Congdon on Changing the Moral World

Sanford Diehl
New York University
sanford.diehl@nyu.edu

My comments will begin with how to understand Congdon's central notion of articulation, then focus on how it allows us to make sense of moral facts that are at once objective and historically specific.

What is articulation?

Congdon's paradigmatic cases of articulation involve trying to put an inchoate feeling into words. You are struck by a work of art, but do not know how to describe what strikes you other than, "That's amazing." You want to declare your love to someone, but all that comes out are clichés that fail to capture the depth and singularity of your feeling. An interaction with your boss makes you angry, but you cannot put your finger on why. In each case, you have an inchoate sense of the meaning of your experience, a direct line on the phenomenon. But only through trying to articulate it do you come to understand what you feel. Crucially, Congdon wants to say, the task of describing your reaction partly constitutes that very reaction, making it more determinate and shaping it in accordance with your description. Whereas describing the movements of a planet makes no difference to the planet, your description of your feelings changes those feelings themselves. "Articulation," as he puts it, "follows an expressive logic, meaning that what it expresses is not something wholly determined in advance of expression, but rather comes to be what it is at least partially as the result of its own expression" (48).[1]

[1] All in-line references are to Matthew Congdon, *Moral Articulation* (Oxford, 2024).

Congdon makes a compelling case that articulation is a real and important phenomenon. It is also a puzzling one. There is a familiar sense in which we do not have the power to shape our emotions by describing them to ourselves. Telling myself that, really, I am still in love with someone, excited about my future, or not hurt by what my friend said does not, unfortunately, make it so. Congdon is alert, of course, to the fact that such self-assurances are as likely to reflect bad faith or self-deception as genuine articulation. Still, when we do succeed in constituting our attitudes by putting them into words, what is it about ourselves that explains how we do, given that it is not an exercise of voluntary control over what we feel? Although Congdon says various things that might bear on this question he does not, I think, address it directly.

One question is what the prospects are for a *reductive* account of articulation, one that explains how articulating our attitudes can shape them by appeal to a cluster of other features of our agency. Consider three candidate features. First, we have the power to make up our minds. Reflecting on what the painting is doing or whether your boss has wronged you involves clarifying your thoughts on the matter, and thereby determining those very thoughts. Such inquiry is open-ended: you could conclude anything, even that you need to reframe the question altogether. Unlike in Congdon's examples, however, what you are trying to get right is simply the object—the painting, the person, the action—as opposed to your feeling about it. You do settle what you feel about the object, and put yourself in a position to know what you feel, but not on the basis of a description of that very feeling; expression is not playing a constitutive role. You are shaping your attitudes in the more general sense that when you wonder whether *p* and come to an affirmative conclusion, you thereby constitute yourself as believing that *p*.

Second, consider emotional epiphanies like the one Emma has in Jane Austen's *Emma*:

> "Why was it so much worse that Harriet should be in love with Mr. Knightley, than with Frank Churchill? Why was the evil so dreadfully increased by Harriet's having some hope of a return? It darted through her, with the speed of an arrow, that Mr. Knightley must marry no one but herself!
>
> Her own conduct, as well as her own heart, was before her in the same few minutes. She saw it all with a clearness which had never blessed her before… "[2]

Emma is in love with Knightley before this happens, but she is not in a position to know that on the basis of reflection. Something outside of herself has to make her realize it. What happens resembles Congdon's description of the process of articulation: Emma has an experience of dissonance upon noticing how much more dreadful it is for Harriet to love Knightley than Churchill, which causes her to ruminate and reinterpret her previous thoughts and feelings, and eventually to describe her elusive feeling as love, thereby altering the character of that very love. Yet this case lacks the metaphysical open-endedness and interpretative discretion that are central to articulation as Congdon understands it. Emma's self-articulation would not lose its transformative character were we to stipulate that there is a unique correct way for her to characterize her feelings for Knightley. What is transformative is the resolution of epistemic, not metaphysical, indeterminacy.

