

Nonabsolutism and Social Change

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Abstract

Nonabsolutism and Social Change

Dean Joseph

There has been little to no inquiry into the normative problems involved in social change. Consequently, we lack an adequate normative framework tailored precisely for the guidance of collective action to that end. In this paper, I argue that normative principles for social change should be considered nonabsolute. To demonstrate this, I develop two normative-ethical frameworks, one absolutist and the other nonabsolutist, to examine how they perform in that context. On the absolutist view, normative principles are binding on agents' behaviour in all circumstances; that is, as absolutes. Another view would be to treat those norms as nonabsolutes, or binding conditionally. I argue that, in the context of social change, the absolutist framework encounters three problems insoluble for it, and so we should adopt nonabsolutism. The latter position, however, brings forth several problems not faced by the former. Namely, it seems to require a supplementary account of moral reasoning to resolve difficult normative problems such as cases of conflicting duties. In response, I argue that setting out explicit rules for what to do in advance of all complex particular cases is absurd. I then address several normative tasks ethical theories are frequently held to by philosophers to see whether they are necessary desiderata. I conclude by appealing to a novel conception of collective moral reasoning which has the upshot of requiring agents to be guided by plausible substantive principles for social change.

It is sometimes complained that Aristotle does not attempt to outline a decision procedure for questions about how to behave. But we have good reason to be suspicious of the assumption that there must be something to be found along the route that he does not follow.

(McDowell "Virtue and Reason", 1979, 347-8)

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§1. Introduction

Suppose that a group of close friends are having one of those political conversations where they all say quite a lot, and probably argue a little, but as always, “nothing changes.” In the conversation I am imagining, the participants are mainly complaining about what is wrong with the world, socially, politically, etc., and each participant has something to offer in the way of what a better world would look like. Luckily for them, a substantial amount of work has converged on the idea of justice, nonideal theory, and recently, feasibility. But an idea that has received comparatively less philosophical attention is how social change should be brought about. I take the practical question of social justice to be “*what should we do?*”¹ (... about the conditions of our social world), and I will be concerned with one answer – social change – in what follows. The question I want to ask is *how should we do it?* Since there has been little to no inquiry into the normative problems involved in social change we lack an adequate normative framework tailored precisely for the guidance of collective action to that end. In short, we lack an account of how we should bring about a better world.

In this paper, I will argue that normative principles for social change should be considered nonabsolute. To demonstrate this, I will develop two normative-ethical frameworks, one absolutist and the other nonabsolutist, to examine how they perform in that context. On the absolutist view, normative principles are binding on agents’ behaviour in all circumstances, that is, as absolutes. Another conception would be to treat those norms as nonabsolutes, or binding conditionally. An absolutist view may be preferable since it disallows trade-offs between norms thus avoiding leaving agents to their own devices in high-stakes moral reasoning. In contrast, a nonabsolutist ethics for social change seems to be in a better position to handle conflict cases where agents have no way to adhere to two or more norms at once. However, even if a nonabsolutist framework can

promise to handle these hard cases, a subsequent worry will arise over how agents can determine which norms take priority in particular circumstances. At this point, the absolutist position may begin to look more appealing since it avoided the need for a supplementary account of moral reasoning. This criticism, however, relies on the assumption that the procedures for moral reasoning must already explicitly reside in an ethical theory, and otherwise that theory can be charged for failing one essential normative task. But that claim is mistaken, or so I will argue.

My first task (§1.1) will be to sketch for us a sense of ameliorative social change as well as the motivation for developing a normative theory for that purpose. In Section 2 I outline the absolutist framework. I then attack it (§2.2) on the grounds that it generates unnecessary problems regarding feasibility, even rendering some ameliorative goals and outcomes entailed by social change inaccessible. From here (§3) I advance a nonabsolutist framework that handles these problems which I call “the flexibility framework.” In contrast to the absolutist position, my preferred account treats the normative principles for social change as binding conditional on particular circumstances of action. This move, however, calls for an explanation of the moral reasoning involved in resolving problematic cases where duties are conditional. In Section 4 I comment on this “trade-off problem” and how agents may determine which norms apply in problematic cases without sacrificing nonabsolutism or appealing to intuitionism. Section 5 concludes.

§1.1 – Ameliorative social change and nonideal conditionsⁱⁱ

My preliminary aim will be to capture a sense of what ameliorative social change is and what motivates the project of outlining the framework for a normative ethical theory of action-guiding principles specific to this purpose. I understand social change as a perpetual project of ameliorating

injustice and the social and political conditions in which subjects continue to find themselves. In Robin Zheng's words, the social change we are concerned with is "a large-scale, comprehensive, global alteration of social arrangements—a change *of* rather than *in* a system" (2022, 1).ⁱⁱⁱ So, by social change we refer to an ameliorative collective project, separating this discussion from regressive or historical and nondeliberate social change.^{iv,v}

As I understand it, a normative ethical theory should be geared precisely for the task of action-guidance in the context of social change for two principal reasons: 1) social change is pursued in *nonideal conditions*, and 2) it is the goal of a motivated collective whose actions and aims may cast the widest wake of consequences across our social world. I will use "nonideal conditions" to refer to the circumstances of injustice within which social change is pursued. There are two senses of it. First, a positional sense:

Nonideal conditions (positional sense): Conditions are nonideal when they fail to approximate those held by conceptions of justice we consider to be reasonable to accept or intuitions of what a better world would look like.

In other words, this sense indicates that the position of the social world falls short of something better in various ways.^{vi} There is also a compliance sense:

Nonideal conditions (compliance sense): Many agents act in partial compliance with the duties that may reasonably be expected of them (Valentini 2012, 655-6).

In other words, and in one sense, agents are often in a position to help others without any undue detriment to themselves, and some are in a position to help a great many subjects, yet they continually fail to do so. We must also note that the addressees of our provisional normative ethical theory will be a particular collective of agents. Namely, they are those readily motivated to act to

ameliorate nonideal conditions and are among many other agents who are capable of so acting but are unsympathetic with or working against our collective of change.^{vii,viii}

Within nonideal conditions a problem arises which traditional normative ethical theories are not geared to resolve.

The nonideal duties problem (ND): Social conditions are unacceptably poor, and many agents act in partial compliance with their duties. To ameliorate injustice, only some agents are prepared to do more than what their duties as individuals require. Assume we cannot convince all agents to fulfill their individual duties, however conceived. What provisional duties qua principles for social change should count as action-guiding for agents of change seeking to ameliorate social conditions?

Here we find ourselves in the peculiar position of requiring a set of principles for the action of only a limited sum of agents since many are unwilling to respect moral principles. In contrast to many normative ethical theories, ND indicates that pursuing social change requires a theory that is provisional with respect to its deployment in nonideal conditions and nonuniversal with respect to the agents it addresses. I am not rejecting the corpus of traditional normative ethical theories nor proposing an additional one. Rather, we are searching for action-guidance in conditions where, to bring about a better world, the perpetual lack of agents' moral motivation makes our traditional ethical theories fall flat on social change. Moreover, were one to begin fulfilling one's duties when others are not, doing so would be insufficient for bringing about large-scale, ameliorative social change.

To insist that agents just start doing what is right, however conceived, would be the work of the missionary of moral philosophy. That is a fine project, but it is not what concerns me presently. The spur to social change turns on the fact that pervasive consequences continue to issue

from the sum of our failings as a moral community. We have universal standards of right and wrong which we may only hope to collectively meet. What we need is a provisional normative ethical theory tailored for those agents who are prepared to do “more than their fair share” (Valentini 2012, 655) to bring about a better world through social change, where, with traditional ethical theories, we risk casting this action into the realm of supererogation or requiring special substantive principles specific to this purpose. The normative questions brought on by those principles specific to social change is precisely what I am after.

§2. The absolutist normative framework

There are two positions I will consider as suggesting answers to the question “*how should we bring about a better world?*” The first of these is to be absolutist about normative values in nonideal conditions. Let us define this position as:

Normative absolutism: A set of normative principles must be adhered to in all cases (Shafer-Landau 1997, 585).^{ix}

Under this framework, whatever the normative principles for social change turn out to be, they apply to agents’ behaviour in all cases. We must introduce a term here to further elucidate this position. By “normative binding” I will refer to whether some normative value must be, may not be, or may partially be adhered to. If norms carry strict binding we may call adherence to them obligatory, and if not then partial or nonadherence is permissible. Absolutism operates under a context-independent view of normative binding.

