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TOWARD A SYNTHESIS OF MORALITY IN AMERICA?

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Margaret Abruzzo, *Polemical Pain: Slavery, Cruelty, and the Rise of Humanitarianism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011)

Molly Oshatz, *Slavery and Sin: The Fight against Slavery and the Rise of Liberal Protestantism* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

Susan J. Pearson, *The Rights of the Defenseless: Protecting Animals and Children in Gilded Age America* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2011)

Historians are amoral. Or, more accurately, historians of the United States do not often make morality a central factor in their interpretation of the nation's past. Even as the profession has created subspecialties with abandon, neither "historian of morality" nor "moral historian" has become a professional designation. Historians, of course, have not ignored morality altogether. Students of religion frequently address it, although perhaps not as often as they do theology and religious practices. Intellectual historians study "moral philosophy." Such works of philosophy may have had a major impact within society, but its influence on a wide array of the population needs to be shown. Political historians, those of certain time periods, have also included morality in their interpretations. Historians of the Revolutionary era who make classical republicanism central to understanding American ideology and institutions stress that early Americans valued virtue, which included not just a commitment to the common good but a belief that a republican government could not survive without a moral population. Historians of the early twentieth century make the language of morality a component of progressivism and a determination to impose morality part of the Progressives' legislative agenda.[1]

[1] On Republicanism and morality in particular see Ann Fairfax Withington, *Toward a More Perfect Union: Virtue and the Formation of American Republics* (New York, 1991). On morality in progressivism see Richard L. McCormick, "Progressivism: A Contemporary

Morality, however, probably serves as the basis of interpretations most often when historians examine "reform," particularly if they root reform in religious belief. Yet even historians of reform seem reluctant to base reformers' motives in moral values, perhaps because many of them have been surprisingly suspicious of the motives and goals of reformers. During the heyday of consensus history, historians all but dismissed the abolitionists as crazy. The interpretation of reform as social control came later and has had a far longer historiographical run, despite its having been challenged by many, including Susan J. Pearson. Its proponents have argued that reformers, of various eras, acted not from some deep moral imperative, or even a desire to help, but out of a determination to maintain order in society and to inculcate discipline among the lower class or immigrants. Other scholars, more sympathetic to the reformers and more sophisticated in their approach, have rightly sought other social explanations for the reform impulse, but they, too, do not put morality at the center of their interpretation of reform.[2]

If historians tend not to take morality seriously, even when they analyze reform, they have, not surprisingly, rarely attempted an overview of American morality or even traced its evolution from republicanism to progressivism. They have, however, offered various dichotomies about morality. Some scholars have pointed to a shift from moral suasion to moral laws. Others, particularly historians of southern religion, draw a distinction between individual and social morality, or, as some would say, a morality based on either righteousness or justice. Perhaps the most widely accepted overview of morality in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries posits a distinction between a Victorian and a modernist morality. Victorian morality, the explanation goes, emerged out of evangelicalism and

Reassessment," in McCormick, *The Party Period and Public Policy: American Politics from the Age of Jackson to the Progressive Era* (New York, 1982), 263–88. There are, of course, exceptions to American historians' tendency to avoid morality as a topic. See, for example, Karen Halttunen and Lewis Perry, eds., *Moral Problems in American Life: New Perspectives on Cultural History* (Ithaca and London, 1998).

[2] Robert H. Abzug, *Cosmos Crumbling: American Reform and the Religious Imagination* (New York, 1994); and Steven Mintz, *Moralists and Modernizers: America's Pre-Civil War Reformers* (Baltimore, 1995) emphasize the religious basis of reform, although Abzug puts more stress on it. On the consensus view of the abolitionists see Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (New York, 1998), 338. Pearson, *The Rights of the Defenseless*, 6–8 has a good discussion of "social control." For an excellent example of the more sophisticated approach to the role of social forces see Thomas L. Haskell's pathbreaking articles on humanitarianism and capitalism reprinted in Thomas Bender, ed., *The Antislavery Debate: Capitalism and Abolitionism as a Problem in Historical Interpretation* (Berkeley, 1992), 107–60. In arguing for greater attention to morality, I in no way mean to diminish the importance of social realties in helping shape morality.

