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John Woolman and Ethical Progress in Kitcher’s Pragmatic Naturalism

ABSTRACT: The development of John Woolman’s views on slavery plays an important evidentiary role in Philip Kitcher’s recent book, The ethical project (Kitcher 2011). In this work Kitcher takes what he calls a “pragmatic naturalist” approach to ethics and claims that the discovery of ethical truth plays no role in the emergence of ethical progress. To support his view, he argues that Woolman’s contribution was not due to his discovery of an ethical truth about slavery, not previously known, but due to his sensitivity to slavery and his influence on others, which contributed to collective progressive change in moral norms involving slavery. While not disputing Kitcher’s ethical theory, I argue that personal discoveries of a moral psychological nature made by Woolman served both as insights and motivations for his contribution. Thus, even if there are no such things as independent ethical truths that can be discovered by individuals, a fully naturalistic approach to ethical progress requires that we make room not only for group-level progressive evolution of norms, but also for individual discoveries of a moral psychological nature that can sometimes cause an individual to play a significant initiating role in progressive ethical transitions that occur at a group level.

Keywords: John Woolman, Philip Kitcher, slavery, pragmatism, moral foundations theory, ethical progress

INTRODUCTION

How did we come to believe that making slaves of other people is a ‘bad’ thing? Have we always known it, or has slavery as an institution become immoral only after western culture finally gave it up in the 19th century? Recently, philosophers of a pragmatic persuasion have looked into the history of slavery as an example of how society comes to acquire new notions of what is good and bad (Anderson 2014; Kitcher 2011). In this paper I want to focus on one such account (Kitcher 2011) and how it treats the role of individuals in the initiation of moral change

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and ethical progress. While Kitcher’s account argues that change in views on slavery and other moral issues is a result of change in moral norms of society and gives little role to individuals, I will argue that an individual can play an important role in these changes. I will argue that this role of individuals is not due to their discovery of some a priori independent moral truth not noticed by others, the anathema of pragmatism; but because, psychological processes, in particular moral psychological processes such as the feeling of guilt at having caused harm to others, can sometimes provide both insight and motivation for an individual to become a socially active innovator with respect to relevant and important social dilemmas of his or her times.

The development of American Quaker John Woolman’s (1720–1772) views on slavery, as expressed in his *Journal* (Woolman 1774/1971) and in other works, plays an important evidentiary role in Philip Kitcher’s recent book, *The ethical project* (Kitcher 2011). In this work Kitcher takes what he calls a “pragmatic naturalist” approach to ethics, central to which is the notion that an adequate understanding of ethical truth and ethical progress depends on correctly interpreting the cultural history of ethical norms and codes, which includes identifying instances of ethical progress. In Kitcher’s view, we identify instances of ethical progress independently of any reliance on the notion of ethical truth and only afterwards attribute ethical truth to those statements that are introduced in progressive transitions that continue to be retained through further progressive transitions. On this pragmatic view, ‘truth’ is, as William James suggested, something that “happens to an idea” (Kitcher citation 2011, p. 7); progressive ‘ethical’ norms of a society appear in a society’s successful attempts to live more cooperatively in changing conditions. The original evolutionary and a continuing cultural function of norms is to provide behavioral rules to follow in cases where ‘psychological altruism’ standing alone would fail, so specified norms supported by the threat of punishment often assisted by transcendental religious and moral beliefs are needed to obtain behavioral conformity. But, these norms, or rules of behavior, constantly need updating, when conflict in previous values and norms arising in changing conditions leads to a reduction in coordination and cooperation. New norms and adjustments in ethical principles are required to bring about improved cooperation in these new circumstances. On this view, there is no a priori notion of the ethical. What is ‘good’ changes with circumstance, and what is ‘progressive’ is an idea of what is ‘good’ that when adopted as a norm appears to succeed in
improving social relations and continues to be maintained in future progressive changes in social norms.

Kitcher’s analysis of Woolman’s contribution to the abolition of slavery is presented to support this view. He sees John Woolman as “arguably, the pioneering abolitionist,” and recognizes as important to the history of the abolition movement his opposition to slavery. But Kitcher claims that this opposition was not due to Woolman’s discovery of an a priori or independent ethical truth. Rather, it was due to his unusual sensibility to slavery, which he saw as “inconsistent with Christian religion,” and to his perseverance in communications with other Quakers (Kitcher 2011 citation, pp. 158–159). Through dialogue with others, his own and their views changed and proposals for new norms with respect to slavery appeared both in Woolman’s published works and in other Quaker publications. But social progress on the elimination of chattel slavery was slow. Because slavery was an accepted form of social relations at the time that this discussion began, it was supported by numerous ‘ethical’ justifications, including many based on scripture. However, through continued discussion and changing views about slavery, new local norms against slavery were adopted not only by the Quakers but also by larger groups, for instance in Britain’s opposition to the slave trade. But it took a slave rebellion in Saint Domingue (now Haiti) and a Civil War in the United States before slavery was eventually eliminated in Western society and slavery became an object of general moral condemnation (Anderson 2014; Davis 1966; Kitcher 2011).