Making up one's mind and having an epiphany are ways that an attitude can coalesce or change over time. A third phenomenon, which is static rather than dynamic, is the dependence of human attitudes and practices on the linguistically mediated self-understanding of those who have or participate in them. Such self-understanding need not be the product of an act of expression that

[2] Jane Austen, *Emma* (Oxford World's Classics, [1816] 2003), 320.

aims to clarify an inchoate experience of something as elusive, as in Congdon's paradigmatic cases. Suppose you feel slighted, reasonably or not, because someone with whom you thought you were best friends has invited a much newer friend to be best man at their wedding. Whether your resentment results from a dynamic process with an expressive logic, or whether instead it arrives fully formed, it depends on a complex understanding of the expectations built into the specific and contingent institutions of being best friends and serving as best man; these institutions depend, in turn, on a general understanding and acceptance of their constitutive norms and meanings. As Charles Taylor puts it, "to say that language is constitutive of emotion is to say that experiencing an emotion essentially involves seeing that certain descriptions apply; or a given emotion involves some (degree of) insight. Nothing is said about how this emotion-insight comes into being or develops."[3]

Here is a reductive proposal. All cases of articulation are just cases of one or more of the three phenomena I have distinguished: making up your mind, wherein you constitute your attitude by concluding something about the world; having an epiphany, wherein hard-won self-knowledge alters the attitude of which it is knowledge; and the dependence of attitudes and practices on a linguistically formulated conceptual scheme. Each of these phenomena calls out for understanding, of course. But, in principle, having satisfactory accounts of all three, and of their interaction effects, would leave nothing else to understand about articulation.

I offer this proposal as a foil. What, if anything, is it missing? Even if it is flawed, as no doubt it is, would Congdon be happy to accept some reductive account, in principle? Or is there reason to think that our power of self-transformation through self-articulation is *sui generis*?

[3] Charles Taylor, "Self-Interpreting Animals," in *Human Agency and Language*: *Philosophical Papers,* vol. 1 (Cambridge, 1985), 45-76, at 71.

How mutable is morality?

In Congdon's paradigmatic cases it is one's own attitudes, not their object, that a process of articulation seems able to transform. How I articulate my response to a movie I have just seen may transform that very response, but it does not transform the movie. A central thesis of the book is that articulation is not always limited in this way. When we articulate moral concepts, Congdon argues, we can change not only our thoughts about morality, but morality itself. How do we manage this? Congdon is not proposing the subjectivist view that the moral facts are a function of what we think they are. To the contrary, he thinks moral articulation helps to explain how morality can be both historically contingent and in an important sense objective.

It seems to me that Congdon tends to explain our power of moral articulation in two slightly different ways. The first is that some moral facts depend on attitudes or social practices, which depend in turn on our contingent conceptual schemes. Since reformulating our concepts can change the attitudes and practices they partly constitute, it can change the moral facts that depend on these in turn (185-187). For example, it is wrong to demean or intimidate someone, and good to have friends. But what counts as demeaning, intimidating, or a friendship partly depends on how we understand ourselves in relation to others. So, developing new concepts like sexual harassment or cyberbullying allows for new ways in which we can be wronged. Similarly, questioning the practice of conceiving of a friendship in terms of an ordinal comparison to each party's other friendships might encourage a more varied and fine-grained appreciation of the value of one's friendships, which might enrich them in turn.

For Congdon, this sort of explanation is an instance of a more general one, which appeals to the view he calls

> *historicized ethical naturalism*: "moral facts are grounded in naturalistic considerations concerning the conditions of our flourishing, given the sorts of creatures we are; yet the successful articulation of the latter can, sometimes, not only illuminate but help create anew the possible forms our flourishing might take, thus developing the sorts of creatures we are" (148).

Historicized ethical naturalism resembles the Aristotelian naturalism of Philippa Foot, but incorporates the fact that human beings live in a way that is shaped by a collective conception of ourselves. Although this view is interesting independently of its connection to moral articulation, its proximate relevance is that it offers a path by which the process of articulating moral concepts can shape moral reality: we articulate what matters to us, which counts as articulating what sorts of creatures we are, which shapes what counts as flourishing for us, which grounds moral facts. This story seems to me to serve some of Congdon's cases very well, such as the contingency and mutability of kinship relations, childcare practices, the public/private distinction, gender, and sexuality. But I am uncertain what it adds to the first, more direct sort of explanation when that is available. To explain what cyberbullying, sexual harassment, and child abuse are and why they are wrong, it does not seem necessary to establish that articulating these concepts involves rearticulating what sort of creature we are and reshaping what counts as human flourishing. It is enough that they are new (or newly conceptualized) ways of inhibiting flourishing, holding the latter fixed.

As I mentioned, Congdon thinks the notion of moral articulation can help explain how it is possible for moral facts both to be objective and to vary historically. Why might this be thought impossible? One reason, as he observes, is that it seems part of believing that, say, torture or

random killing is objectively wrong, as opposed to being taboo or out of fashion, that one takes its wrongness not to depend on anyone's attitudes or the authority of law or custom. The unconditional validity of moral obligation points towards universality, short of ways for something to restrict its scope without being a condition on its validity. Thus if some moral obligation applies only to a certain society, and it is really more than a mere custom, one expects there to be a good reason for the restriction. And the most familiar sort of reason is that the obligation is an application to certain circumstances of some universal moral principle, as the obligation to teach one's children to use a computer is a specification, in a society like ours, of the obligation to educate them. It is tempting to think that any historical variation to which morality is subject will admit of some similar explanation.