a conservative reading of the Bible and held firmly to a fixed moral standard that emphasized right, usually individual, behavior. Modernism, loosely but never solely tied to the emergence of liberal Protestantism, championed a relativistic morality based not on a single, immutable standard, drawn from the Bible, but rather on one that acknowledged that different cultures defined morality differently and each could be equally "right." Modernist morality usually connoted a little more flexibility in behavior; for example, where Victorians would condemn any sex outside marriage, modernists might approve if the situation, perhaps a meaningful relationship, justified it. Most historians who assume a great divide between these two moral systems date the emergence of modernism to just before or soon after the First World War, but that era probably marked only the beginning of its challenge to Victorianism. Traditional, or Victorian, morality still held sway in the Progressive era and inspired much legislation, including Prohibition. The battle over Prohibition in the 1920s became, in part, a skirmish in a longer war over morality, in which the 1960s witnessed perhaps an even more decisive battle. If the relativists had "won" by the 1970s, however, a counteroffensive soon followed, and since then the forces of conservative morality have escalated their attacks. Its partisans seem to assume that before the 1960s, their vision of morality, one close to that of the Victorians, had reigned in America. Understanding the history of morality in nineteenth- and twentieth-century America therefore has particular relevance for what some have called a contemporary "culture war," but it should also be of interest to historians concerned only with understanding a changing American society.[3]

The three books under review here do not, for the most part, directly address such interpretive issues. All three focus on the nineteenth century, although their arguments have implications for the twentieth. Only Molly Oshatz's *Slavery and Sin* makes morality central to her discussion; the other two books address moral issues but build their interpretations on what they term the language of "humanitarianism" in Margaret Abruzzo's book or "sentimentalism" in Susan J. Pearson's. Nevertheless, all three very fine books help elucidate how nineteenth-century Americans confronted important moral issues. Although conceptualized very differently, they still reinforce each other's conclusions and encourage a more complex understanding of the nature of morality in nineteenth-century America.

[3] One of the best descriptions of the difference between Victorians and modernists, although not focused solely on morality, can be found in Daniel Joseph Singal, *The War Within: From Victorian to Modernist Thought in the South, 1919–1945* (Chapel Hill, 1982), 11–33. Stanley Coben, *Rebellion against Victorianism: The Impetus for Cultural Change in 1920s America* (New York, 1991) puts it in the context discussed here.

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In *Polemical Pain*, Margaret Abruzzo examines the way in which "humanitarianism" shaped the debate over slavery. Drawing on "a medley of interconnected assumptions," humanitarianism stressed that humans could control pain and that individuals "bore some measure of moral responsibility for the pain of others." Humanitarianism also incorporated new attitudes toward "what constituted a sufficient reason to inflict pain" and a new, more positive, view of "the moral or spiritual value of *experiencing* suffering" (3). Abruzzo begins her discussion of humanitarianism's origins with the Quakers, who early on saw the infliction of pain as indulging the flesh and seeking luxury, which they considered wrong in itself. Antislavery Quakers, led by John Woolman, took a long time to convince even other Quakers to apply such assumptions to slavery, but they eventually "reshaped the nascent Quaker humanitarianism by recasting slave pain as a symptom of the impurities in the hearts of *all* Quakers, even nonslaveholders" (27, original emphasis). Woolman's "asceticism" thereby created a key element of humanitarianism, "a broadening sense of responsibility for the suffering of others" (31).

Though Quakers pioneered the development of humanitarianism, its widespread adoption by the late eighteenth century resulted for the most part from two other forces. One was Scottish moral philosophy. It "treated indifference to or delight in the misery of others as a sign and catalyst of moral and social breakdown" (52). The Scots also argued that people "naturally felt—literally—the feelings of others" (55). The second source of humanitarian thought was Christianity, although Abruzzo does not explore its influence as fully as she does that of the Quakers or the Scottish philosophers. She argues that by the late eighteenth century Presbyterians, Methodists, and Baptists had denounced "those who inflicted pain on helpless victims" and had come to believe that "a true Christian would never inflict unnecessary pain on anyone and that cruelty was the antithesis of morality" (50). Reformers thought Jesus the perfect model of a "gentle, humane reformer of manners" (65).