Context-independent normative binding: Normative principles are binding on agents independently of the particular facts of Φ -ing and the circumstances in which Φ is performed.

To work with a concrete example, let us posit *democracy*, *equality*, *personal liberty*, and *nondomination* as our four substantive norms for social change.^x

On this account, a collective of change must act such that the way in which social change is brought about is democratic, subjects are treated as equals in some plausible construal, a certain conception of liberty is respected, and arbitrary or discriminate forms of domination are avoided. Undemocratic action, action that violates some plausible conception of equality, action that violates some plausible conception of liberty or liberties, and action that is predicated on dominating individuals would be, strictly speaking, impermissible.

§2.1 The appeal of absolutism for social change

As a framework applied to the normative principles of social change, the absolutist position is attractive for several reasons. First, it carries a strong concern for the stability of the outcomes of social change. Since social change seeks a large-scale alteration of social conditions, the means to effecting social change are critical to ensuring the stability of the outcomes effected and the resilience of the principles sought within the resulting social conditions (Cohen 2008, 327). For instance, it would be straightforwardly impermissible to act as though ‘all bets are off,’ that social change must be realized by any means. This strategy may set an ameliorative goal even farther back than before agents pursued it for the reason that the outcome realized would be unstable. One plausible demand for the process of bringing about social change may be that there be a consistency, preferably a great degree, between the principles guiding action in the process and the principles constituent of the goal. This is to say that if the goal were to bring about a thoroughly democratic outcome, then the process to bringing that about should also be thoroughly democratic, and so on for other appropriate normative values.^{xi}

An additional attraction of the absolutist view is that it seeks to ensure the permissibility of social change by disallowing exceptions in agents' adherence to normative principles. The worry that a collective pursuing social change may realize a disastrous outcome is perhaps the most immediate moral risk involved in social change. To be sure, if anything counts as a strike against an ethical theory, it is that it allows or even requires bad results. We should remember that a normative ethical theory for social change is not concerned with ensuring that the outcomes some collective seek be realized. The task for a substantive normative theory is to lay out which principles should guide the pursuit of those outcomes, whether or not they are realized. One objection to pursuing social change at all is that the outcomes sought may not be feasible, but furthermore, and due to this difficulty, the attempt to realize social change would bring about a worse state of affairs than if it had not been pursued. The absolutist position seems well-suited to quell this worry on normative grounds. It recognizes the difficulty of achieving effective social change by requiring agents to adhere to norms in cases where feasibility constraints^{xii} challenge that adherence. This normative stringency, so to speak, also offers a tidy setting for practical reasoning.

A third appeal of absolutism for social change is its normative simplicity, which presents fewer problems for practical reasoning than if norms admitted exceptions. The absolutist account keeps the normative network simple: if agents are to pursue social change, prescribed norms are to be adhered to in all circumstances; if agents encounter feasibility constraints that cannot be overcome, as is likely to occur in nonideal conditions, a collective is not permitted to transgress norms in order to progress towards their goals. This coheres well with an expectation we may hold an ethical theory to, that it tells agents what to do in practical conditions. The absolutist framework weighs adherence to norms over prudential reasons for action in every case. So, if agents knew

that some particularly stubborn practical constraints could be overcome by the employment of, say, violence, the absolutist framework would reject this and other expedient routes. Let us now turn to problems with absolutism for social change.

§2.2 Against absolutism for social change

No ethical position comes without its problems. It is customary to outline pros and cons of various views to see how they stack up against each other, but since the stakes involved in social change are plausibly higher – its pursuit being more prone to large-scale harm – than the failure to meet one’s individual duties, I will argue that absolutism is wholly unsuited to serve as a normative framework for social change. Absolutism faces three problems.

The first of these I call “feasibility minimization.” The stringency of an absolutist position avoids permitting undesirable consequences issuing from the action of collective agents through fluctuations in the normative binding of various principles. Even if agents found occasion to overcome feasibility constraints at the expense of action-permissibility, absolutism would reject the expedient route, averting the risks of realizing unintended consequences. I had also agreed above that the task of a normative theory of social change was to lay out principles for action-guidance in nonideal conditions towards an ameliorative goal, not to ensure the success of a collective’s goals. But it is a mistake to think that a normative ethical theory for social change must be indifferent to the feasibility of agents accessing their goals.^{xiii} The spur to social change is to ameliorate unjust social conditions and a provisional normative theory should be geared, I argued, precisely for that context. Imposing upon agents absolute duties can introduce excessive normative obstacles in circumstances in which adhering to particular norms is precisely what minimizes the feasibility of realizing a desirable goal, and intuitively without impermissible

consequences resulting from nonadherence to that norm. In these cases, all else being equal, feasibility constraints that issue from the absolutist framework are excessive when a transgression of some norms would produce ameliorative results; that is, when the consequences of an intuitively acceptable transgression of norms would produce more just conditions. Thus something counterintuitive obtains accepting *context-independent normative binding* when binding is unnecessarily stringent. In some cases, pausing or abandoning efforts at social change will allow unjust conditions or conditions worse than those that would have resulted from nonadherence with norms to persist.

Consider as an example of a feasibility minimization a case of civil disobedience. Some collective C is seeking more just social circumstances, say, respect for a certain group's rights, but they face legal or institutional opponents O who will not fairly deliberate with C or implement fairer conditions. If we regard C as bound by a democratic norm which requires them to engage in public or legal deliberation with O, then continuing to adhere to that norm when O is not interested in fair deliberation, seeking only to disrupt C's actions, strikes me as imprudent. If engaging in civil disobedience is permissible given that C's attempts at democratic deliberation have failed to procure fair results (Fung 2005, 410-11), this counts as a strong reason to accept that norms for social change are not best construed as carrying context-independent normative binding. I take the normative binding of a democratic norm in the above case to loosen due to the particular circumstances in which C finds itself. So, what I want to show is that the binding of each norm may constrict or loosen depending on particular situational conditions. But that is not to say that the binding a norm has can be determined mechanically by appeal to any tension at all between action and goal.^{xiv}

A second problem for absolutism in the context of social change is what I will call the “inaccessibility problem.” Since the absolutist position holds agents to adhering to each norm at once, contradictions obtain when conditions do not allow agents to adhere to two or more norms simultaneously. Assume that a fair distribution of or access to resources is an acceptable characteristic of a better world. Now imagine that a collective is seeking a redistribution of resources in an isolated setting. If we judge the consequences of this goal to be just, it seems that given the normative set we posited above, personal liberty cannot be adhered to in all circumstances here, and even a commitment to a democratic value would be challenged in the pursuit of this goal.^{xv} Nonetheless, we can imagine resource redistribution entailing a just outcome where equality, democracy, personal liberty, and nondomination are all more thoroughly fulfilled in the resulting conditions despite a loosening in the normative binding of a few of those principles during the process to getting there. If we can agree that these four norms, or any of the best possible set, may require partial adherence in nonideal conditions for social change to be accessed, then agents face a dilemma. On the first horn, agents could continue to pursue social change which would require partial or nonadherence to one or several norms. On the second horn, agents could abandon altogether any ameliorative goals that require partial or nonadherence. But absolutism has already taken a position on how to proceed here, prescribing in all cases that pursuing social change be halted when goals entail normative conflicts. This solution, however, is no solution at all. Here, our normative framework is not merely erring on the side of caution, but requiring that agents disengage from ameliorative social change whenever normative trouble is afoot. Thus there are some outcomes of social change that are inaccessible to agents under an absolutist framework, but those very outcomes are also entailed by a plausible conception of what an amelioration of the social world would require.^{xvi}

We may glean from the inaccessibility problem an additional difficulty for absolutism. This is the more familiar case of conflicting duties. In the redistribution case, agents are motivated to realize a fairer distribution of resources by their devotion to the four principles we have so far been working with. But realizing this goal creates a conflict between the democratic, nondomination, and egalitarian principles, on the one hand, and the personal liberty principle on the other. Here, strict adherence with the personal liberty principle – allowing even grossly unfair distributions of resources persisting – undermines the three other principles in our set, especially the egalitarian principle.^{xvii} If agents are normatively prohibited from effecting a redistributive goal then they are required to at least not interfere with unequal distributions of resources, if people “who have too much” (Robeyns 2022, 250) are unsympathetic with doing their fair share to help when they can, without undue personal detriment. This result, however, is highly counterintuitive given that the goal of social change is to ameliorate nonideal conditions. Here again, under the yoke of the absolutist framework, agents are forced to allow those conditions to persist.^{xviii}

In sum, absolutism brought forth three problems: i) it excessively reduces the feasibility of ameliorating nonideal conditions, ii) ameliorative goals are rendered wholly inaccessible if outcomes preclude strict adherence with norms, and iii) in cases of conflicting duties, agents must cease their efforts. It appears then that absolutism requires agents to stop short of ameliorating social conditions without regard to particular circumstances, as demonstrated in the cases of civil disobedience or fairer distributions of resources. Let us now examine the alternate position.