Congdon thinks we should resist that temptation. Specifically, he aims to shake us free of our commitment to what he calls the

> *immutability thesis*: "if objective moral grounds exist, they must be (traceable back to grounds that are) historically inalterable" (164).

His strategy is to work through case studies that call this thesis into question. In a central one, from E. M. Forster's *Maurice*, Maurice and Clive attempt to articulate what they mean to one another in a homophobic society that does not supply them with adequate hermeneutic tools. As they invent ways to express what they feel, they simultaneously discover their love and shape it. The contours of their feelings and relationship are specific to the two of them, constituted through their joint articulation of it against a historically specific hermeneutic background. (Facts about their relationship are *moral* in the broad sense of being considerations that bear on how to live and relate

to other people.) And yet their articulations of what they feel are objective, according to Congdon, because they are open to criticism as deluded or illuminating. ("Objective" should also be read broadly, so that its contrast is illusion, not mind-dependence; the crucial point is that there is a fact of the matter about which one can be mistaken.)

Congdon argues that the same dynamic plays out at the level of social movements. When we collectively articulate new conceptions of gender, romantic love, and gender-based oppression, our attitudes about the possible forms of flourishing open to human beings, and about what we need to overcome significant obstacles to flourishing, constitute not only a conception of how to live, but a historically specific form of life itself. Given historicized ethical naturalism, these newly articulated facts about our nature are coeval with newly constituted facts about what is good for us and what we have reason to do. These moral facts are both objective and alterable.

I find the lesson Congdon draws from his case studies compelling. Notice, however, that it is compatible with the immutability thesis. The thesis that all objective grounds are traceable to historically invariant grounds permits a moral principle to be objective and historically specific so long as its validity depends—if partially, still indispensably—on something historically invariant. When Maurice and Clive's attempts at articulation succeed, on such a view, that is so partly in virtue of something immutable about the value of freedom or romantic connection. What the two briefly have together cannot be understood solely in terms of some such value, but neither can it be understood without appeal to the value of freedom or close relationships or sexual expression in any human life.

Is this a problem? I think it does not prevent Congdon's cases from motivating an interesting and important thesis, which I will call

existential weak mutability: Some objective moral facts are historically variable. Their normative force does not derive entirely from that of some invariant substantive moral fact.

Again, a historically variable moral fact that *does* derive its force entirely from something invariant is the obligation to ensure that one's children learn how to use a computer, understood as a specification of the obligation to prepare them to be functioning members of society, in a society that depends heavily on computers. In other circumstances, discharging that obligation might require teaching one's children to hunt, but not to use a computer. Congdon's historically specific moral facts are not mere specifications of this sort, even if they turn out to depend partly on something invariant.

Congdon's own view goes beyond existential weak mutability in two ways. First, he regards "the idea that at least some moral facts exist untouched by both history and our means of expressing them in language" (142) as one horn of a dilemma he intends to escape. Escaping it requires more than proof positive of moral facts that are both objective and historically contingent; it must be shown how his treatment of examples like Maurice and Clive could generalize to *any* aspect of morality we take to be objective, leaving nothing untouched. Second, Congdon frequently presents himself as arguing against the view that morality has *any* "invariant core" or "unchanging part."[4] I take this to mean that he would reject my suggestion that the value of Maurice and Clive's relationship is partly traceable to the invariant substantive moral fact that

[4] Although historicized ethical naturalism is a historically invariant partial ground of many moral facts it is not, itself, part of morality. Following Foot, Congdon distinguishes between "*grammatical claims*, which make explicit the logical connections between a certain class of concepts and judgments, and *substantive ethical principles*, which… [are] meant to have normative authority for moral agents. Historicized ethical naturalism denies that there are timeless truths of the latter sort, not the former" (180).

having loving relationships is good for human beings (even granting that the nature of such relationships and their role in a good life will vary historically). Combining these points yields

> *universal strong mutability*: All objective moral facts are historically variable. Their normative force does not derive, even partially, from any invariant substantive moral fact.

Thus I take Congdon's position to be that if you are persuaded, as he is (128-129), by the usual metaphysical, epistemological, or motivational arguments against standard forms of moral realism, you can still think morality is objective in the broad sense by taking it to be grounded in a historically articulated conception of human flourishing.

