ON (NOT) BECOMING A MORAL MONSTER: DEMOCRATICALLY TRANSFORMING AMERICAN RACIAL IMAGINATIONS

STEVEN FESMIRE

Radford University

Steven Fesmire is Professor of Philosophy at Radford University and President-elect of the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy. He is the author of *John Dewey and Moral Imagination* (Indiana University Press, 2003), winner of a 2005 Choice "Outstanding Academic Title" award. He is also the author of *Dewey* (Routledge Press, 2015), winner of a 2015 Choice "Outstanding Academic Title" award. Most recently, he is editor of *The Oxford Handbook of Dewey* (Oxford University Press, 2019), and he is completing two book manuscripts: *Beyond Moral Fundamentalism: Pluralism in Ethics, Education, and Politics,* and *Ecological Imagination.* His recent public philosophy work—most of which has been in the ambit of ethics, education, and politics—has appeared in places such as *Salon, The Chronicle of Higher Education, Inside Higher Ed, The Conversation, Huffington Post, The Humanist, The Key Reporter, Education Week,* and *Vermont Public Radio.*

"People who shut their eyes to reality simply invite their own destruction, and anyone who insists on remaining in a state of innocence long after that innocence is dead turns himself into a monster."

-James Baldwin (1953)

Making Sense

The worldly events that determine our lives don't come prepackaged with a transparent way to interpret them. We *give* them significance, and these meanings diverge. People earnestly impute meanings to social and political events using ideas that others can barely conceive without caricature.

Often this disconnect arises from differences in habituated worldviews, as with incompatible conceptions of freedom, equality, justice, identity, and responsibility that inform the so-called "culture wars" between American conservatives and progressives. Deeper still, disconnects arise from tragic failures to communicate across what James Baldwin called "levels of experience." In Baldwin's interpretation, the putative state of innocence of a life typified by Doris Day's songs of the 1940s and 50s is ruthlessly protected against any genuine dialectical encounter with the struggles of a life typified by Ray Charles's blues. It would help, Baldwin implied, if our country's Doris Days worked harder to "get" the blues (cf. Glaude 2007 and 2020). At any rate, when people impute meanings to events--such as the 2020 killing of George Floyd, the shooting of Jacob Blake, and subsequent upheavals--they do so with ideas that already make sense to them. And what makes most sense to people is typically due to others with whom they share identities and life experiences, and from whom they've inherited their basic intellectual scaffolding.

But making sense of an event isn't enough. We're driven to mobilize sustained action by convincing ourselves that our cause is morally or politically in the right. So people build on their stable-yet-

evolving intellectual scaffolding and explanatory schemes to rationalize, justify, and sanctify their conduct. Contemporary moral psychologists make a related point that what goes by the name of "moral reasoning" often amounts to little more than a self-justifying, ineffectual "rider" (reason) atop the headstrong "elephant" of habituated intuitions (Haidt 2012).

Becoming a Moral Monster

The easiest part of becoming what Baldwin called a moral monster is to cultivate only those beliefs and values that confirm pre-existing desires and biases. The more complicated part is to construct a justifying consciousness that allays any doubts as to the rightness of our behaviors. This self-justifying consciousness insures that we'll arrive safely at foregone conclusions with little risk of confronting others' experiences in a way that might unsettle our equilibrium or sap our vehemence. As Dewey observed in a 1916 essay on "The Mind of Germany," this subtle work requires us to build up a system of beliefs that "effectively mask from view whatever would trouble action were it recognized" (MW 10:217). With such rationalizing beliefs in place, people avoid facing realities that might upend their pretenses, and they can deny the social and material conditions they *need* to deny in order to stay their course, so they are now ideally positioned to be, in Dewey's words, "profoundly moral even in their immoralities" (217).

Take a couple of examples of how we can become moral monsters, beginning with the construction of a self-justifying consciousness about structural discrimination. When a group of people who occupy positions of caste-like systemic dominance (Wilkerson, 2020) consistently holds that racial injustice is largely a bygone chapter of American history ("All Lives Matter"), or that the movement for black lives simply plays up victimhood as a red herring for laziness, this group sees no point in dialogue with those who could

unsettle and disarm their self-justified inaction. After all, from their little seat atop their elephantine unacknowledged habits, most members of this group reason that once the institution of slavery was ended, residual racial injustice was based on a lingering individual character defect called "racism." Now that most members of the dominant "caste" don't consciously feel racist anymore, they believe racial injustice is limited to a few bad apples who utter racial slurs, commit hate crimes, spew racial hatred, and blatantly discriminate. These must be chastened or prosecuted, they insist, but systemic racial injustice is water under the bridge.

As a related example, many contemporary white Americans believe that racial justice is a zero-sum game that they are losing (Norton and Sommers, 2011). On that view, black gains are white losses, so a tragic black loss—disproportionate Covid-19 deaths, driving while black, being arrested while black, walking away from an officer while black, jogging while black--may seem to matter a bit less than it might otherwise. Of course, most who labor under this intellectual habit will blanch at the immoderate crassness of the avowed white supremacist who, Confederate flag in hand, declares that these losses help to even the score. This seems a bridge too far to them.