§3. The flexibility framework: nonabsolutism

An alternate position suggesting an answer to “*how should we bring about a better world?*” is to be nonabsolutist about principles for social change. I call this position the flexibility framework.

Normative nonabsolutism: A set of normative principles need not be adhered to in all cases (Shafer-Landau 1997, 586; 2015, 237).

Under this framework, whether and to what degree various principles are normatively binding supervenes on practical considerations such as the circumstances in which agents act. So, nonabsolutism operates under the following view of normative binding:

Context-dependent normative binding: Normative principles are binding on agents' behaviour conditionally with respect to the particular facts of Φ -ing and the circumstances in which Φ is performed.

In this section I will argue that this modification avoids the feasibility and accessibility problems faced by absolutism and that we should adopt the present view.

The flexibility framework treats the substantive norms for social change, whatever they might be, – *democracy, equality, personal liberty, and nondomination*, for example – as “conditional duties” (Ross 2007, 19-20), that is, principles that are normatively binding conditional on particular practical conditions.^{xix} Russ Shafer-Landau calls these “excellent, nonabsolute, permanent reason[s]” for action (Shafer-Landau 2015, 237).^{xx} So, whether various norms are to be adhered to at once in nonideal conditions is determined through agents' judgements of facts about the conditions in which they act. Instead of straightforwardly regarding partial or nonadherence with any normative principle impermissible, when we ask whether some action is permissible, the correct response, as Thomas Scanlon claims, “may of course be ‘It depends,’ followed by a specification of additional facts about the action that are needed to determine its permissibility” (Scanlon 2008, 9). We have already seen two examples (civil disobedience and redistribution) of permissibility depending on “additional facts” particular to circumstances in which action is

performed. Let us now examine how nonabsolutism performs in the tasks of social change and with the problems faced by the absolutist framework.

§3.1 – Is nonabsolutism better suited than absolutism for social change?

What separates the flexibility framework from the absolutist position is that it holds the normative principles guiding social change as conditional on particular facts about the circumstances of action. We should consider this a significant strength over the former account for social change. Consider a simple case where one has made a promise to a friend, say, to drive them to a sports game. All else equal, a plausible ethical theory would require them to keep this promise. But if they suddenly encounter a stranger in need of help that would require breaking the promise, it seems plausible that the normative binding to keep the promise loosens.^{xxi}

Now, an absolutist theory may cause little trouble if the duties that must always be adhered to are those requiring inaction (Shafer-Landau 2015, 229). For instance, it is very easy not to maliciously murder innocent people. This shows us that the level of normative trouble an absolutist position causes for agents depends on what kind of duties it prescribes. Unfortunately for absolutism, social change is a particularly trouble-prone moral context in this regard since any plausible set of substantive normative principles for guiding action towards a better world will include positive duties, that is, norms the conformity with which require action, and not in all cases *inaction*. We cannot expect a better world to follow from *not* acting, adhering only to obligations not to do this or that.^{xxii} If the principles guiding the process of social change are to enjoy any amount of stability in resulting conditions, agents' positive powers will need some exercising, at least to some degree, and likely to a very great degree, since collective action requires a great amount of cooperation (Searle 2009, 9 and 49).

Let us consider the problems the absolutist position encountered in order. Returning to the feasibility minimizing problem, civil disobedience, it may be argued, does not necessarily require nonadherence to the principles of social change, depending of course on what those principles turn out to be. Depending also on the circumstances in which civil disobedience is practiced, conflicts in adhering to the four norms we have been working with may not arise at all. But we should stipulate that even in cases where a set of norms can be adhered to altogether in social change, we may hold nonetheless that those principles were conditional duties, only that, fortunately, conditions did not present themselves such that some principles could not be adhered to. This is to say that the nonabsolutist account does not render problematic a project for social change that is going well, only that we should want our normative framework to be sufficient for accounting for problematic cases should they arise, even if they do not.

The critical point here is to see that the flexibility framework itself does not minimize the feasibility of particular goals for social change below an acceptable threshold. The absolutist position inflated the threshold of impermissible action to any endeavours that fell short of strict adherence with each of the normative principles guiding social change. As we argued above, this unnecessarily minimizes the feasibility of agents realizing some ameliorative goals and renders others wholly inaccessible. The flexibility framework, of course, retains a threshold of (im)permissible action, but it does not set this bar so high as strict adherence with all norms. Instead, agents have the normative flexibility to look to the additional facts about the circumstances within which they find themselves to determine the permissibility of this or that action, nonetheless with their principles counting as defeasible reasons for action. In the case of civil disobedience, as with union-striking, for instance, the additional fact that a collective is dealing with bad faith

opposition^{xxiii} plausibly provides a sufficient reason for partial adherence to democratic, deliberative, or other norms.

Let us revisit the inaccessibility problem. The pursuit of a redistribution of resources posed a conflict between some of our norms, namely, equality and personal liberty. A normative framework cannot ensure that any collective's goal be successfully realized, but it need not be the case that the feasibility of reaching those goals is normatively hindered. The absolutist position rendered the redistributive goal wholly inaccessible on normative grounds, since achieving that goal required partial or temporary nonadherence with some norms. But we want the success or failure of realizing ameliorative goals, insofar as realizing those goals would be ameliorative, to be decided on the scale of feasibility, not accessibility. If agents fail to secure an ameliorative goal due to its being normatively *inaccessible* then our normative framework clearly has a hand in preventing social change, whether or not that goal is feasible. In the case of civil disobedience or union striking, a collective may fail to bring about the outcomes they seek, but under a nonabsolutist framework, the outcomes the collective sought were in principle normatively accessible. In other words, there were possible routes^{xxiv} for a collective to pursue social change and achieve desired outcomes without a conflict in our normative set obtaining that prescribes they cease action.

To sum up, on the flexibility framework, *context-dependent normative binding* keeps the outcomes agents seek accessible in principle, whether or not achieving those outcomes is (in)feasible. Agents are then given the leeway needed to consider particular circumstances and form judgements about how to proceed and which normative bindings hold. But we have not yet discussed the problem of conflicting duties. Since we are working with a pluralist set of norms and

have accepted *context-dependent normative binding* to keep open for agents many intuitive routes in “the garden” (van Inwagen 1990, 277), the worry arises whether the move to nonabsolutism has left too much up to agents. If principles are conditional then we should ask when particular norms take priority over others and how agents can determine these ‘trade-offs’ in moral reasoning. These and other questions I take up in the next section.

§4. Nonabsolute norms, moral reason, and trade-offs

One of the problems the absolutist position faced was that it could not adequately account for cases of conflicting duties. The question, at this point, is still open over whether the flexibility framework is in a better position to handle this problem. What we want to know is the following: what is the trade-off rule or procedure for when such cases arise? Do the normative values in any set for social change carry priority rankings? How do the answers to the previous questions bear on the practical question of what agents are to do in nonideal conditions? And how can agents know what to do? Without a trade-off procedure for when some principle should give way to another, the worry arises that the move to nonabsolutism may allow social change to veer aimlessly into impermissible territory. In this section, I respond to these questions and concerns.

To the dismay of some, perhaps, I do not believe it is possible to formulate a trade-off rule to cover all cases of conflicting duties, or problematic cases of other kinds, in advance, without exceptions finding cracks in that rule. But this does not mean that all is lost. In “Virtue and Reason,” John McDowell advances a skeptical attack against the codifiability of a decision procedure applying in all cases in advance from which agents may determine what the right or best thing to do is, or rather, which concerns will be “operative” in determining this.^{xxv} His thoughts there will be instructive for our purposes.