To better understand Kitcher’s interpretation of Woolman’s contribution toward the abolition of slavery, we need to distinguish between two possible claims with respect to the role that discovery might play toward ethical progress. The first is that the discovery of ethical truths can contribute to ethical progress, because they are, like scientific truths, independent truths that can be discovered. Kitcher claims that there is no evidence in Woolman’s, or any other, case of the discovery of such independent ethical truths. This confirms his view that such discoveries are impossible because ethical truths are not the kinds of things that can be discovered prior to progressive developments in societal norms, since their recognition as truths depend on progressive transitions that resist reversals in future transitions.

But there is a second possibility that gives a role to discovery in ethical progress. An individual might make a personal discovery that is not of an independent ethical truth, but is, instead, a factual truth about his or her own moral psychology. For instance, from the feeling of personal guilt as
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a result of some behavior involving harm to others a person may develop moral beliefs about how one should behave that affect that person’s future behavior. This kind of truth is not a universal fact about ethical reality, but a psychological fact about how a particular individual responds to a particular situation that the person interprets in a moral or ethical manner. If the individual is then motivated to pursue what turns out to become a progressive ethical goal based on this experience and this pursuit results through dialogue and political action with others in eventually achieving that goal, then this moral psychological discovery of a personal sort would contribute to ethical progress and to subsequent statements taken to represent ethical truths for pragmatic naturalists.

I believe that Woolman made a discovery of this latter sort, one that Kitcher overlooked in his investigation of Woolman’s life and in his discussion of Woolman. This discovery, based on his own experience of guilt as a moral emotion when he killed a bird and the bird’s nestlings as a child, motivated him to devote much of his life to the abolition of slavery and other similar situations involving harm to others. Because this discovery was not of a universal ethical truth (not everyone finds killing birds to be morally objectionable), it does not provide evidence against Kitcher’s view that there are no objective ethical truths. But it does provide a deeper understanding of the psychology of this important individual in the history of the abolition movement and how the development of an individual’s moral motivation can contribute to changing moral norms in a society, and, in this case, toward a change in norms that we think of as one involving ethical progress.

However, I shall also argue that Woolman’s discovery was not just one about his own experience. He took his personal moral psychological discovery to indicate two important factual truths that apply generally to humans as psychological beings, moral psychological truths particular to human psychology, as opposed to ethical truths applicable independently of human nature. These moral psychological discoveries led Woolman to develop what I call his sympathetic methodology, which is quite analogous to Kitcher’s own notion of “empathetic understanding” as a process by which individuals can propose progressive advances and become “justified agents of ethical change.” (Kitcher 2011, p. 250) So, even if we adopt Kitcher’s account of ethical progress and ethical truth which makes individual discovery of ethical truths impossible, Woolman’s moral discoveries and sympathetic methodology provides an example not only of a justified agent of progressive ethical change, but of one who, in his systematic use of a sympathetic or empathetic method-
ology, took a constructive approach to ethical truth quite analogous to Kitcher’s own pragmatic naturalism. 

The psychologically richer account of Woolman that I offer below does not show that Kitcher is mistaken in claiming that the discovery of ethical truths can have no explanatory role to play in the emergence of ethical progress. But if it is conceded that personal discoveries of the sort that I discuss here can play an important role in ethical progress, then the pragmatic naturalist’s current emphasis on social level phenomena will need to be modified to give a significant role to moral innovations made by individuals in at least some instances of progressive ethical change.

**KITCHER ON WOOLMAN’S CONTRIBUTION TO ETHICAL PROGRESS**

Kitcher finds evidence in Woolman’s *Journal* for a developmental account of change in Woolman’s ethical views on slavery. Through communication and discussion, primarily with other Quakers, change occurs both in Woolman’s views and in his co-religionists’, and it is this group-level progressive activity that Kitcher wishes to stress in his pragmatic ethical naturalism: “Woolman made a large and important progressive step” in “his rejection of slavery.” He should be admired for the “courage and perseverance displayed in his many attempts to persuade others.” Even so, Kitcher’s emphasizes: “*His reasons, however, are not those of any contemporary secular ethical framework.*” (Kitcher 2011, p. 161, italics in the text) Instead, Woolman’s reasons were religiously based.

Whether or not Woolman was “*the* pioneering abolitionist,”¹ Kitcher is surely right that he was among the first to contribute to a continuous tradition that began among American Quakers because of their concerns over whether slavery was “consistent” with Christianity and that eventually contributed importantly to the abolition of slavery (Slaughter 2008; Jackson 2009). Kitcher’s account of Woolman’s views on slavery focuses mainly on the first incident involving slavery mentioned in the *Journal*, in which Woolman describes how he was asked by his employer to write a bill of sale of a Negro woman, while the buyer was waiting:

The thing was sudden; and though I felt uneasy at the thoughts of writing an instrument of slavery for one of my fellow-creatures, yet I remembered that I was hired by the year, that it was my master who directed me to do it, and that it was an elderly man, a member of our Society, who bought her; so through weakness I gave way, and wrote it; but at the executing of it I was so afflicted in my mind, that I said before my master and the Friend that I believed slave-keeping to be a practice inconsistent with the Christian religion. (Kitcher 2011, p. 159; citing Woolman 1961, pp. 14–15)
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When considering this experience with respect to Woolman’s general development, Kitcher gives the following psychological interpretation:

