1 Moral Failure[[1]](#footnote-1)\*

Moral revolutionaries are people who succeed in thinking from a moral point of view that both exceeds and improves upon the conventional moral understandings that are broadly shared in their social worlds. They get it right under social circumstances that make it difficult to do so. And we admire them for it. In this chapter, I pursue the paradoxical thought that their getting it right actually *produces* a particular kind of moral failure of their lives. Thus, such revolutionaries are likely to have reason for regret about how their lives turn out morally.

<1> I. Failures, Moral Failure, and Moral Luck

Failure is not the same as culpable error. For culpable errors one is held responsible, downgraded, chastised, penalized, punished, disapproved, resented, held in contempt. One may feel guilty about, repent, make amends for culpable errors. Failures, by contrast, are not culpable--at least the failures I am interested in are not. For want of talent, one might fail to be a good philosopher; or, for want of the inner resources to be cheerful, one might fail to have friends; or, for want of natural grace or rhythm, one might fail to be able to dance. Nor are failures simply excused errors. A good excuse gets one off the evaluative hook. To be excused is to have no reason to think badly of oneself or for others to think badly of oneself. To have failed, by contrast, isto have a reason to think badly of oneself and to expect others to do the same. However unavoidable turning out to be a bad philosopher or a friendless person or incapable of dance may have been, these failures leave their evaluative mark. They are sources of regret, shame, loss of self-esteem, and of the thought that one's character or life is blemished by falling short of some standard for what lives should look like.

One might, of course, deny that there are any such things as the failures I have described. Either one is culpable, or one isn't; evaluation tracks those two conditions. Much moral philosophy, in its focus on the will, obligation, and responsibility, gives the impression that no one simply fails. But without a space for the notion of failure, it is hard to make sense of many of the things that shame us or inspire the thought that our lives have not turned out as human lives are supposed to--our uncomeliness, lack of talent, gracelessness, competitive poor showings, and crumbled marriages.

In addition, without a space for the notion of failure, there will be no way to acknowledge that what we expect from other people and ourselves is not in fact confined to what is under voluntary control. Some of our expectations are tied to thoughts about what is statistically normal for persons or for persons of a certain sort.[[2]](#footnote-2) Normal people have some modicum of talent, or cheerfulness, or grace. Those who don't are failures. Other expectations are tied to an ideology of the normal that is disconnected from what real people are typically like. Normal people are supposed to be self-supporting and capable of sustaining long-term marriages. Those who aren't are failures. Other expectations are tied to ideals rather than to normalcy. To embark on a career is to hold up for oneself an ideal of excellence, or be held to it by others. To fall short is to fail, sometimes in a minor way, sometimes thoroughly.

In moral philosophy, the notion of moral luck captures one sense of specifically moral failure. As Thomas Nagel developed the notion, our actions and characters are vulnerable to moral assessment so long as we have made some contribution to what our actions and characters are even if most of what we actually do or actually turn out to be like is a matter of luck, pure and simple.[[3]](#footnote-3) So, for example, we morally assess the accidentally successful rescue attempt and the accidentally botched rescue attempt differently, even though succeeding or botching was a matter of luck. We morally assess the character of those who participated in Nazi Germany differently from those who didn't, even though it was a matter of luck that some people but not others faced the particular moral tests posed by life in Nazi Germany. Victims of bad moral luck fail to perform well, and we blame them for it, even though much of what contributed to their deeds being what they were was not under their control.

In Nagel's view, the moral part of moral luck hinges on our having made *some* contribution to our deeds or character. It is the fact that we can be held partly responsible for what we do or are that gives moral assessment a foothold. Underlying this view is a remnant of the Kantian notion that the domain of morality extends only to what we can control. Thus moral failures must partially connect to that domain.

A quite different account of the moral part of moral luck seems to be at work in Martha Nussbaum's use of that notion.[[4]](#footnote-4)For her, the ideal of a morally excellent life is what makes moral failure possible. Oedipus, for example, fails to live a morally excellent life. Through no fault of his own, his life becomes blemished by acts of incest and patricide. Although he made contributions to these deeds, *that* is not what makes him vulnerable to moral bad luck, as opposed to just plain bad luck, on this account. Rather, his bad luck and failure are moral, because the ideal in the light of which he is assessed is a moral ideal of what human lives should be.