Let us define a generalized form of normative uncodifiability.^{xxvi}

Normative uncodifiability: In reasoning what to do, agents cannot determine a ranking of the relevant prudential and moral concerns to be weighed in a particular case in advance; thus a determination of what agents should do, in consideration of those concerns, cannot be made explicit in advance (McDowell 1979, 343-4).

Accepting *normative uncodifiability* does not entail that agents' decision procedures in moral reasoning or the appropriate trade-offs between norms cannot be made explicit *at all*. Rather, it would mean that the right or best way for agents to proceed (regarding adherence to norms applying to their conduct) in particular circumstances is not something agents can determine *explicitly and in advance* of all circumstances.^{xxvii} Now, if there is just one case where a set of normative principles does not exhaust guidance in what to do by weighing, or providing agents with general rules to weigh, the particular prudential and moral concerns in advance, then we should reject *context-independent normative binding*.^{xxviii} But in doing this we will require an account of how agents can weigh the relevant concerns without guidance only from that set of principles.

To find some footing here let us lay out three guiding points for the following sections: (a) I will assume no priority rankings between the normative values in our set for social change; (b) we want to know whether the trade-off rule and the appropriate normative trade-offs are prescribed theoretically (by the explicitly accepted set of principles for social change), or non-theoretically (decided upon by the agents with reference to other implicit normative principles) – I go with the latter; and (c) in asking if a trade-off rule can be made explicit, we should be asking *when*, not simply *whether* it can. I will now handle these points in turn.

§4.1 – (a) Priority rankings for normative principles?

We cannot assume priority rankings between norms for social change at least until we agree on what those norms are. Now, I have suggested that I suspect some or all of *democracy*, *equality*, *personal liberty*, and *nondomination* will be in any plausible set, and we have also encountered other plausible principles such as *stability*, *functional sustainability*, and *deliberation*. But I have not provided a substantive argument that any of these principles must be included in the set.^{xxix}

The effective thrust of the nonabsolutist position was that if the pursuit of an ameliorative goal requires partial or nonadherence to various norms in degree or duration, a collective of change is not necessarily normatively prevented from realizing that goal. In the case of civil disobedience and union striking, the additional fact that a collective is dealing with an uncooperative opponent bears on the normative binding of a commitment to democratic deliberation, and even to a democratic principle simpliciter if their adversaries are the larger body. In contrast, in the case of redistribution, where those who hoard resources are a fraction of those who need more than they have to effectively determine their own social and political conditions, a democratic principle may not be strained, but the normative binding of a personal liberty principle, or an entitlement principle of the sort Nozick had in mind (Nozick 1974, 164), may loosen.

So, if a context-independent priority ranking of democracy over other principles or vice versa were adopted, the worry arises whether nonabsolutism with priority rankings for its norms collapses back into absolutism. Perhaps there may be stronger versions of nonabsolutism with no priority rankings and weaker versions where some ranking does function. I cannot take a position on this question here, but I see no reason that weaker forms of nonabsolutism would need to accept *context-independent normative binding*, and this is what matters. It seems that whether there is a ranking of the norms for social change under a nonabsolutist framework, there are at least some

cases where one or other principles can plausibly take priority over others context-dependently.^{xxx} This is an indication that whether we should adopt stronger or weaker nonabsolutism may itself be best decided context-dependently.

An additional question now is, for action in social change to be permissible, are there necessary or sufficient conditions for adhering to a number of the principles in the normative set? As a general rule, agents should attempt to adhere to all of the principles in a plausible set. Otherwise, why accept them in the first place? But conditions are rarely so tractable, and this is what calls credence to the need for nonabsolutism in social change. With the present question we are advancing further into territory that demands context-independent answers without which, it is threatened, the nonabsolutist position will prove untenable. I fear, however, that we have been asking too much of our normative ethical theory. This brings us to (b).

§4.2 – (b) The decision procedure – theoretic or non-theoretic?

In “Virtue and Reason,” McDowell discusses a “vertigo” (McDowell 1979, 339) experienced by the “terrifying” thought that undergirding our conduct in everyday life – say, in crossing a busy street, having a conversation, or deciding which apartment to settle on – is not algorithmic applications of explicit rules, but a nebulous collection of social practices and the employment of implicit knowledge.^{xxxi} This ‘vertigo’ represents a dissatisfaction with the lack of explicit rules for the practical question of *what to do*, so that in the absence of explicit rules to “keep us, as it were, on the rails” (McDowell 1979, 339) in moral reasoning, heads spin like a top. Critically, however, the head that is doing the spinning is the theoretician of ethics “grasping [at] books of rules” (Cavell 1976, 52) in this supposed tempest, not the agent applying rules who often gets by with implicit knowledge and its applications.

By accepting *normative uncodifiability* we are resisting the idea that we should expect from a normative theory explicit rules and procedures for what to do, since what a theory prescribes for practical purposes often fails to match the complexity of the world.^{xxxiii} So, if our normative ethical theory for social change is charged for offering agents no clear rules for deciding what to do in complex cases, then the defense we can appeal to is humility and circumspection. To offer a rule prescribing, “if *X* then norms *N1*, *N2*, or *N3* do or do not apply, and so on,” would be to risk a greater recklessness than refusing to suggest one in advance.^{xxxiii} We need only consider the consequences of suggesting such a rule which admits of theoretical cracks having maintained that that rule was sufficient for practical guidance. The positive suggestion is the more reckless than refraining from suggesting a rule because if we were to offer one we should be sincere about its efficacy. If practical rules were suggested with the caveat “this rule cannot apply in all cases,” then we have yet fallen short of finding that context-independent rule in advance which our detractors are demanding. Say an unconvinced skeptic insists that it is true that one or many basic rules for what to do in nonideal conditions have limited applicability, “we just haven’t set out *all* the rules needed.” Our response should then be, “yes, but what are all *those* rules?” It is at this point that anyone clinging to context-independence must concede that they cannot say much more than “and so on *ad infinitum*”^{xxxiv} until agents encounter distinct problematic cases. We can follow general explicit norms, but the rules for agents’ appropriate adherence to them, or the auxiliary norms of norms, as it were, cannot be anticipated and made explicit in advance. In consideration of our discussion so far, we should regard a thoroughgoing context-independence about the normative values for social change as highly suspect.

To elucidate that agents may know what to do without explicit guidance, consider an example from Stuart Hampshire. Performing a supposedly simple task like biking up a hill – much

simpler than the tasks involved in social change – is something the rider does implicitly. They need not think about mind-muscle connections, exerting pressure on the peddles, when to shift gears, and so forth (Hampshire 1978, 24-5). In fact, to protest that to properly cycle the rider requires an explicit list of all of the relevant rules and their appropriate applications, suggesting that they be judiciously guided through these could no doubt be charged as bad pedagogy.^{xxxv} Agents find occasion to make their knowledge of norms and the required conduct explicit and advance their knowledge when conflicts in the performance of those tasks present themselves (Jaeggi 2018, 79).^{xxxvi}

That is acceptable, but our problem, it might be said, lies with agents who do not yet know how to perform their tasks and these tasks involve precarious ethical problems in the context of social change. It is not as though this is a bicycle some collective is hopping back on for a ride! That is a difficult challenge, but this line of thought can be resisted on the grounds that the addressees of our provisional normative ethical theory are a particular kind of agent. They are agents of change who pursue more just social conditions, recognizing existing pervasive forms of injustice. These agents are well-acquainted with moral know-how by their explicit acceptance of and commitment to plausible norms for social change. Moreover, they are forced into positions, by the nature of nonideal conditions, to learn *what to do*, and learn to “discern and define problems of public interest and experiment with solutions to these problems” (Anderson 2010, 96). Elizabeth Anderson calls collective action issuing from these circumstances and with these effects “educative acts.”^{xxxvii} As a collective of change, the addressees of our normative theory are a group of agents similarly motivated and bound by their desire to resolve unjust conditions in an ameliorative manner. So, we are addressing a collective rather than individuals of whom no association is assumed. The moral and practical reasoning our collective will need to employ will

be to cooperate with each other through democratic deliberation. When they come upon normative problems or feasibility constraints in need of a response, they will need to turn to each other for help in determining how to permissibly proceed. Here we could not be in a better position to treat the addressees of a normative ethical theory seeking to realize projects for social change as what Michael Bratman calls “planning agents.”^{xxxviii} On this view, we can reject an individualistic intuitionist view of moral reasoning. That view would hold that agents possess a private capacity for direct, intuitive apprehension of what to do in particular circumstances (Wallace 1991, 585). Many difficult problems are invited by the intuitionist view of moral reasoning – which are particularly malignant in the context of social change – such as how agents can come to know what to do simply by looking inwards, so to speak, and how they can justify the permissibility of their action and principles to others. Instead, through addressing practical and moral problems together, committed to explicitly accepted norms and the pursuit of mutual plans, agents of change have the opportunities to learn from the challenges they face to deliberate and experiment democratically about how to proceed.