Humanitarianism led first to an attack on the slave trade, which allowed reformers to condemn a distant evil, not a local one. With the end of the slave trade, Abruzzo argues, northerners came to accept blame for tolerating southern cruelty and championed colonization as a means to remove the evil. Colonization then gave way to abolition, and the abolitionists put more emphasis on the cruelty of slavery. In response to their attacks, white southerners soon developed an argument that slavery was a humane institution. Abruzzo does not specifically trace the origins of humanitarianism in the South, but provides a full and interesting discussion of white southerners' use of its language to defend slavery. Slaveholders "unabashedly proclaimed slavery a genuinely humanitarian alternative to the cruelty of freedom" (121). They emphasized that "[s]lavery—not

emancipation—fulfilled the moral demands of sympathy by providing laborers with food, clothing, shelter, and security" (135).

After 1832, a debate emerged between northerners and southerners, both of them claiming the mantle of humanitarianism. In explicating that debate, *Polemical Pain* makes its most important contribution. By the late 1830s white southerners had convinced many, even in the North, that slavery, not emancipation, represented true humanitarianism. Faced with southern success in the polemical war, slavery's northern critics increased their attacks on the institution. They claimed that slavery degraded the masters, which led them to inflict greater pain on the enslaved, and came to argue that slavery's cruelty formed part of a deeper barbarity in southern society. For these critics of slavery, as for the Quakers, Abruzzo shows that moral outrage focused more on cruelty's perpetrators than on their victim's pain—a fascinating observation with important implications. The abolitionists, though, still put more and more emphasis on pain because slavery's defenders proved so adept at making their case through the language of humanitarianism. Southerners, in turn, then added a racial dimension to their argument, claiming that God designed Africans for slavery and that slaves were happy.

At the end of her skillful discussion of the way humanitarianism shaped the debate over slavery, Abruzzo adds a few observations on how each section's arguments influenced its position during Reconstruction. Abolitionists returned to the language of cruelty, but white southerners' assumptions about slavery's superiority to emancipation led to their determination that Reconstruction would fail. Abruzzo also observes that the "decision to frame arguments for and against slavery in terms of cruelty had lasting implications" because "the malleability of humanitarianism left a complex and ambiguous legacy that lingers today in patterns of thinking not only about racial politics but also about pain, morality, and the grounding of rights. Pain persists in playing an ambivalent role in our moral thinking," Abruzzo concludes, because Americans today can identify suffering but disagree on whether or not it is justified (241). She points to the debate over abortion and the public response to the pictures from Abu Ghraib, among other contemporary controversies. In all such issues, other moral and ideological beliefs, not just humanitarianism, shape what pain people think is justified. Perhaps Abruzzo's next book will carry the story forward and trace the evolution of humanitarianism through contemporary debates over torture and human rights; if so, it would be a welcome sequel.

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Molly Oshatz centers *Slavery and Sin* on the antebellum debate over slavery, and like Abruzzo's, her book benefits from exploring how the various sides in that debate shaped one another's arguments. Oshatz's account of the debate does

not refer to the language of humanitarianism; instead, she carefully examines how each side interpreted the Bible. Oshatz's book also differs from Abruzzo's in that, even though primarily about the antebellum years, its major contribution lies in revealing the way debates over Biblical interpretation and slavery led to the development of liberal Protestantism, which fully emerged well after the Civil War.