Woolman does feel an emotion—an “unease”—on the pivotal occasion when his master asks him to draw up a bill of sale. . . . We are given a portrait of a young man who views the conventions of behavior, even among the Friends (the Quakers), as not always sufficiently scrupulous, and who minutely scrutinizes his own conduct to forestall possible lapses. The “unease” takes very explicit forms, exhibited in the reflections leading him to quiet it and perform the task assigned him: the buyer is elderly and himself a Quaker, thus decreasing the chances of sexual and physical abuse and increasing those of spiritual guidance for the slave. In the background are facts Woolman recalls as he ponders what to do—slaves are often beaten, female slaves are often sexually coerced, concern for the spiritual development of slaves is rare. He is suddenly asked to do something that makes him, if only tangentially, complicit with these common features of the slave-owning institution, and, for a young man so sensitive to his spiritual temperature, even that tangential involvement promotes unease. (Kitcher 2011, pp. 184–185)

Kitcher concludes that “this psychological explanation fits the record” and that no discovery of an ethical truth about slavery was involved:

Only the persistence of the feelings, together with the extensive confrontation with many alternative points of view, intensified his conviction that slavery was wrong. If we view him as justified, it is because he comes to recognize his emotional reaction is not transitory—it cannot be displaced by the most severe attempts to revise some of the associated cognitions and volitions. It is the social exchange, not any awareness of an external standard endorsing his feelings, that gives Woolman whatever ethical insight he has. (Kitcher 2011, p. 200, italics in text)

So Kitcher concludes based on this incident that Woolman made no personal discovery of an ethical truth about slavery. It was only through discussion with others that both his own and their views of slavery changed, and as a result, a significant initiating influence toward the eventual abolition of slavery ensued.

PROBLEMS WITH KITCHER’S ACCOUNT

Leaving aside philosophical issues, Kitcher’s account of Woolman’s moral psychological development is incomplete.

Note first what Woolman writes about his involvement in the transfer of the Negro woman just after suggesting that “slave-keeping” is “a practice inconsistent with the Christian religion.”

This in some degree abated my uneasiness, yet as often as I reflected seriously upon it I thought I should have been clearer if leaving all consequences
I craved to be excused from it as a thing against my conscience, for such it was. (Woolman 1971, p. 33; italics early draft version)

While there was some abeyance in Woolman’s uneasiness after thinking about the people involved in the transfer and having expressed his views, this was not enough to relieve all his concerns, since being involved at all was “against his conscience.” His conscience did not change as a result of his involvement in the transaction. What did change was his decision not to engage in such an activity in the future regardless of consequences. But this does not explain why it was already against his conscience at the time of the original incident.

So, why was it against his conscience? Was it merely a case of perceived inconsistency with Quaker religious principles and an especially scrupulous religious orientation toward scrutinizing his own and others’ behaviors with respect to consistency with these principles as Kitcher suggests? Or was there some personal discovery or intuition more of a moral than of a religious nature that was involved in the case, a personal moral discovery that plunged Woolman into a deeper level of understanding of moral psychological, if not ethical, truths? I believe that the latter possibility was the case.

By personal moral discovery I mean the awakening in an individual of a moral thought or intuition, usually through a unique personal experience that causes a moral psychological state, such as guilt or compassion, to occur, and from which the individual draws some inference, or obtains a belief, about the nature of morality through reflection on the experience. One of the earliest incidents mentioned in the Journal describes such a personal moral discovery:

Another thing remarkable in my childhood was once, going to a neighbor’s house, I saw on the way a robin sitting on her nest; and as I came near she went off, but having young ones, flew about and with many cries expressed her concern for them. I stood and threw stones at her, till one striking her she fell down dead. At first I was pleased with the exploit, but after a few minutes was seized with horror, as having in a sportive way killed an innocent creature while she was careful for her young. I beheld her lying dead and thought those young ones for which she was so careful must now perish for want of their dam to nourish them and after some painful considerations on the subject, I climbed up the tree, took all the young birds and killed them, supposing that better than to leave them to pine away and die miserably, and believed in this case that Scripture proverb was fulfilled, “The tender mercies of the wicked are cruel” [Prov. 12:10]. I then went on my errand, but for some hours could think of little else but the cruelties I had committed, and was much troubled. (Woolman 1971, pp. 24–5)
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This event must have been a painful experience for Woolman. It is the most detailed event described from his childhood in his *Journal* and is the kind of early experience and memory that can be seminal in the formation of an individual’s personality (Adler 1964). Among personality psychologists, it is a called a nuclear scene, one that forms the foundation for a “nuclear script,” a schema that gives perceptual structure to similar experiences, and can determine behavior through analogs and anti-analogs (Barresi & Juckes 1997; Tomkins 1979). Affectively loaded experiences, especially those that occur in early childhood, can have long-term consequences in individual human psychology. While psychoanalysis posits some universal experiences of this sort, script theory holds that the kinds of experiences that have long-term and highly ramified consequences can vary widely across persons. Even so, they have similar structures as scripts, with a cast of characters and emotionally laden scenes involving these characters. According to script theory, these usually very traumatic experiences can form the basis for a nuclear script which takes on various forms. Analogs of the original event or scene are experienced or re-enacted over and over again, even in situations where a person without the script would experience these events in quite different ways. By contrast, anti-analog scripts can be formed through an attempt to deny the original experience, and replace it with one that nullifies the event. These anti-analog scripts also require re-enactment in order to hold off the emotions associated with the original event, and tend to expand widely to include a great variety of situations. In Woolman’s case, I believe that this event provided the ground for an anti-analog script to avoid causing harm or suffering to other “innocent” creatures, and to reduce suffering wherever possible. Woolman’s antislavery efforts are consequences of this anti-analog script, which is meant to undo the damage caused by his original heartless killing of the mother robin, and his tortured killing of her offspring.