We are not guaranteeing success in social change, but what we have established, I hope, is that the expectation that an ethical theory in nonideal conditions set out rules exhausting guidance on what to do in advance is unrealistic. Expecting otherwise would be like asking the bicyclist to describe, exhaustively, the procedure for climbing up any possible kind of hill; there would be a “counter-hill” for their every response. The nonabsolutist approach leaves much decision-making up to the agents, but they are generally guided nonetheless by their mutual acceptance of nonabsolute principles and their democratic plans to bring about a better world. On this view, agents have the normative room to tackle cases that challenge adherence to norms *when*, not if

they arise, and find answers for how to proceed together through rational, democratic deliberation.^{xxxix}

§4.3 – (c) Moral reasoning and implicit and explicit norms

We finally reach point (c). The resistance to the desire that answers to practical questions must already reside in our theory, needing only to be untangled context-independently, is also echoed in close quarters to conditional duties. In David McNaughton’s “An Unconnected Heap of Duties?” he provides a defense of Rossian conditional duties by criticizing the practical demands frequently imposed on ethical theories.^{xl} Of the tasks ethical theories are normally held to McNaughton outlines three: (i) “to impose order and systematic unity” on our moral thought, (ii) to fulfill a justificatory role, for either principles or actions, and (iii) “to supply guidance in making difficult moral choices” (McNaughton 1996, 447). Insofar as we have been concerned with problems for a normative ethical theory for social change, clashing with some of these tasks at various points, let us see how they bear on nonabsolutism for social change and address each of them.

§4.3.1 – Systematicity for moral thought

The flexibility framework, like Ross’ account of prima facie duties, is nonabsolutist about normative values. Moreover, we both face absolutist opponents. One complaint for a nonabsolutist view of normative principles is that it straightforwardly fails in task (i) or does more poorly than the absolutist alternatives.^{xli} If a consequentialist or deontological theory – each absolutist about moral principles – is more systematic than a pluralist, nonabsolutist view like Ross’, then the former are simpler only *at the abstract level of principles* (McNaughton 1996, 441). The absolutist theories leave a mess of practical conditions if counterintuitive cases – such as the exclusion of

animals from the moral sphere in Kant's ethics^{xlii}, or slavery on utilitarianism^{xliii} – are allowed or, in some cases, required. After the absolutist account is done plugging these holes, a nonabsolutist account, more complicated at the abstract level, begins to approach equal ranking or exceed its opponents in systematicity, so long as conditional duties can be employed effectively and intelligibly.^{xliv}

Say an absolutist about social change now concedes that their position offers agents systematicity in moral thought equal to that offered by the nonabsolutist position, and so neither is clearly at an advantage with regard to task (i). This concession, alas, is too little too late. The absolutist in social change has no such chips to bargain with because they are, unlike the Kantian or some consequentialists (perhaps), unable to plug the counterintuitive holes mapped for the absolutist framework in §2.2. With regard to practical conditions that challenge adherence to norms, the absolutist position will either, at best, excessively hinder the feasibility of agents realizing ameliorative goals, or, at worst, render those goals inaccessible on normative grounds, full stop. So, with regard to the systematicity for moral thought offered by absolutism in social change, the trade-off in theoretical virtues is that agents gain order in their moral reasoning but at the expense of sacrificing the feasibility and even accessibility of ameliorative goals. This is a fruitless exchange and reveals not a parity between the competing positions under analysis, but a disadvantage for absolutism. Systematicity in moral thought is not worth much if the theory that guides agents issues counterintuitive directives in an orderly fashion.

§4.3.2 – The justificatory role of an ethical theory

A longstanding criticism of intuitionist positions like Ross' converges on task (ii), voicing a dissatisfaction with the groundlessness of basic duties.^{xlv} On the Rossian view, agents always have

a duty to act out of beneficence and gratitude, to name only two (Ross 2007, 22). These duties are nonderivative in that there are no deeper moral principles undergirding them. Agents can work out reasons not to lie to others or harm them by appeal to the basic duty to nonmaleficence. But nonmaleficence itself is not grounded in any deeper principles. This, many have claimed, offers little reason why we should accept the basic conditional duties in the first instance from which the others are derived.^{xlvi}

I have not yet accepted that the putative principles in the set for social change will be groundless. In fact, we have not settled on what those principles are, only what they likely should be. Nonetheless, we need not hide behind the fact that we have yet to settle on principles to mount an effective defense here. I see no reason why the principles for social change would need to be groundless, especially if they are anything like the principles we have considered so far, some of which any plausible set for social change would need to recognize. Surely, democracy, liberty, equality, and the like can plausibly find grounding in the idea of justice, thus avoiding the groundlessness of intuitionism.^{xlvii} Moreover, since our theory addresses a particular kind of collective rather than unassociated individual subjects, we are not forced into an intuitionist account of *justification* whereby an individual is held to have a direct connection with moral truths.^{xlviii} As I argued in §4.2, the *epistemic* role of how agents come to know what to do falls to the deliberative capacity of the collective of which they are members, and not to their normative theory. There I demonstrated that agents of a collective must turn to each other, exercising deliberative strategies for problem-solving in cases of moral or normative conflict. Thus, the justificatory task too naturally falls to the deliberative, democratic cooperation of a collective, and not to individualist intuitionism.

But is this collective net we cast out to catch the epistemic and justificatory roles of moral reasoning just a modified intuitionism in disguise? An objection here may reason that we have successfully shrugged off the individualism of Rossian intuitionism, but not the intuitionism. After all, how do the individual agents of a collective come to know or justify which normative principles apply in complex cases? Our response to this challenge must appeal again to the collective element of social change. When making moral decisions that affect others in an ordinary context (where no special association between individuals is assumed), and likewise for the context of social change (where associations are assumed), the actions agents perform and the principles they follow may be arraigned in the court of public reason by any member of an appropriately delimited social sphere. That is, fellow moral agents may legitimately request of one another *explanations* for the question “*how* did you come to know that *that* action was required of you?”, and *justifications* for the question “*why* did you do *that*?” An agent following individualist intuitionism, now in this court of public reason, may occasionally provide satisfactory answers to the second question, but only if their justifications, and the moral axioms they are derived from, are acceptable to others. But the individualist’s answer to the explanatory question “I came to know through intuition,” will ring a frustrating dissatisfaction for the ears of most.^{xlix} The answers the individualist provides for either question frequently fail to satisfy those who do not share their ethical beliefs because their moral reasoning, employed to arrive at their having decided to act so, is always in an epistemic relationship with only the principles and the general moral outlook the individual has antecedently adopted. In other words, one has a difficult time justifying one’s reasoning to others if that reasoning presupposes claims others reject or do not accept.

Things are different on the collective picture. Here agents associated through a collective of change in deliberative exchange each share an epistemic and justificatory relationship with

every other member of the deliberative collective, and with their associated moral outlooks, during moral reasoning. The collective does not merely have other moral agents to explain and justify to subsequent to their making moral decisions and acting. Rather, on the collective picture, an element of agents' moral reasoning, antecedently to making decisions and acting, is justifying and explaining their reasoning with others. The individualist is only in a position of justification and explanation *after* the sequence of their moral reasoning produces decisions on what to do and their actions have been performed. So, for a collective of change, the reasons for or against acting so, considered in the collective sphere of justification, and the ethical principles of individuals' moral outlooks that proposals to act are weighed against, will remain consistently diverse. This is not to say that we are rejecting the use of intuition in moral reasoning altogether. Agents of change in deliberation with one another surely must rely on moral intuition and their imagination of what consequences might result from this or that action to aid in reasoning about what to do. What I am rejecting is the use of *intuitionism* as a desirable form of moral justification in social change, not the use of intuitions at all.¹ Nonetheless, the individual agents in the collective, by virtue of their being members of a collective of change, must check their personal moral outlooks with the general explicit principles in the normative set for social change. Agents that straightforwardly abandon or recklessly neglect the putative principles for social change consequently forfeit their status as agents of change.^{li} This distinction, between the simplicity of the epistemic relationship comprising the individualist's moral reasoning, and the diversity of the collective's, is the critical point separating the justificatory and explanatory nature of moral reasoning for a collective of change from both individualism and intuitionism.