Nevertheless, to hold the zero-sum view of racial justice is to dwell in an intellectual house designed to keep its occupants' faces turned away from the persistent institutionalized conditions that break black bodies and souls. Most zero-sum adherents hold that they're already the kind of people that a democracy requires (they're the least racist people they've ever met), so what hope is there for enlisting them in creating a new context for becoming such people, when their prior commitment is to go on living and thinking as they do?

People's ideational scaffoldings operate as neural paths of least resistance. A century ago, Dewey discussed this in terms of the

deliberately imprecise term "habit," as part of his rejection of the traditional European model of free-willing, autonomous moral agency. In Dewey's idiom, "habits" encompass not only private behavioral patterns but also pre-established social circuits, what journalist Isabel Wilkerson recently called our "neurological societal downloads" (2020, 71). For good and ill, our complex, relatively stable, and often contradictory horizon of internalized social habits sets the scene for how we relate to others, how we understand situations, and what we see as possible courses of action. They organize the implicit background of our everyday interactions. This includes often-unspoken biases and stereotypes as well as our routine habits of *thinking* about race, such as the tendency to reduce racial injustice to individual intentions instead of thinking of it in terms of a systemic "value gap" that discounts black lives and livelihoods (Glaude, 2016). We see dimly, if at all, beyond this interpretive horizon, from our most uplifting ideals to our most degrading "racial habits" (on which, see Eddie Glaude Jr.'s incisive Dewey-inspired analysis in *Democracy in Black: How Race Still Enslaves the American Soul* (2016, ch. 3)). Dewey summed up the moral import of all of this in *A Common Faith*: "The community... in which we, together with those not born, are enmeshed... is the matrix within which our ideal aspirations are born and bred. It is the source of the values that the moral imagination projects as directive criteria and as shaping purposes" (LW 9:56).

Moral Recovery

Moral maturation is an ongoing process in which habits are evaluated and reconstructed, whether gradually or suddenly, in light of circumstances rather than championed in blind conformity or dismissed in reactionary defiance. "The choice," Dewey urged, "is not between a moral authority outside custom and one within it. It is between adopting more or less intelligent and significant customs"

(MW 14:58). To the degree that we disclose, criticize, evaluate, and transform our habituated beliefs, values, and outlooks, we can own them imaginatively in the service of nonreactive democratic inquiry that sympathetically faces realities. In turn, insofar as habits own us mechanically, democracy is a farce because deliberate choice in that case is indistinguishable from mere impulsion.

In the face of circumstances that overwhelm them, people tend to behave much like pinballs ricocheting around a machine. When we're reactively tossed around, we don't inquire and communicate, so we're unable to *take part* in democratically redirecting the course of emerging events. When we're overwhelmed, we get caught up in a reactive cascade that leads us to oversimplify situations, neglect context, take refuge in dogmatic absolutes, ignore relevant possibilities for convergence, and shut off inquiry. In this way, we make the worst of our native impulses toward social bonding and antagonism, and we make it impossible to debate and achieve controverted social goals—goals we can only achieve together— like justice, security, and health.

These observations hold regardless of our partisan stripes. Every political framework is in some way truncated, the more so if it hides from scrutiny by claiming access to a precise latitude and longitude of moral rectitude. By owning up to the fact that we're *all* self-justifying creatures of habit, we're less likely to assume that we have nothing to learn from those who disagree with us. No diagnosis or proposed solution to a problem is beyond revision and reformulation. Meanwhile, progress in one relevant dimension of a problem may be regressive in another dimension, and we're more likely to notice those off-the-radar dimensions if we'll engage in democratic dialogue, debate, and persuasion. Nevertheless, it would be irresponsible here to ignore that a large minority of U.S. residents today receive their daily dose of white anger, fear, resentment, and parochial antagonism from a self-serving misological president who is

advised by white nationalist fanatics (Guerrero, 2020) and is backed by the unprecedented right-wing media scope of Fox News, the Sinclair Broadcast Group, and Breitbart News.

We are in profound need of more people who are humane, compassionate, active and informed participants in a country that sends many Americans daily signals that their lives are of lesser value than folks from the other side of their still-segregated hometown. One cannot look to Dewey to lay bare the intellectual scaffolding of white supremacy (he didn't understand it) and the demoralizing current reality of white retrenchment. He did not supply an inroad to disclosing the matrix of our racial imaginations so that American racial habits, along with filters for denial, may be critically appraised. (For exceptional work in this direction, see Sullivan 2019 and Glaude 2007, 2016, and 2020.) But inspired in part by a critical embrace of Dewey, contemporary work in the American philosophical tradition that includes theorists such as Patricia Hill Collins (1998, 2019) is emphasizing that we understand problems better when we democratically inhabit the standpoint of intersecting identities, while challenging those who invite destruction by assuming that only their own experiences, habituated values, and concerns have overriding force when perceiving, diagnosing, and ameliorating problems. This is a call for deeply democratic inquiry. Through it we may learn our way together toward a healthier, more just, more secure, and more sustainable future.

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