While script theory can account for the motivational consequences of Woolman’s early experience, in order to investigate its moral nature, we need to consider the psychological sources of moral thinking. Recent research and theorizing on moral psychology has proposed that there are a number of ‘moral intuitions,’ basic dispositions in human nature of a moral sort, that have their roots in hominin evolution, and that form the basis of ethical norms in all societies, despite their diversity (Haidt & Josephs 2004; Haidt 2012). These basic dispositions develop differently in different cultures, each culture giving different weights to the pluralistic first principles, or moral foundations. Haidt & Josephs (2004) proposed that there are five such
basic moral intuitions or foundations: care/harm, fairness/cheating, loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion, sanctity/degradation. Haidt (2012) later added a sixth possible foundation, liberty/oppression. Each of these moral foundations is associated with some social function that holds society together. For instance, care versus harm, was associated originally with parental care of their young, and the avoidance of harm to them, which is necessary for reproductive success in many animals. Fairness versus cheating is associated with fairness in cooperative activities among individual social animals. Authority versus subversion is associated with obedience of and respect for superiors in dominance hierarchies, while loyalty versus betrayal focuses on identification with one’s group in opposition to other groups. Sanctity was originally the disgust that is associated with the avoidance of impurities, and came to be associated with religious taboos and transcendental religious beliefs about body and soul. Woolman’s experience of killing the robin that was caring for her young and the moral feeling of guilt that followed, was an experience that falls into the first category of moral intuitions, and in an especially strong way. I believe that it led through ramifications involving a personally constructed nuclear script to concern for care vs. harm moral issues of a quite extraordinary and general nature, and that its development was especially important with respect to Woolman’s commitment toward the abolition of slavery.

But, in addition to a personal motive to prevent harm and to reduce suffering in others as a direct result of this highly emotional experience, Woolman also thought he discovered a general moral truth about human nature, and a method by which to facilitate his own and other’s ethical behavior. Assuming that these apparent discoveries made by Woolman are in fact general truths about human moral psychology that have been or would be confirmed by empirical investigation, then it seems reasonable to call them moral psychological truths. Unlike ethical truths of the sort that Kitcher rejects as possible that are constrained by external factors, moral psychological truths are constrained only by limits in human psycho-social capacities. Thus, truths of this sort can depend on ontogenetic and cultural factors as well as on moral capacities intrinsic to human beings as a species. Haidt’s (2012) moral foundations theory is an example of a general theory from which more specific hypotheses of moral psychological truths might be derived.

The nature of the moral psychological truths that Woolman thought he discovered as a result of this incident become clear from his reflective response in his next comment to the robin event and its experiential consequences:
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Thus He whose tender mercies are over all his works hath placed a principle in the human mind, which incites to exercise goodness towards every living creature; and this being singly attended to, people become tender-hearted and sympathizing; but when frequently and totally rejected, the mind shuts itself up in a contrary disposition. (Woolman 1971, p. 25)

Certainly, Woolman’s religious belief in God’s “tender mercies” is significant in what he says here; but viewed from a “secular” post-Darwinian perspective, what is more significant with respect to Woolman’s moral psychological and ethical perspective, is the belief that he acquires from the experience that there is “a principle in the human mind, which incites to exercise goodness towards every living creature.” Because this principle is analogous to the first of Haidt’s moral foundations, though here applied by Woolman to all creatures not just to other humans, it appears to have independent support as a moral psychological truth. But in addition to this truth, he thought he found another one that I call his sympathetic principle and from which he developed a sympathetic methodology. If the incitement to “exercise goodness toward every living creature” is “singly attended to,” it produces a “tender-hearted” sympathetic response; but, if not, then the “mind shuts itself up” and does not respond to the needs of other “living creatures.” I will discuss this principle and method in the next section. Here I focus only on ramifications of the robin experience in Woolman’s early development.