§4.3.3 – Ethical theory and practical guidance

What I have been indicating about when trade-off rules between conditional norms can be made explicit should now itself be made explicit in response to task (iii). I call the procedure agents of change may employ to determine normative trade-offs “*collective explication*.” This procedure is employed with the deliberative, nonindividualist, nonintuitionist, collective view of moral reasoning we discussed in response to tasks (i) and (ii).

Collective explication: When faced with conditions not allowing for the full and equal fulfillment of explicit normative principles, agents in particular conditions, generally faithful to that set of norms *ceteris paribus*, consider and deliberate collectively about the facts particular to the conditions in which they act to attempt to find the best, most appropriate way of proceeding.

Now, I say “explicate” and “find” the appropriate trade-off to elucidate that normative rules are not *made* by agents. Following Paul Boghossian, rules always exist before they are accepted as norms on behaviour, and “[m]oral rules are norms on behavior independently of whether they are accepted” (Boghossian 2015, 6). So, the appropriate way of proceeding in problematic moral or normative circumstances will require agents acknowledge and respond to antecedently existing norms.

The lesson for our purposes is that the set of norms guiding social change need not explicitly include all of the auxiliary rules forming the procedures to be followed in conflicting cases, but that agents will find, through collective deliberation, that norms for *what to do* already bear on their behaviour. For instance, consider any of the cases we have discussed thus far. Let us take civil disobedience. These circumstances may not allow for nonpartial fulfillment of democratic or deliberative norms. Agents nonetheless are still committed to their liberty, equality, and nondomination norms, but none of these five norms explicitly indicates to agents that if their

institutional opponents are only stalling and have no interest in implementing fair conditions that, *ceteris paribus*, violence is not a permissible response. Likewise, there need be no explicit rule indicating to these agents that if their opponents are not deliberating fairly, and clearly have no interest in doing so, agents are not obligated keep trying at a foiled strategy and pursue further attempts at deliberation. The norms that now bear on their behaviour, the binding of which has, so to speak, laid dormant before these conditions obtained, now bear on the behaviour of the collective in question thus giving them the opportunity to be informed by those norms on how to proceed. Recalling our discussion above, the epistemic task of determining that these conditions have obtained falls to the collective's capacity to deliberate with each other, as does the justificatory task of defending the practical determinations for how to proceed at which they will arrive.^{lxi}

What happens in problematic normative or moral cases where explicitly accepted norms offer insufficient practical guidance, is a special instance of “disruptions” in implicit knowledge (Jaeggi 2018, 79). In other words, the principles agents implicitly act in accordance with, or those agents are forced to acknowledge in order to respond to unforeseen problems, remain implicit until agents encounter cases that call implicit knowledge to be made explicit, or for their knowledge to be advanced and “revised in the light of further reasoning” (Scanlon 2014, 20). In the civil disobedience case we reviewed just above, agents encountered circumstances in which one set of principles (a set agents had not explicitly accepted) must be weighed against another (a set agents have explicitly accepted).^{lxi} Even though agents have a ‘primary,’ as it were, set of principles which may often remain implicit in order for them to make practical decisions efficiently, that set of principles does not exhaust or provide guidance for all of the possible cases to be encountered. Norms, then, which have not yet been explicitly accepted by agents can nonetheless plausibly be

said to apply to agents in cases where practical guidance from an accepted set of norms has been expended, nevertheless without agents' behaviour being indictable as unprincipled.

It is in these cases that collectives in nonideal conditions have opportunities to deliberate about and make explicit their decisions for which trade-offs to make. The practical upshot of rejecting *context-independent normative binding* then is that conflicts in adhering to norms, or cases of conflicting duties, present agents with an opportunity to find and make explicit the most appropriate way of proceeding.^{liv} We realize, for example, that happening upon a steep hill to climb for the first time requires a performance we have not rehearsed nor foreseen. So too in difficult ethical cases we find that there is a preferable, or least undesirable, route to take which demands a certain way of proceeding which we have not foreseen, or which we could not reasonably be expected to have foreseen. Why should we expect it to be any different in social change? A nonabsolutist framework recognizes that these cases will obtain, and with circumspection, it hands the reins to agents in conditions where only they can determine what to do.

Nonideal conditions might be so severe that agents of change do not have the luxury of being able to collectivize and exercise the deliberative strategy we have been discussing here.^{lv} This problem forces us to recognize two things: first, that there are degrees of severity of nonideal conditions; and second, that which principles should be chosen to occupy the provisional set for social change must be decided by appeal to the particular degree of conditions' being nonideal. A deliberative norm would not do agents much good by itself as a guiding principle for conditions so severely nonideal that agents cannot reasonably be expected to act in accordance with that norm. In conditions this severe there will be more appropriate norms to accept into the substantive set for social change which should be accepted precisely to ameliorate conditions such that agents can

engage in deliberative strategies in future conditions. This would be an exercise of agents' "dynamic duties" (Gilbert 2017, 96) to move them beyond severely nonideal conditions towards midpoints, or intermediary goals, so as to increase the feasibility of realizing the just conditions they envisage as end-goals. We should recall our discussion from §4.3.2 here on agents forfeiting their status as agents of change when they recklessly neglect putative principles for social change. A conceptual distinction between agents of change and agents of injustice must be maintained,^{lvi} and identifying which agents occupy which of those modalities in practice can be a difficult task. Nonetheless, we should state here that agents in nonideal conditions of some severity n are not subject to criticism for not adopting principles which should be accepted into the provisional set for social change at conditions of another severity $n+1$. This is to say that agents of change acting in conditions which do not allow them to organize and practice deliberative strategies are not bound by deliberative norms and thus do not forfeit their status as agents of change for not practicing deliberative reasoning. The point is to acknowledge that there are more and less severe nonideal conditions and corresponding norms which are binding on agents' behaviour relative to the particular degrees of those conditions' being nonideal. The task of determining which normative principles apply in conditions of various severities is a broad-scale demonstration of the validity of the flexibility framework for social change.

I hope to have demonstrated in this section that the possibility of exhaustively and explicitly formulating rules for trade-offs between norms in conflicting cases in advance is unrealistic. The silver lining is that by adopting a nonabsolutist framework, the appropriate way of proceeding, and there will always be most appropriate action, can be found within those cases by agents of change. A normative framework should handle the task of settling on a view of normative binding and broad-scale practical guidance, such as in eschewing violent or nondemocratic

behaviour. But to expect that a normative theory will contain explicit advice for what to do in particular circumstances, the complexity or occurrence of which agents cannot reasonably be expected to anticipate is absurd. In deciding what to do in complex, nonideal conditions, agents must look to themselves and each other for guidance. In fact, to resolve problematic cases in this way would require agents to exercise principles of democracy, cooperation, and deliberation in nonideal conditions of appropriate severity – fine principles for social change. Surely there will be brute impasses to moral progress. Nevertheless, by adopting a nonabsolutist framework we remove normative strictures from the conduct of agents of change in order not to needlessly impede their attempts to remove injustice in the world, even if they should fail in their attempts.

§5. Conclusion

I set out to motivate the need for a provisional normative ethical theory for social change. I have not provided any substantive theories but rather mapped two possible frameworks to be applied to the deployment of a theory. The first of these was to be absolutist about normative values and the second was to be nonabsolutist. The absolutist framework faced several problems which were insurmountable from that position. Namely, to be absolutist about normative values in social change is to minimize feasibility and render inaccessible intuitive outcomes plausibly constituent of an amelioration of nonideal conditions. The absolutist framework also prescribes that in cases of conflicting duties, to resolve these conflicts, action pursuing social change be ceased. This solution, I claimed, is no solution at all, and reveals absolutism as a fair-weather friend. What agents of change require is a framework suited for the inclemency of social change.