I am not convinced that Congdon's arguments against the immutability thesis show the mutability of moral facts to be either universal or strong. One central line of argument in the second half of the book is that moral articulation offers the best way out of what Congdon calls *Hacking's dilemma*. Ian Hacking argues that child abuse is a socially constructed kind that is importantly different from cruelty to children, in virtue of its medicalized and social character and its connections to other forms of domestic abuse. Now, before the articulation of the concept of child abuse, was there such a thing as child abuse, which was wrong? To say "no" is to embrace an insufficiently critical kind of relativism. Actions cannot avoid being wrong only because no one has the concepts for them. Hacking says "yes." He distinguishes the object, child abuse, from the concept of it, which was constructed at a particular time, and holds that the object was a "real evil" before the concept was constructed.

According to Congdon, Hacking's answer neglects his own insight that what is socially constructed is not just the concept of child abuse, but the *kind* itself. The thought is that because

child abuse is a socially constructed kind that is essential to the self-understanding of survivors, institutions fighting it, and so on (and these connections, in turn, are essential to what child abuse is), it is not a straightforward matter to classify as child abuse anything that preceded the articulation of the concept. But then it is not clear what it means for Hacking to say that there was some thing, child abuse, which was a real evil before the introduction of the concept.

Moral articulation is Congdon's solution to this problem. What is articulated is real, yet sufficiently immersed in our social practices for questions about it not to make sense outside the context of those practices. It does not make sense to ask about the nature of Maurice and Clive's love before they met. And it seems artificial to apply our own concepts of gender and sexuality without remainder to, say, ancient Greece. Nevertheless, these concepts describe objective features of the world in which they were articulated; it is not a matter of "anything goes." So once we have the possibility of articulation in view, Congdon argues, Hacking's dilemma dissolves.

Here is where the gap between existential and universal mutability matters. I like Congdon's account of how Maurice and Clive's love escapes Hacking's dilemma. But Congdon does not explain how his solution applies to the original example of child abuse. Even if we cannot easily talk of a kind, child abuse, which was wrong before the articulation of the concept, I find it hard to see what is mistaken about the question whether actions that would today count as child abuse were wrong at the time. Consider also genocide and sexual harassment, two of Congdon's other recurring examples. Congdon of course thinks that there was genocide, and it was wrong, before Raphael Lemkin invented the term in 1942, and that there was sexual harassment, and it was wrong, before the concept was articulated in consciousness-raising groups in the 1970s. But I am not sure what entitles one to say this on the universal strong mutability interpretation of historicized ethical naturalism.

I take Congdon to be addressing this worry at the end of chapter five. Focusing on the case of gender-based oppression, he writes that

> rational considerations capable of condemning gender-based oppression are at least as old as gender-based oppression itself. For as soon as gender-based oppression begins creating experiences of suffering, humiliation, anger, resistance, and counter-ideological solidarity, it begins, precisely, attuning human beings to aspects of the sorts of living things they are that, emphatically, speak against such oppressive modes of social organization. Yet… we are not bound by the immutability thesis, and hence are free to hypothesize that the features to which we thereby become attuned are not eternal, but, rather, deeply historical features of our own creaturely existence. We neither merely invent nor merely discover the conditions of our flourishing. Being human is a condition we articulate. (194-195)

Yet in order to show how the notion of moral articulation offers a compelling and general alternative to the horns of Hacking's dilemma, it is not enough to show that those who are subjected to gender-based oppression (or child abuse or genocide) always already have the requisite epistemic materials to articulate their situation. Congdon's view, as I understand it, is that articulation is part of what *constitutes* gender-based oppression as the sort of thing it is. If the act of articulating is doing metaphysical work (not just the epistemic work of allowing us to grasp what has been true all along, as in Emma's epiphany), then Hacking's dilemma will persist so long as the articulation of a particular kind of gender-based oppression is not as old as the thing itself. And a historicized ethical naturalist should expect such temporal gaps. What reconstitutes moral reality, in their view, is the transformation of our shared form of life through creative rearticulation

of the kind of creatures we are. But individual victims of gender-based oppression lack the unilateral power to transform our shared form of life. That takes a social movement, which unfolds over time.

I have just raised a worry about whether Congdon's argument establishes his thesis that all moral facts are mutable. I now want to raise a further worry about his claim that moral articulation, historical ethical naturalism, or a combination of the two helps show how it is possible for morality to be in a meaningful sense objective, yet lack an "invariant core" or "unchanging part." Recall what motivates the immutability thesis: I do not think that whether genocide, torture, or random killing is wrong depends upon the particularities of my or any other historically articulated form of life, or upon anyone's acts of articulation. Congdon owes us an account of why this thought is misguided.