Oshatz provides a convincing argument that the Bible supported slavery. Proslavery Christians grasped that and therefore readily accepted biblical authority and a straightforward interpretation of Scripture. Christian abolitionists, Oshatz argues, either dismissed the authority of the Bible or resorted to "weak, contorted, and highly selective biblical exegesis" (45). They, for example, argued that the passages mentioning slavery actually referred to servitude. Some readers may be more open to the abolitionists' exegesis than Oshatz, but her focus is on a third group, the most interesting of all, "the antislavery moderates" who "carefully and painstakingly defended a middle ground" (11). In the early years of the Republic, opponents of slavery—Quakers and some other people, influenced by republicanism—focused their moral outrage on the slave trade, which could easily be interpreted as anti-biblical. By the 1790s antislavery thought had declined; most northern Christians who still had reservations about slavery turned their attention to campaigns on behalf of colonization or education for free blacks. In the 1820s, white southerners, frightened both by the controversy over Missouri statehood and by the failed Denmark Vessey revolt, developed a defense of slavery that thereafter became more prominent in southern thought in the 1830s. The moderates, most of whom came from the ranks of the New School Presbyterians, Congregationalists, and northern Baptists, opposed southerners' proslavery biblical interpretation but were equally aghast at the abolitionists' attack on the Bible. They believed slavery evil, but not every slaveholder a sinner, and sought to use moral suasion to build support for gradual emancipation. The antislavery moderates' social status and "deep institutional and personal ties to Southerners, including many slaveholders" (57), contributed to their rejection of radicalism, but the dismissal of the Bible by some abolitionists particularly troubled them. They struggled to find a way to oppose slavery yet still acknowledge the authority of the Scripture.

They first argued for the "antibiblical nature of Southern slavery" (65), a position that could be defended, but southerners succeeded in keeping the public debate focused on the sinfulness of slavery itself. In response, antislavery moderates occasionally pointed to the racism inherent in slavery but never made it central to their critique. Instead, to make the case against slavery, they "appealed to the spirit and principles of the New Testament" (75). To "avoid the implication that Christ and the apostles had, for equally unimaginable reasons of cowardice or irresponsibility, neglected to provide adequate moral instruction," they instead

argued "that God's demands for human society had progressed over time, so that what was once acceptable had become a sin" (78). The sides divided, Oshatz astutely summarizes, over a commitment either to the moral law or to moral progress. She also shows that the antislavery moderates made another important argument, one that anticipated the social gospel: They labeled slavery a "social sin," one "for which society, rather than the individual, might be responsible" (82). In developing that point, Oshatz includes a discussion of a controversy within the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) over how to treat Cherokee and Choctaw slaveholders. The ABCFM's abolitionist donors demanded that the group denounce slavery. Its moderate leaders replied that where individuals could choose to drink or commit adultery, no one could become a slave-owner in the absence of state action. That made slavery a "national" or "social sin," and Christians tolerated them "while establishing principles that eventually brought them to an end. Social sins, unlike individual ones," they believed, "should be dealt with indirectly" (88).

The implications that Oshatz draws from the debate over southern slavery make her book very important. After the war, she argues, many northern Protestants believed that God had made clear through war and emancipation that his guidance went beyond the Bible. "By offering what Northern Protestants took to be proof of the reality of providential progress, emancipation and military victory prepared the way for the development of liberal Protestantism in the North" (113). Adherents of that liberalism "looked to the development of antislavery Protestantism and its eventual triumph as a testimony to the progressive development of Christian truth and morality" (4). Oshatz does not deny the importance of biblical criticism, Darwinism, and other post-Civil War factors in the rise of liberalism, but she makes a convincing case for liberalism's roots in the antebellum period. She also discusses other groups that did not embrace liberalism. Abolitionism, Oshatz adds in an intriguing but not fully developed observation, led some of its adherents to "fundamentalism" and others to "free religion" (123). Postwar "secular elites would adopt a pure form of historicism that left no room for Christian revelation, and more conservative Protestants would deny the historicist nature of truth and retain an orthodox providentialism" (101). Among the conservatives were white southerners. Liberal Protestantism, Oshatz goes on to argue, never became important in the white South because southerners found it difficult to understand defeat as the will of God, so Lost Cause thinking took hold. The factors behind the white South's persistent conservative approach to scriptural interpretation may be more complex than Oshatz's reference to the Lost Cause suggests. The need for a biblical defense of segregation and a fear of the reform implications of liberalism may have proved as important in white southern Protestant thought as the impact of the war.