My suggestion was to adopt a nonabsolutist framework for social change. This view holds norms as conditionals the binding of which depends on particular circumstances of action.

Nonetheless, this position too came with difficulties, but these problems served to reveal the pertinent foci for normative conversations over social change. In complex conditions, agents seemed to be left with no explicit rules for which principles require adherence. I responded by referring to various cases where agents do not and need not look to an abstract theory for guidance in what to do, but to themselves and among those with whom they cooperate. This strategy, in fact, requires that agents be guided by principles we often find in our hopes for better worlds. McDowell's vertigo, therefore, experienced in the context of social change, is merely a symptom of the failed search for explicit guidance in what we should do, believing that all is lost, and we are on our own without it. What to do in social change, however, is not to be found through casuistry in the armchair but within particular circumstances, through agreement with each other.

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Notes

ⁱ This question is posed in the style of Kant's famous formulation of the canonical practical question of morality (Kant 1998, B833).

ⁱⁱ "Social change" seems an inadequate term because the word "change" fails to rule out regressive change, it neglects stipulating an ameliorative goal, and lacks an intentional tone. "Social transformation," doesn't clearly do any better; "transformation" may be unintentional. So, I prefer to use the straightforward "ameliorative social change."

ⁱⁱⁱ Zheng emphasizes that in an increasingly globalized world (consider commerce, communication, and international governing bodies, for instance) the *global* element of this description does the work of dispelling any illusion that social change could or should be realized in only isolated contexts.

^{iv} I lean on the work of critically-inclined philosophers and my understanding that many extant forms of suffering are superfluous in assuming that we have done well enough in the task of gathering the reasons sufficient to bring about a better world. See Geuss (1981); Wright (2010 & 2019); Haslanger (2012 & 2017).

^v I will refer to the target of social change simply as our “social world,” understood as the complex set of social conditions in which we live. These conditions bear on the well-being of subjects owed moral consideration, however interpreted.

^{vi} I avoid appeal to an “ideal” world because circumstances may be recognized as nonideal without the use of “ideal” as a yardstick. Consider cases such as physical health or writing a song. In the first case, I know that eating at restaurants several days out of the week is not doing my health any favours. Eating “clean,” however, is not something one achieves once like completing a marathon, it is something that must be maintained and may always be improved. I may measure my health’s being nonideal on the scale of some goal, such as training for distance-running and how well I am doing relative to that goal. Appealing to a specific, even arbitrary goal is not necessary but it is sufficient for recognizing conditions as nonideal. In the case of song-writing, there may be no ideal at all. See Sen (2006, 223) and Haslanger (2021, 32-3) for scepticism over the need for delineating ideal conditions.

^{vii} I am modifying Laurence’s (2021) “agents of change” to a collective conception (see pp. 110 & 116 for his definitions of agential modalities). Erik Wright used the term “agents of transformation” (2019, 119).

^{viii} See Elster (1985, chs. 6 & 8) for a critical discussion of the conditions of collective action for social change in the context of capitalism.

^{ix} Many normative ethical theories are absolutist. To name only a few, *natural law theories* (see Aquinas, *ST I-II*, q94, a2), *consequentialist theories* (see Moore 1903, 147), *Kantian ethics* (Kant 2012, 4:429), and also theories in the *social contract tradition* (see Gauthier 1986, 352-3).

^x To clarify, my aim is not to argue for which norms should guide social change. I am concerned with how those first-order norms should operate, and so which framework of the second-order should be applied to them. I do, however, consider these four norms reasonable to posit as our running example of principles of social change and I suspect

many or all of them would appear in any plausible set. Furthermore, I assume that any set of normative principles for social change would need to be pluralist to account for complex political and social conditions and address those conditions as they are. See Fraser and Jaeggi (2018, ch. 4), Lippert-Rasmussen (2018, ch. 1), and Kymlicka (2002, chs. 1 & 3), for discussions on various principles central to contemporary political and social theory.

^{xi} There may, however, be principles for social change that are not well-suited to be extended to the process of pursuing social change, but rather pertain primarily to the maintenance of the outcome. For instance, Nancy Fraser posits “functional sustainability” as one principle for social change (Fraser & Jaeggi 2018, 178). This principle holds that an outcome should be functionally sustainable. Of course, that outcome should be brought about through some kind of reform of the antecedent social conditions in a way that is amenable to maintaining a stable result. But as a consideration to the means by which social change is brought about, other principles such as nondomination, and democracy are better suited for guiding action in the process of realizing goals. In the means-dimension (as opposed to the end-dimension – see Joseph 2022, 85-6), “functional sustainability” depends on the fulfillment of the other principles in the normative set.

^{xii} See Gilabert and Lawford-Smith 2012, 810.

^{xiii} See Southwood 2018, 8-16.

^{xiv} I will discuss this point further in §§3 and 4.

^{xv} I am assuming that there are many wealthy individuals who “have too much” (Robeyns 2022, 250) and would not agree to imposed limitations.

^{xvi} My example of such an outcome is a fairer distribution of resources. We may imagine other outcomes that could be entailed by any amelioration of our social world requiring a considerable violation, in degree or duration, of many plausible norms. Other examples may include a “transition trough” entailed by even vastly successful large-scale social change, where conditions transiently worsen to a state less desirable than the status quo ante before improving beyond it (Wright 2010, 314). The objection from paternalism is another instance, whereby engaging in social change at all is criticized for deciding for subjects what is good for them, especially those unsympathetic with the goals, due to logistical or conscientious worries, or ideological dissent.

^{xvii} This point is also made in Robert Nozick’s famous Wilt Chamberlain example in his argument for an entitlement theory of justice (Nozick 1974, 160-4). My point is only to elucidate that conflicts of duty will obtain within the

pluralist set of principles we have been working with, and any with plausible set.

^{xviii} A possible point of resistance here would be to claim that the principles for social change are just that, *for social change*. I have not argued that these principles be extended to any normative tasks outside of the context of collective action towards an ameliorative goal. If this is right, the objector claims, then conflicts of duty no longer arise, so long as agents drop the goal from which the conflict issues. But here we have fallen back into the inaccessibility problem.

^{xix} The idea that norms apply to behaviour conditional on particular circumstances is distinct from the idea that *only* particular conditions can, and moral rules never, determine permissibility. The latter view is called “particularism.” It rejects that moral norms can ever be a reason for moral action and so rejects conditional duties in the present sense (see Dancy 2004, 7-8; for a discussion of the distinction see Shafer-Landau 2015, ch. 16). Since I am interested in the normative problems involving principles for social change, I do not explore the particularist ‘no-principle’ view.

^{xx} See also Ross 1939, 168.

^{xxi} This is not a criticism of absolutist normative ethical theories outside of the context of social change, such as Kantianism or consequentialist theories, for instance. I use this simple case only to illustrate that two duties agents may plausibly be held to may conflict. Kantians or consequentialists avoid the case just mentioned if acts of keeping promises and helping strangers are themselves derivative. For our purposes, in the context of social change, if a duty to respect a principle of democracy, equality, and so on, are (non)derivative and conflicts ensue, then strict binding of one or the other duty must wane in those particular cases. I discuss these cases below.

^{xxii} Even Herbert Marcuse’s dream of the “Great Refusal” involved a great deal of civil disobedience; he recognized the vast student and anti-war movements of the 1960s as its embodiment (see Marcuse 1991, *xxxvi-ii* & 257).

^{xxiii} The same would hold for instances of “distorted discourse.” In these cases, various parties involved in a common social setting – say, nationally, culturally, legally, or so forth – reach agreement in their deliberations regarding a common interest. But the “agreement” through distorted discourse is illegitimate due to a power imbalance between the interlocutors. A comparatively powerless party, it is argued, cannot freely consent to proposals affecting their common social setting if the deliberation is stacked against one or more parties in order to reproduce the power imbalance, along with other conditions of injustice. See Young (2001, 685-9) and Habermas (1987, 150-152, 196, 388). In Habermas’ discussion, what is doing the “stacking against” may not necessarily be a monolithic collective of agents, but is systematic. Young’s discussion is closer to a power imbalance between discrete parties in deliberative

exchange.