This nuclear episode occurred in Woolman’s childhood, but one can find echoes of its impact in other early writing in his Journal, including in the description of his adolescent religious awakening that occurs prior to the incident involving the Negro slave:

I...was early convinced in my mind that true religion consisted in an inward life, wherein the heart doth love and reverence God the Creator and learn to exercise true justice and goodness, not only toward all men but also toward the brute creatures; that as the mind was moved on an inward principle to love God as an invisible, incomprehensible being, on the same principle it was moved to love him in all his manifestations in the visible world; that as by his breath the flame of life was kindled in all animal and sensitive creatures, to say we love God as unseen and at the same time exercise cruelty toward the least creature moving by his life, or by life derived from him, was a contradiction in itself. (Woolman 1971, p. 28)

While clearly intermingled with his inward religious development, the original anti-analog moral insight is reflected here, particularly in Woolman’s concern over cruelty to “all animal and sensitive creatures.” Subse-
sequently, he would apply this same nuclear script based concern for all “sensitive creatures” when responding to slavery. So, what Kitcher views as an “anonymous” concern for “fellow-creatures” in Woolman’s later writings on slavery, seems, at least in its origin, to be bound quite closely to an original very personal and individualizing experience involving a particular robin and her young that he killed as a youth.

But I should mention an additional background factor that was a probable influence on his views about slavery. His own family did not own slaves. Moreover, his father had some views that leaned toward those of his son and likely played a role in his development. When Woolman’s father was dying in 1750, he asked John what he planned to do with the essay he wrote on “Some considerations on the keeping of Negroes” in 1746 after his trip to North Carolina that he hadn’t yet published. About his father and this conversation, John writes in his Journal:

[H]e asked me concerning the manuscript, and whether I expected soon to offer it to the Overseers of the Press and after some conversation thereon said, “I have all along been deeply affected with the oppression of the poor Negroes, and now at last my concern for them is as great as ever.” (Woolman 1971, p. 45)

So, there is a precedent in Woolman’s family for concern over treatment of slaves, though nothing near the level exhibited by John Woolman, for whom not just the treatment of slaves was an object of concern, but also the institution of slavery itself became an object. Still, in terms of Kitcher’s pragmatic naturalist approach, Woolman’s beliefs might be seen as grounded in a shared family view with his father, while also perhaps stimulated by the robin incident, and his own sensitive nature, to take this view much further than his father, and turn it into a “concern” of grand proportions. However, without his discovery of moral psychological truths regarding harm to others and their prevention through sympathy based on the robin experience as well as the nuclear script that resulted from the sense of guilt that was his moral response to that experience, I doubt that Woolman’s significant role in the repudiation of chattel slavery would have been possible. Moreover, as we shall see in the next section, there is a good deal of evidence to support the notion that a nuclear script and moral insight drove Woolman’s moral motivation and ethical views.

**WOOLMAN’S ETHICAL THEORY: PRACTICE AND ARGUMENTS**

Woolman took an ascetic approach in his own personal role as an individual who recognized the moral dilemmas of his time. In line with his
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moral discoveries, he saw as important to his mission to replace self-interested motives with motives that responded to the needs of others and would move society forward toward greater justice and general happiness. He believed that it was God’s wish for all organisms to be happy, or at least not to suffer unnecessarily, and he wished to promote this end, even if it involved his own suffering. Christ was his model in this respect. Throughout his life, after his adolescent conversion experience, he constantly attempted to suppress that side of him that he had perceived as shutting one’s mind off from attending sympathetically to the concerns of others, thus pursuing his sympathetic methodology in his own case. As he reports in his Journal, it was no easy task. One seemingly odd consequence of this attempt was that it affected not only himself, but also his wife and daughter. Like himself, they also had to receive less of his love in order that others receive more. He reflects on this several times in his Journal and in his communications with his wife. For instance, in a letter written to her in 1760 he writes:

[Th]ough since I left you, I have often found an engaging love and affection toward thee and my daughter and friends about home, [so] that going out at this time, when sickness is so great amongst you, is a trial upon me, yet I often remember there are many widows and fatherless, many who have poor tutors, many who have evil examples before them, and many whose minds are in captivity, for whose sake my heart is at times moved with [such] compassion that I feel my mind resigned to leave you for a season, to exercise that gift which the Lord hath bestowed on me, which though small compared with some, yet in this I rejoice: that I feel love unfeigned toward my fellow-creatures. (Letter cited in Woolman 1971, p. 107)

In this letter it is apparent how he uses his sympathetic methodology to counteract the personal desire to be with his family, by comparing their “lucky” situation of having a living husband and father, even if away at the time, with “widows and fatherless.” He also speaks of his special “gift” to “feel love unfeigned toward [his] fellow-creatures,” a gift that I believe was partially a consequence of the robin incident. So this letter indicates both the ‘gift’, which I suggest is a motivational outcome of the robin incident, as well as, an instance of his use of a sympathetic method that reduces the importance not only of his own self-interest but also that of his family’s interests to that of more distant others. In terms of moral foundations theory, this would be an example of reducing the importance of loyalty, here to his family, to that of harm avoidance as a moral motivation applied generally to others.