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Where Abruzzo focuses almost exclusively on the antebellum period and Oshatz's work employs developments in that era to explain what happened after the war, Susan J. Pearson's wonderful *The Rights of the Defenseless* rests firmly in the late nineteenth century. Pearson does an amazing job of placing her arguments in a variety of historiographical contexts—among them reform, state formation, and liberalism. She also displays an admirable appreciation of ambiguity. Her account of the movement to protect animals and children shows that it involved revulsion against cruelty, a concept important to Abruzzo as well. Pearson, though, sees the new postwar attitude as rooted not in the language of humanitarianism but in that of sentimentalism. She makes a convincing case for its importance, but certainly Abruzzo's "humanitarianism" has much in common with Pearson's "sentimentalism." Both stress a revulsion against pain and suffering and involve a growing awareness that individuals could and should act to alleviate it. Historians may well be in danger of identifying so many "languages" in nineteenth-century America that some may wonder how Americans managed to talk to each other.

Sentimentalism, Pearson argues, "revolves around feelings" and

> is a philosophically rooted genre that positions affect, or feeling, as the grounding of both our common humanity and our morality. Sentimentalists assume that humans naturally have sympathy (or what was once called "fellow feeling") with one another, that this natural sympathy is aroused through the sight of suffering, and that it moves the observer of suffering to try to relieve it.

Its "chief goal is virtuous behavior, and the chief strategy to this end is emotional cultivation rather than rational thinking; the heart not the head is the source of moral truth" (9). She locates the roots of sentimentalism's growth as well as that of the child- and animal-protection movement "not simply in 'bourgeois moral sensibility,' but also in abolition, evangelical Christianity, Darwinism, and romanticism" (7). Never ignoring the social context, she ties sentimentalism as well to the popular perception that the "social order" needed "improvement" because the "closing decades of the nineteenth century were wracked by paramilitary violence and the end of Reconstruction in the South, and the social dislocations of industrialization, immigration, urbanization, panics and depressions, labor unrest, and rising discontent among the nations' farmers" (7). Like Abruzzo she also credits the Scottish moral philosophers with a role and echoes Oshatz by mentioning the influence of the idea of Christian progress. Finally, she ties the movement's critique of cruelty to a fear of appetite and avarice, a critique shared by more conservative moral reformers

of the time. The desire for pleasure and wealth, both groups believed, corrupted morals.[4]

Pearson begins her fascinating book by arguing that in the 1870s many reformers linked animal and child protection. She explains that, among other things, attitudes toward animals and children were both rooted in the idea of domesticity, in which the function of children and pets alike shifted "from an economic to a sentimental investment" (29). Both, too, could be better managed with "the power of kindness" (51), and reformers thought cruelty to animals could lead to the abuse of children. Like many in the antislavery movement, protectionists saw cruelty as a "slippery slope" toward even worse behavior. Pearson, like Abruzzo, observes that her reformers believed "cruelty" was "degrading to both victims and perpetrators" (58). To combat the abuse of animals and children, reformers across the country formed 354 "protection societies," of which 185 sought to protect both animals and children, 104 were dedicated exclusively to animals, and 45 solely to children. These reform associations "divided their time between lobbying for new legislation, public education campaigns, and investigating individual cases of cruelty" (3). In the process, they "forged a distinctively post-Civil War brand of benevolence, one that combined sentimentalism with liberalism, sympathy with decisive and forceful action, love with justice, mercy with persuasion" (15–16). Sentimental reformers, Pearson concludes, operated from "a vision of rights based on protection rather than liberty" (133). They believed that animals and children—and by implication all citizens—deserved protection and a "modicum of wellbeing," a conception of rights that led from Gilded Age protection societies to modern, interventionist liberalism. (16)

Anticruelty reformers did not abandon moral suasion; they still campaigned to get individuals to change their behavior. They also turned to the law, however. "The Civil War," Pearson rightly argues, "seemed to prove that people would not change unless forced to" (167). The activists did not need new laws to protect endangered children, but they sought and secured passage of legislation to protect animals. To enforce the resulting regulations, state and municipal authorities relied on private reform organizations rather than creating new state institutions. The reformers therefore pioneered a new form of state power, one that combined the private and the public. That approach proved effective in the protection of both animals and children. Later in the 1890s, a split developed between reformers who sought to protect animals and those who were concerned primarily about children. In the Progressive era, the latter would undertake new campaigns seeking child welfare laws.