^{xxiv} See the feasibility “chart” in Gilabert (2017, 118-9). The main idea is that the routes agents have before them to achieving a goal in practical conditions may be manifold, requiring that they achieve some middle points to increase the feasibility of reaching their end-goal. An exhaustive judgement of the feasibility of some project would take as its position an Archimedean point from which to view the entire “garden of forking paths,” as it were (van Inwagen 1990, 277). But since that ideal position is unattainable, due to epistemic constraints and the complexity of practical conditions, outcomes that are in principle accessible, even quite feasible, may fail to be secured.

^{xxv} His discussion stays close to the concept of “virtue” since he is attempting to advance an account of moral reason in ethics which is not dependent on principles context-independently, one that is also neither Humean nor Kantian. For a critical discussion, see Wallace (1991). I am grateful to Olivia Sultanesco for suggesting McDowell’s paper and Paul Boghossian’s discussed below.

^{xxvi} I generalize the following idea because McDowell’s discussion pertains to individuals’ conceptions of “how to live” virtuously; he discusses practical *sylogisms* (McDowell 1979, 343-4). What we are after involves agential-collectives acting under at least one explicit set of normative *principles*. McDowell’s discussion holds relevance for ours nonetheless since he is concerned with the application of norms on behaviour, finding out which ones those are, and thus what agents should do in particular cases. So, we are after analogous questions.

^{xxvii} This is not to say that if agents were to anticipate X occurring, and they agreed that “if X we should do Y” the prescription to do Y would be uncodifiable. The point is that *in advance*, anticipating X and determining a conditional prescription for X’s occurrence almost never matches the particular conditions agents will face.

^{xxviii} See also “ethical indeterminacy” in Shafer-Landau 1997, 598-99.

^{xxix} See note *x*.

^{xxx} Otherwise we would countenance civil disobedience, union striking, and redistribution, and other normatively complex pursuits of social change, as inaccessible on the grounds that these endeavours entail normative conflicts. But this kind of sweeping judgement which neglects facts peculiar to particular circumstances is what I have been resisting since §2.2.

^{xxxi} McDowell has in mind Wittgenstein’s “form of life” (see Wittgenstein 2009, §§23 and 241; and also McGinn 1997, 50-1 for a helpful reading of Wittgenstein).

^{xxxii} See McDowell (1979, 347-8) for comments on knowing what to do without explicit principles. Wallace (1990, 488) calls the plausible reading of McDowell's position "connoisseurship." But we need not adopt this view of moral reasoning for a collective of change, nor an intuitionist account. I discuss my preferred view of moral reasoning in our context in §4.3.

^{xxxiii} This is not to say that formulating a rule would in fact bring about a greater number of counterintuitive results in real conditions. The present worry is not whether a normative theory will have a hand in agents bringing about bad results. The worry is whether the explicitly formulated rule exhausts all of the possible uses for which it will be required. A possible complaint now would be that I am passing the buck off to agents since it is the theory that should be responsible for guidance in practical reasoning. But this would be to beg the question against the view that decision rules need not issue from the theory explicitly and in advance. The idea that guidance in practical reasoning is a necessary desideratum of an ethical theory, particularly in nonideal conditions, is precisely what I am resisting.

^{xxxiv} McDowell (1976, 343) quotes Wittgenstein (2009, §208) but without the "*ad infinitum*." The "*ad infinitum*," Wittgenstein says, is the unabbreviated caveat for something that "we cannot write down," like "all of the digits of π ." That we cannot write down all of those digits, Wittgenstein states, "is not a *human* shortcoming" (emphasis added). In the case of π , it cannot reasonably be expected of us that we write down an infinite series of numbers. Likewise for possible practical cases, we cannot reasonably be expected to anticipate them such that we could explicitly set out the application of principles needed to account for those cases.

^{xxxv} The possible considerations involved in performing tasks Hampshire calls "inexhaustible:" that a description of some set of conditions "however restricted they may be" cannot be completed (1983, 22). If one were to attempt exhausting the relevant considerations in the bicycle case, we could reasonably doubt whether the rider would ever get their wheels spinning. That doubt holds a fortiori if we were to expect the considerations involved in social change to be exhausted or exhaustible.

^{xxxvi} See also Wittgenstein (2009, §§155, 323) for similar notes on knowing "how to go on" and being in "the circumstances." (See McGinn 1997, 58, 67-8, & 106-9 for discussion).

^{xxxvii} See Anderson 2010, §§5.2-5.4; see also Laurence 2021, §4.5 for a discussion of Anderson and her Deweyan influence.

^{xxxviii} See Bratman 2009, pp. 412 and §VIII for a discussion of planning agency; see pp. 413-16, 420, & 433 for

comments on collective deliberation in planning. In “Agency, Time, and Sociality” Bratman writes “further deliberation is shaped in part by rational pressures in the direction of means-end coherence and intention-belief consistency” (2010, 10). These latter terms are what he calls “the basic norms of practical rationality” (2010, 21).

^{xxxix} I cannot set out the rules for this kind of discourse here. For a discussion of possible rules for this discourse and its operation, see Habermas (1990, 89-94).

^{xl} Thanks is due to Jordan Walters for suggesting McNaughton’s paper.

^{xli} See McNaughton 1996, 440 for his response.

^{xlii} See Camenzind (2021).

^{xliii} See Hare (1979) for a utilitarian defense against this objection.

^{xliv} More on this in §4.3.3.

^{xlv} Indeed this was one of Rawls’ motivations for constructing his theory of justice, one that relied on neither utilitarianism nor intuitionism (Rawls 1999, §§7-9).

^{xlvi} McNaughton’s defense against these claims will not satisfy for our purposes. So we must go it alone. He claims that the critic from task (ii) is begging the question against the intuitionist, “who maintains that these basic duties stand in no need of grounding” (McNaughton 1996, 441). I, however, want to reject intuitionism.

^{xlvii} A skeptic to this view would assume as their foes a much broader range of opponents than I. Alternate views providing grounding for the putative principles for social change may be that those principles are necessary constituents of the promotion of individuals’ well-being or their interests. Accepting either of these views, or the justice-grounding view, would be incompatible with regarding the principles we have considered thus far as basic and groundless. I cannot take a position on these alternates and provide a substantive defense of it apart from mentioning that they are available to us. However, I suspect the justice-grounding view is the least problematic.

^{xlviii} Shafer-Landau (1997, 597) claims that a nonabsolutist ethics requiring agents to “go beyond the rules” in practical circumstances would have two options for guidance: accept intuitionism or appeal to some absolute rules. Going with the second option would not force us into pure normative absolutism, but perhaps, a weaker form of nonabsolutism since the explicit set of first-order principles would remain conditional.

^{xlix} And rightfully so. The defense that non-intuitionists are always begging the question against the intuitionist when complaining about the latter’s moral reasoning may be a valid accusation by way of pointing out a question-begging

fallacy, but this will never satisfy one's opponents. This exchange only serves to keep those in opposed ethical positions dissatisfied with the other's position. In the context of social change, that defense will not do.

^l Thanks is due to Jing Hu and Pablo Gilabert for getting clear on this distinction.

^{li} See the discussion at §4.3.3 on "severely nonideal conditions" for a caveat on the conditions of agents forfeiting their status as agents of change.

^{lii} This is not to say that a collective in deliberation will necessarily agree on what to do, or in fact agree on the most appropriate way(s) of proceeding. Rather, the most appropriate way of proceeding *must* be found through this strategy to avoid violating a democratic norm, which is a plausible norm to accept into the set for social change, and to avoid the problems associated with intuitionistic accounts of determination and justification. The most appropriate way of proceeding, and one a collective arrives at through deliberation, may conceivably be to wait for conditions to subside, or they may fail to agree on what to do and need to wait to secure an agreement. Agents may even be required to revisit the normative binding of the democratic and deliberative norms they are attempting to fulfill in severely nonideal conditions.

^{liii} See Dworkin (1977, 78) for a similar case in a legal context where the court is demonstrated as weighing "two sets of principles."

^{liv} Again, the most appropriate way of proceeding may require inaction.

^{lv} Thanks is due to Pablo Gilabert for suggesting this problem.

^{lvi} See Laurence (2021, ch. 4, §§4.3 and 4.4).