In congruence with the generalizing property of nuclear scripts, the targets of Woolman’s concern for harm avoidance and sympathy for
diverse recipients was quite pervasive. He showed concern and sympathy for: the poor, the wealthy, slaves, slave owners, animals, sailors, Indians, South American slave miners, and members of other religions. For instance, in sympathetic response to the suffering of horses as well as post-riders in England, he refused to use their mail service. He also walked most of the time to avoid horse carriages, where horses received rough treatment. On his trip to England, he stayed with sailors in the bowels of the ship to better understand their life as well as not to take advantage of unnecessary wealth wasted in cabins. He also took on a dangerous mission to meet Indian leaders in order to better understand and possibly help them. There is much, much more.

Woolman’s arguments against slavery, though often having religious content, rarely involved scriptural interpretation. More often biblical references are used to buttress ethical arguments that he took to be independent of these religious authorities. But many of his arguments provide ethical justifications, with little or no religious overtones. Of these I want to focus on two types of argument that follow rather directly from his moral insight and sympathetic methodology because they require sympathetic or empathic understanding of the situations of others. His use of these arguments provide evidence that Woolman was a “justified agent of ethical change” in Kitcher’s terminology and an agent of ethical progress to the extent that his dialogues with others eventually resulted in progressive movement toward the abolition of slavery. The two forms of argument are:

*Position exchange*—where one is asked to imagine oneself in the position of the oppressed other and to consider how it might affect one’s life and behavior.

*Causal consequences*—where one is to trace the consequences of various just or unjust practices on the people involved in them.

Here is an example showing Woolman’s use of position exchange in his first publication against slavery:

To consider mankind otherwise than brethren, to think favours are peculiar to one nation and exclude others, plainly supposes a darkness in the understanding....

To prevent such an error let us calmly consider [the slave’s] circumstance, and, the better to do it, make their case ours. Suppose, then, that our ancestors and we have been exposed to constant servitude in the more servile and inferior employments of life; ... that while others in ease have plentifully heaped up the fruit of our labour, we had received barely enough to
relieve nature, and being wholly at the command of others had generally been treated as a contemptible, ignorant part of mankind. Should we, in that case, be less abject than they now are? (Woolman, Some considerations on the keeping of Negroes 1754/1971, p. 202)

In this example, Woolman tries to convince the reader that any apparent superiority that he might feel compared to the Negro is due to having experienced a different life history rather than being due to any fundamental difference in character between two races of humans. In order to show this, he has the reader imagine having the experiences of the Negro that Woolman believes created the abject character he has. If the reader is convinced by this imaginative simulation that he would turn out to have the same abject character, then he should see that there is no morally relevant difference in human nature between himself and the Negro. Hence, slavery will be seen as a cause of harm for anyone, regardless of race, and its elimination justified by the harm that it causes. This is a form of what Campbell and Kumar (2012; 2013) call “moral consistency reasoning,” where several cases are compared and through this comparison a consistent moral judgment across cases is formed. However, it should be pointed out that the basis of consistency as Woolman used it here is consistency with respect to care/harm as a moral foundation, not consistency with respect to loyalty to one’s in-group that would include white slave-masters, rather than betrayal of one's in-group by supporting instead an out-group of black slaves. A similar point applies to the arguments made below. Woolman consistently treats the human race all as ‘brethren’ so as to deny giving special importance to loyalties based on race or religion.

In 1857, on his second major trip south, Woolman reports several conversations that he had on Negroes and slavery in his Journal, with one having a different sort of argument where position exchange also plays a role:

I said that men having power too often misapplied it; that though we made slaves of the Negroes, and the Turks made slaves of the Christians, I believed that liberty was the natural right of all men equally, which he did not deny.... (Woolman 1971, p. 61).

Here the comparison reverses one’s position from being master to being slave to support the suggestion that slavery is not a natural state of any human and so support the notion that liberty is a natural right for all humans equally. The comparison with Turks making slaves of Christians was mentioned in many of the early tracts on the abolition of slavery. In the Quaker literature, it first appears in the unpublished Ger-
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*mantown Protest* in 1688 (Hendricks, up de Graeff, Pastorius, & up den Graef 1688).

Woolman’s second type of ethical argument that involved sympathetic understanding focused not on position exchange but on causal consequences. An example occurs earlier in the conversation just reported from his *Journal*:

I took occasion to remark on the odds in general betwixt a people used to labour moderately for their living, training up their children in frugality and business, and those who live on the labour of slaves, the former, in my view, being the most happy life; with which he concurred and mentioned the trouble arising from the untoward, slothful disposition of the Negores, adding that one of our labourers would do as much in a day as two of their slaves. I replied that free men whose minds were properly on their business found a satisfaction in improving, cultivating, and providing for their families, but Negores, labouring to support others who claim them as their property and expecting nothing but slavery during life, had not the like inducement to be industrious. (Woolman 1971, p. 61)

Once again a comparison between cases is used to argue against the practice of slavery. Woolman begins by comparing two different life styles and their consequence on a “happy life.” He convinces the listener that engaging in one’s own labor is more conducive to a happy life than having slave labor support one. Then, in the second argument against the notion that Negores have “slothful” dispositions, he points out how slaves who must work for others are less motivated than they would be working for self. In both of these comparisons, he and the listener have to imagine causal consequences for persons in two different situations, but, unlike position exchange, they are presented here in a third-person format. By a careful selection of parallel situations based on his understanding of human psychology, Woolman hopes to convince the listener that the situation he compares to that of slavery produces happier lives for all concerned than the one involving slavery. Note that in these arguments he attempts to evoke his listeners to use the same sympathetic or empathetic methodology that he himself employs to justify his views on slavery. As we shall see in the next section this is quite similar to Kitcher’s own empathetic methodology.