Perhaps he would say that the wrongness of genocide is historically contingent because, inasmuch as genocide is distinct from mass murder or the destruction of a society, it depends on human beings conceiving ourselves in terms of national, ethnic, racial, or religious groups, and it is not a fixed fact about us that we must do so. It seems to me that the most this argument could establish is weak mutability, however. Even that can be disputed, for something can fail to be timeless without being mutable: from the claim that 'genocide is wrong' was not true until human beings existed, or understood ourselves in ways that make genocide possible, it does not follow that it could have been the case that genocide is possible, yet not wrong. Moreover, the relevant change here involves the basic ways that we conceive of ourselves in groups. The expressive logic of the process by which the concept of genocide was formulated and widely adopted, which is the focus of Congdon's discussion, is not obviously relevant.

Congdon emphasizes that the *concept* of genocide is historically contingent. Yet what is at issue is how much follows from the contingency of our concepts about the contingency of what they conceptualize. The lacuna marked by Churchill's talk of a "crime with no name" could, for example, have been filled by a concept that contained not only "acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such,"[5] but also acts committed for other reasons, such as to create more living space for one's own people or defeat an opposing military force, that cause such destruction as a foreseen side-effect. The question of what moral difference it makes whether the knowing and avoidable physical destruction of such a group is intended or merely foreseen is not settled by the fact that the historically contingent concept of genocide includes an intent condition.

If that is right, it suggests a way to defend Hacking's invariant realism. Congdon usefully describes concepts as "cognitive capacities to apprehend patterns of unity and difference in the world" (58). Introducing the concept of child abuse allows us to apprehend new patterns, such as what child abuse has in common with other forms of abuse, what victims have in common with (and what distinguishes them from) other victims of trauma, and so on. I think this point can be taken further. Apprehending such patterns is a matter not merely of grouping things together in a new way (which might be arbitrary) but of doing so on a certain basis. Whenever we judge a token action to be an instance of child abuse we can ask, "In virtue of what is this child abuse?" and expect to find some properties of the action that justify the classification. I suspect that if we proceed to ask, of the same token action, "In virtue of what is this wrong?", we will find ourselves citing many of the same properties. In other words, many of the properties that make an action child abuse also make it wrong.

[5] https://www.un.org/en/genocide-prevention/definition, accessed March 10 2026.

Why is it tempting to commit the anachronism of classifying pre-articulation cases of child cruelty and neglect as child abuse? Because these cases have certain features, *F*, which are or closely resemble features that would justify the classification today, and which make these ways of treating children wrong. But then it is open to us to bypass classification altogether and say that those actions, child abuse or not, were wrong in virtue of being *F*. This is no more paradoxical than the claim that, even though inviting only friends over on Thanksgiving day does not straightforwardly count as 'hosting a Friendsgiving' if it happened decades before the articulation of that concept—after all, the participants' understanding of what they were doing will have been different or inchoate and, let us suppose, the event was causally independent of the economic processes leading more adults to live with roommates, far from family and without money or time off to travel home, which partly explain why there has been occasion to articulate a new concept—the event can still have been valuable in virtue of being an intimate gathering of friends and enabling people who might otherwise have been alone to celebrate together, just as a true Friendsgiving can be.

Let me summarize. Congdon's idea that our relation to morality is mediated by articulation, a notion that combines the aim of accurate description with the power to shape what is being described, offers a way to explain how the content of values and obligations can depend on contingent concepts and practices even though their authority does not. I think Congdon has identified a real source of normative change. However, I have argued, he overstates both its breadth and its depth. If the fact that instances of a kind have a certain normative property (e.g., being wrong, oppressive, or a valuable gathering of otherwise stranded friends) predates the concept of that kind, then that fact does not depend on the articulation of that concept. This is true whether the kind itself predates its concept (e.g., genocide and sexual harassment) or not (e.g., child abuse

and Friendsgiving). The normative fact might still depend on the existence of some other mutable social kind (e.g., ethnic group, work environment, dinner party), and there might be some other argument, not featuring articulation, for its partial or total mutability (but I doubt there will always be). In a different sort of case, instances of a kind have a certain normative property only in virtue of their kind membership, and the nature of that kind depends on how it is conceptualized. Sometimes (e.g., Maurice and Clive's love), though not always (e.g., the best man's duty to toast the groom), how it is conceptualized depends on a process that follows an expressive logic. Under these conditions, moral articulation can reshape moral reality.[6]

[6] I am grateful to Matthew Congdon for discussion at the 2025 Eastern APA, where I presented an earlier version of this material, and to Miranda Fricker and Berislav Marušić for comments on a draft.