having to constantly confront the racism woven into the very fabric of their own society. These experiences can give rise to justified and [politically useful feelings of anger](#), which can in turn drive moral progress. Affective friction, in contrast, arises when there is a misalignment between an individual's norm psychology and whatever norms prevail in their social environment (whether those norms are just or unjust, fair or unfair, etc.). In cases of social change, it is caused by *instability* in the social environment, a change to the previously fixed norms a person was accustomed to. In this sense, these two kinds of emotional experience are completely distinct. And while the experiences described by LeBoeuf may be unique to racialized individuals, we think the phenomenon of affective friction is likely to be universal.

However, the changing social dynamics that give rise to affective friction can be easily *misinterpreted as oppression*. This can lead to feelings of anger that might be subjectively similar to the rage experienced by those who are genuinely oppressed. While the latter can motivate powerful forms of political progress, the former can motivate an equally powerful form of political backlash under the guise of fighting injustice. For some individuals, it may not always be easy to tell the difference between feelings of awkwardness and anger that stem from real oppression and feelings of awkwardness and anger that stem from changing norms. This makes it all the more important for people to reflect upon these feelings, and to think carefully about what's causing them.

Another way to criticize our story would be to argue that affective friction actually performs an important function by preventing us from adopting new norms willy-nilly. After all, we should expect any new norm we encounter to generate affective friction, regardless of whether it's good or bad for society. Maybe the old norms are there for a good reason, and the new norm would make us worse off. In other words, affective friction might operate like a **normative immune system**, protecting us from getting "infected" by bad norms. The system errs on the side of safety, and so a price we pay for its protection is that we end up rejecting a few harmless or positive norm changes along with all the bad.

This criticism gets something right: in practice, affective friction will sometimes prevent us from adopting harmful norms. But it would be a mistake to think this is what affective friction is *for,* or that our norm psychology aims at internalizing norms that are *good for society*. The function of our norm psychology is to keep us in sync with our social environment. This one, specialized piece of our minds does not "care" whether the norms it processes are good or bad, or whether some alternative set of

norms might be better or worse. But *we* do care. Our minds contain much more than our norm psychologies, and we can consider all kinds of things—including moral arguments and reasons—in making judgments, deciding what to do, figuring out which norms are better or worse. As we sort through all the possibilities, we shouldn't place too much trust in a psychological system whose default response to *any* norm change is to treat it like it's bad.

Affective friction is liable to contribute to group-level resistance to moral progress as well. It is primarily an individual experience, but as we've noted, some episodes of norm change will cause affective friction in many members of a community at the same time. Their individual experiences, especially if they are exacerbated by the darker sides of our social identities and groupishness, can produce dramatic collective effects. Their accumulated influence can manifest as powerful resistance at a societal level, gumming up the gears of social change. Is there anything that can be done about it?

Our answer is…*probably?* There won't be any magic bullets here. But we think a good way to brainstorm solutions will be to focus on factors that are likely to mitigate affective friction and make us more receptive to new norms.

One potential strategy might be to try to harness the power of [curiosity](), which causes people to find novelty rewarding as opposed to aversive. Think again of Alice, who intentionally immerses herself in a new culture, delighting in its distinctive traditions and norms. Her curiosity led her to [explore,]() to seek out and embrace the unfamiliar instead of fleeing or resisting it. Another approach might be to lean into our propensities to play and pretend. One way to have [fun]() is to temporarily suspend our commitment to the norms that are actually in force, that tell us how we're supposed to act "in real life," and imagine other ways of doing things. When we [play](), we can let ourselves experience what it's like to live by [different rules,]() or even [explore what it might be like to be someone else entirely](). We can also try to mitigate feelings of intergroup conflict by [presenting new norms]() in a way that appeals to a person's social identity instead of threatening it. Finally, we can try to advocate and enforce new norms with positive rather than negative feedback, praising people for doing the right thing instead of shaming them for doing wrong.

We're not sure how to implement these ideas in practice. But we're pretty confident of this: Changing the social world for the better will very often mean changing some of old, harmful norms and replacing them with better ones. And very often, that's not going to feel good. Much of the time, it's going to feel preachy. It's going to grate on your nerves. It's going to make you roll your eyes.

A lot of moral progress is going to be annoying.

Ugh.