I’ll conclude this section with one more poignant quote in which Woolman alludes to that principle of mind which he discovered, and through which he believed that we come to understand that all humans are “brethren.” It comes from the conclusion of Woolman’s second essay on slavery published in 1762:
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There is a principle which is pure, placed in the human mind, which in different places and ages hath had different names. It is, however, pure and proceeds from God. It is deep and inward, confined to no forms of religion nor excluded from any, where the heart stands in perfect sincerity. In whomsoever this takes root and grows, of what nation soever, they become brethren in the best sense of the expression.

However, this is not always the case, especially when self-interest is involved:

He that has a servant made so wrongfully, and knows it to be so, when he treats him otherwise than a free man, when he reaps the benefits of his labour without paying him such wages as are reasonably due to free men for the like service . . . tho’ done in calmness without any show of disorder, do yet deprave the mind in like manner and with as great certainty as prevailing cold congeals water. These steps taken by masters, and their conduct striking the minds of their children whilst young, leave less room for that which is good to work upon them. The customs of their parents, their neighbours, and the people with whom they converse working upon their minds, and they from thence conceiving ideas of things and modes of conduct, the entrance into their hearts becomes in a great measure shut up against the gentle movings of uncreated Purity.

From one age to another the gloom grows thicker and darker, till error gets established by general opinion. (Woolman, 1971, pp. 236–7)

Woolman’s worry here is that the mind can get shut off from the universal sympathetic principle when a general, publically reinforced form of oppression becomes habitual in a society. Then the mind becomes depraved and lives easily in error. Thus, when slavery or any other form of oppression becomes fixed as the custom or norm of a people, overcoming it may require more than sympathy of a few. It may require a catastrophic solution, one where God “turns the channels of power, humbles the most haughty people, and gives deliverance to the oppressed.” (Woolman, 1971, p. 237)

If it were not for his own personal experience of killing the robin and making his discovery of what he believed to be a moral truth of a general human desire to avoid harm to others, as well as a capacity for sympathy that ought to be attended to in our relations with others, I propose that Woolman would never have become the radical reformer that he became. This would not be because he would have failed to have some sympathy with Negro slaves, but because his personal appreciation of the effect of shutting off the mind on cruelty and lack of concern for other living creatures would never have been magnified into the anti-analog nuclear
script and personal life mission that it did for him. His moral psychological discoveries gave him a discernment of moral dilemmas of his time that few of his contemporaries had, and motivated him to act on his insight to teach others what he himself could see clearly. His increased acquaintance with slavery in the South and his discussions with others of varying viewpoints only reinforced his view of slavery and increased his commitment to speak against it, but did little to change his own view of slavery. However, his empathic responsiveness to the concerns of others in these discussions made him an effective and highly valued communicator in the development of the abolition movement among Quakers, both in America and in England.

SYMPATHY, ALTRUISM, PROGRESS, AND ETHICAL TRUTH

During the eighteenth century there were other writers who expressed views similar to Woolman’s about the role of sympathy in our moral dealings with others and who also opposed slavery, though there is no evidence of Woolman’s dependence on these works of others. For instance, Hutcheson was the first philosopher of the moral sense school to argue explicitly against slavery (Sypher 1939). His work that included these arguments, System of moral philosophy, was based on lectures from the 1730s and 40s, but not published until 1755. Adam Smith’s (1757) extensive work on sympathy as the foundation of morality, The theory of moral sentiments, also opposed slavery. Woolman published his earliest work on slavery in 1754 before both of these works.

Whereas Woolman, like other 18th century theorists, focused on sympathy as a uniquely human moral capacity, Kitcher begins his discussion with a closely related concept, “psychological altruism,” which he casts within a biological evolutionary perspective. Psychological altruism is aimed primarily at kin, though in some animals it seems to extend beyond immediate kin, and in humans well beyond kin. However, Kitcher views psychological altruism as a pre-moral capacity that, because of its selective character, often results in “altruism failures.” True morality or ethics depends on the capacity for “normative guidance,” which is needed to overcome altruism failures and emerges only in humans. This human capacity, which had the initial function of facilitating cooperation within hominin groups and eliminating altruism failures, required sufficient mutual sympathy and empathetic understanding within the group for its members to reach agreement on norms that would apply to all members of the group in an egalitarian fashion. On this account,
norms are created through group-level agreement, and punishment is one of the means used to enforce adherence to them when psychological altruism alone would not be effective. Human conscience emerges out of this process. Any ethical truths that we may “discover” are tied to cultural progress in ethical norms. Sympathy might arouse an individual’s emotional response, for instance, to the mistreatment of slaves, and this may lead to a revulsion against an institution that condones that treatment; but on the pragmatic view of truth, this emotional response and the revulsion derived from it requires endorsement by others to achieve validation. Since, truth is something that “happens to an idea” and depends on transitions in ethical norms at a group level, it is impossible for a single initiator on his or her own to be the original discoverer of ethical truth.