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4 On "conservative" moral reformers see Gaines M. Foster, *Moral Reconstruction: Christian Lobbyists and the Federal Legislation of Morality, 1865–1920* (Chapel Hill, 2002).

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Together these thoughtful and important books contribute to a better understanding of American morality in the nineteenth century, and perhaps even point toward the possibility of a synthesis of how morals changed over time. They not only agree that Americans debated the morality of slavery, a debate that many historians have already done a good job of explaining; they go on to show how the end of slavery spurred reformers to confront other issues. Pearson, for example, writes that when the "war disrupted one of the most obvious forms of dependence in the country's history, it called into question other relations of inequality and dependency: between husbands and wives, employers and employees, parents and children" (101). The antislavery precedent also became important in more conservative causes such as the campaigns against polygamy and alcohol. A recognition that emancipation became a powerful precedent for postbellum reform efforts not only contributes to an understanding of how American morals changed but calls into question a popular conception in studies of Civil War memory—that Americans tended to forget that the war was about slavery. The repeated use of the antislavery precedent suggests that many people remembered emancipation's importance in the war but then used it to justify all sorts of change save racial equality. Both Abruzzo and Oshatz reveal the racism within the antislavery crusade. That racism no doubt contributed to the fact that the language of humanitarianism put more emphasis on the cruelty of the slaveholder than on the suffering of the slave, which in turn may have played a role in the failure of racial reform.

As the antislavery precedent suggests, the Civil War was an important turning point, both in how Americans conceived morality and in how they tried to sustain it. Both Oshatz and Pearson make a strong case for the war's importance. Oshatz gives the war a critical role in the development of a new way of thinking about the Bible and in the emergence of liberal Protestantism that later came to play a major role in the evolution of morality. Pearson, too, shows that the war fundamentally altered the way in which Americans thought about some moral issues, although, with her usual appreciation of ambiguity, she also acknowledges the antebellum roots of these changing attitudes.

To make the antislavery precedent and the Civil War so important to changes in reform or in definitions of American morality raises questions about older conceptualizations of reform and morality. Historians frequently use the terms antebellum reform and Progressive reform; Gilded Age reform sounds almost like an oxymoron. Yet, as Pearson shows, sentimental reformers during the Gilded Age pursued an active agenda and did not hesitate to turn to the state for assistance. She stresses that their lobbying came at the state and local levels and involved a hybrid use of government power, one in which private associations exercised the state's police power. The Gilded Age, though, witnessed other moral legislation—both

federal and state attacks on pornography, birth control and abortion, as well as the federal campaign against polygamy. Historians today may have trouble thinking of all of these efforts as "reform," but certainly their supporters thought so. Because such moral reform efforts led to a new role for the state in the Gilded Age, historians may need a new way to conceptualize the stages of reform. Following Rebecca Edwards, Pearson adopts the idea of a "long progressive era" (8). But Oshatz's conclusions about the antebellum roots of liberal Protestantism suggests a more extended and complex chronology of reform.

In developing one, historians should explore the continuity of debates over time rather than identify and define a change from one conception of morality to another. Oshatz's account of the conflict over how to interpret the biblical treatment of slavery resonates with current battles within many mainline churches over homosexuality and the ordination of gays and lesbians. The biblical case that homosexuality is a sin is not nearly as compelling as the argument that the Bible justifies slavery. Christians who condemn homosexuality as a sin, nevertheless, claim biblical justification and, in support of their position, like the slaveholders before them, insist on a straightforward reading of the few scriptural passages that seem to challenge same-sex relations. Christians who dismiss the notion that homosexuality is immoral and defend the rights of gays and lesbians follow Protestant liberals in arguing that the Bible is not the only source of God's will and in believing in a progressive revelation that supports the morality of homosexuality and the rights of gays and lesbians. Oshatz does not discuss a parallel between the contemporary and the antebellum debates, but such a conclusion can be drawn from her book. Doing so reminds historians of the persistence of debates over scriptural interpretation and morality.

These books not only complicate the traditional chronology of reform; they also challenge other common conceptions. Pearson, in particular, shows that reformers' commitment to moral suasion and legal enforcement of morality coexisted during the nineteenth century. The tendency to define concerns about morality as either a focus on individual or social morality also does not hold up well in light of the evidence in these books. Oshatz shows convincingly that antislavery moderates conceived of slavery as a "social" sin far more than as an individual one. She even shows that antislavery moderates blamed slavery on societal failings and resisted condemning the moral failings of individual slaveholders—a view that not only departs from traditional notions of Victorianism but will seem strange to conservative moralists of today, who focus unrelentingly on individual sins.

Even more important, Abruzzo's and Oshatz's works challenge perhaps the heart of the traditional conception of Victorian morality, the idea that nineteenth-century Americans held fast to a universal, fixed definition of morality. Abruzzo clearly shows how attitudes about the morality of inflicting pain had evolved by

the eighteenth century. The debates over the application of humanitarian values and biblical interpretation show that antebellum Americans, at least outside the South, recognized that morality could and should change. Without accepting the sort of situational morality of modern relativism, most nineteenth-century Christians clung instead to a notion of moral progress. Morality, in their view, did not so much change as improve, but change it did. Oshatz's book points to an even more radical view. The antislavery moderates' interpretation of the Bible would indeed allow, if not encourage, relativism. If God could reveal new moral standards through his actions in history, the idea of a single, fixed morality would not survive, at least among liberal Protestants.

Where Oshatz's and Abruzzo's conclusions undermine the idea of a rigid, unchanging morality in the nineteenth century, Pearson's provides an additional but very different challenge to reigning conceptions of the shift from Victorian to modernist morality. Her activists blamed the abuse of children and animals on, among other things, a desire for personal pleasure that led down a slippery slope toward cruelty. In doing so, Pearson finds that they expressed fears of appetite and avarice. Conservative moralists in the late nineteenth century who lobbied the federal government for all sorts of moral legislation operated from similar fears. Such doubts about values at the heart of a capitalist economy have not been part of historians' conception of Victorian morality but perhaps should be. In the late twentieth century, though, the modernists, not the heirs of Victorianism, more likely condemned appetites and avarice. Explaining how by that time champions of traditional moral values came to accept appetites and, if not avarice, at least a positive view of wealth, will be essential to any synthesis of changing American morality. No doubt the rise and pervasiveness of a consumer culture played a central role in that acceptance, and that story must be integrated into an account of the evolution of American morality.

American historians, of course, may still be a long way from constructing a convincing synthesis of the changing history of American morality. In some ways, the works reviewed here only complicate historians' conceptions of American morality. Yet the complications are most helpful. These books show that antebellum Americans conceived of slavery as a social sin and accepted that standards of morality could progress and therefore, implicitly, that they changed. Pearson explains the way in which animal- and child-protection campaigns led to new conceptions of rights and liberalism. All three of these very fine books point to a less clear-cut divide between the way Americans in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries conceived of morality. They show that the nineteenth century does not offer a world shaped by a fixed, immutable moral order that twenty-first-century Americans can revive. Instead, they suggest that moral standards often changed, and that Americans have continually fought over defining morality. If American historians ever achieve a grand synthesis of American morality, its

title will probably not be *The American Moral Tradition*, much less *The Genius of American Morality*. It will more likely be titled *The Contours of American Morality* or even *Conflict and Consensus in American Morality*. Be it ever so messy, though, a surer sense of American morality is needed. Like Abruzzo, Oshatz, and Pearson, other historians would be wise to pay more attention to morality in constructing their narratives of the past.

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