Even so, Kitcher sees ethical innovators who show “empathetic understanding” of appropriate desires of a wide range of other individuals as a basis for their ethical proposals, as “justified agents of ethical change:”

Empathetic understanding, especially when sensitive to . . . desires that are typically suppressed can foster societal discussion to remedy existing altruism failures. People who call attention to the frustrated desires, beginning a broader deliberation about them, are likely to move the ethical project toward refinements of its original function.

Kitcher views Mary Wollstonecraft as such an individual because of her “sensitivity to women’s suppressed aspirations.” He is less sure about Woolman:

Woolman is a more ambiguous figure. His account of his route to rejecting slavery reveals the role his own anxieties about personal salvation played. Insofar as these were dominant, we cannot view the psychological processes that generated his proposed reform as reliable. Nevertheless, some considerations underlying his hesitation about writing the bill of sale—concerns for the pains and abuses visited upon slaves, worries that official interest in their well-being (their salvation) is a sham—indicate the operation of an empathetic capacity. To the extent that he resembles Wollstonecraft, we can view him, too, as a justified agent of ethical change. (Kitcher 2011, p. 250)

I think that a much stronger case can be made for Woolman. Based on his personal moral discoveries, on his ethical practice, and on the ethical forms of justification he used in his works and discussions with others, Woolman would certainly fall into the category of a “justified agent of ethical change,” despite Kitcher’s reservations in that regard based on his own analysis of Woolman’s life and works. Moreover, the nature of his
personal moral discoveries and their relationship to ethical theories based on sympathy developed in the 18th century as well as to Kitcher’s own discussion of empathy suggests that personal moral discoveries based on empathetic processes that operate at an individual level can contribute importantly to instances of ethical progress. Thus, the pragmatic naturalist emphasis on norms constructed at a cultural level in instances of progressive ethical change needs supplementation by giving greater room for individual contributions by ethical innovators like Woolman.

In a sense, individuals like Woolman are like Old Testament prophets. Somehow, through individual experiences and personal insight they see more clearly than others the moral illnesses of their own time, the tension in values that need to be addressed. They speak to their compatriots about their individual vision of these ills and how to resolve them. They also warn them of possible consequences, including catastrophes that will occur if their concerns are not addressed. Some of these prophets are more accurate in their understanding and predictions than others. They also vary in their ability to persuade others of their vision and in their personal commitment to work to bring about its possibility. Woolman happened to be a prophet whose vision was more accurate than others, whose powers of persuasion were better than most, and who was committed to work toward change. As a result, he was at the forefront of the movement to abolish chattel slavery. Unfortunately, it took the catastrophe of the Civil War to overcome slavery in the United States, and its consequences are still being felt today. Woolman had other innovative progressive ideas based on his empathetic understanding of the suffering of others. Some of these, society has addressed and as a result seems to have made ethical progress, while others, like societal inequities in wealth and our relations with other animals have not yet been adequatly addressed.

CONCLUSION
I believe that attending to individual lives of ethical innovators and to the moral discoveries that may have occurred in their lives can contribute as importantly to a naturalistic approach toward understanding ethical progress as that taken by Kitcher. His pragmatic naturalism attends mainly to phenomena at an interpersonal and cultural level, but it may underestimate the role of individuals like Woolman who can often lead the way in getting others to rethink current moral practices and ethical codes in a progressive way. They can set an example not only by
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expressing a unique personal moral vision not readily perceived by others, but also by living a life congruent with that vision. Neither the individual nor the interpersonal approach requires that we resolve issues about the nature of ethical truth. Yet, even limiting ourselves to a fully naturalistic approach to ethical progress requires that we make room not only for group-level progressive evolution of norms, but also for the discernment by individuals of novel possibilities for richer forms of cooperative existence that can motivate them to initiate progressive ethical transitions at a group level.

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ENDNOTES

1. Woolman was not the first American Quaker to argue against slavery, but he seems to be the first whose writing on the topic received formal approval by a Quaker organization.

2. I thank Philip Kitcher for pointing out this distinction to me.

3. I have made an informal quantitative investigation of Woolman’s moral motivations using the Moral Foundations Dictionary of moral terms (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek 2009) on his Journal. Using these terms, Woolman ranks high on care/harm and sanctity/degradation compared to the combined sermons by liberals and conservatives used in that study, but below their average on the other three moral foundations. He is more like liberals on care/harm and more like conservatives on sanctity/degradation. Woolman’s attention to sanctity reflects his religious orientation and personal asceticism, but also to his commitment to a sympathetic methodology. Since this dictionary did not include liberty/oppression, no comparisons could be made on this moral foundation; but it is obvious that he would also rank very high on this more recently proposed moral motivation.
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