Claudia Card also develops an account of moral luck that differs from Nagel's.[[5]](#footnote-5) Whereas Nagel emphasized the luck that enters into our being *held* responsible, blamed, or praised, Card emphasizes the luck that enhances or undermines our capacity to *take* responsibility for ourselves. Taking responsibility for ourselves includes taking responsibility for the social meaning of our lives and actions. For example, when being lesbian is socially defined as unnatural and perverse, taking responsibility for being lesbian will involve creating and imposing new meanings so that one can stand behind one's life. Success, however, depends on how others receive these new meanings. Thus taking responsibility will be a matter of luck. The luck is moral because taking responsibility is a basic form of moral activity.

The notion of moral failure I have in mind is closer to Nussbaum's and Card's than to Nagel's. What I will suggest is that among the ideals of what a human moral life should look like is the ideal of living a moral life within a shared scheme of social cooperation where one's moral understandings are shared by others. Under these conditions one's moral activity and one's moral reasons will be intelligible to others. Given sufficient bad luck, our moral lives can fail because they are characterized by abnormally frequent unintelligibility to others or abnormally frequent inability to defend one's actions in terms that others find meaningful. Our attempts to be self-respecting, to avoid misplaced gratitude, to generously offer what is not owed, may be received by others as arrogance, ingratitude, and mere dutifulness. Under such conditions, our moral practice is idiosyncratic, not part of a common scheme of social cooperation. If this is in fact a kind of moral failure, it is a failure from which impeccable exercises of responsibility cannot protect us.

Obviously, it will take some work to make the case that there is such an ideal, that falling abnormally short of it is a *moral* failure, and that trying to do the right thing can produce this failure. Let me begin, then, with doing the right thing.

<1> II. Doing the Right Thing and Feminist Resistance

Trying to do the right thing, to live morally well, is not just one thing but many. Realizing that moral philosophers disagree among themselves about what these moral tasks are, let me propose the following four commitments as relatively uncontroversial and basic to (if not exhaustive of) any attempt to do the right thing:

(1) *The principle of self-respect.* I am a being with self-respect; and as a being with self-respect, I will affirm my place in the moral world.

(2) *The principle of mutually agreeable rules.* I am a reasonable being; and as a reasonable being, I will act according to principles that could be mutually agreed to by free, equal, reasonable, and rational beings.

(3) *The principle of pursuing the good.* I am a rational being with the powers to frame a conception of the good; and as a rational being, I will act on my conception of the good.

(4) *The principle of character.* I am a being with moral character; and as a being with moral character, I will cultivate and express the virtues.

These principles, if correct, express the moral commitments any agent, in any social context, must have and act on if she is to do the right thing. In this sense, doing the right thing is always the same thing. However, these moral commitments must be enacted in the agent's own social world where a moral practice is already underway and where there are established and broadly shared social understandings of what counts as doing the right thing. In morally well-formed social worlds, doing the right thing will be a matter of compliance with shared moral understandings. But in morally ill-formed social worlds, doing the right thing will require resistance to the existing practice of morality. In this sense, doing the right thing is *not* the same thing across all possible social contexts.

Feminist moral philosophers, unlike more conventional moral philosophers, have been interested in describing theshared moral understandings that operate in sexist, heterosexist, classist, and racist social worlds. They have also been interested in what it means, particularly for members of subordinate groups, to try to do the right thing in these social contexts. In particular, feminists have drawn attention to the facts that in our social world (1) some groups are socially constructed as moral inferiors to be treated as second-class citizens in the moral world; (2) unjust practices to which members of subordinate groups could not possibly agree absent coercion are socially institutionalized; (3) some healthy conceptions of the good are deemed inappropriate for some social groups (for example, fulfilling same-sex erotic relationships, marriage, and family for gays and lesbians), whereas damaging conceptions of the good are deemed appropriate (for example, for women, the pursuit of excessive slimness and use of plastic surgery); and (4) the images of virtue or of what it takes to avoid vice that are offered to women, blacks, gays and lesbians, and the poor are deformed and demeaning ones (for example, avoiding arrogance means deferring to male and white authority, being civilly respectful of other's feelings means concealing one's lesbian identity, and having a work ethic means accepting poverty as one's own fault).

The four principles for doing the right thing, when put into play in ill-formed social worlds--particularly when put into play by members of subordinate groups--will be principles of resistance. From the standpoint of the subordinated, for example, the principle of self-respect is primarily a principle of intolerance: "I am a being with self-respect, and as a being with self-respect I will *not* tolerate\_\_\_\_." To be self-respecting is to refuse to put up with humiliation, abuse, unfair denial of opportunities, objectification, demeaning or defaming stereotypes,[[6]](#footnote-6) silencing, and domination. It is to refuse to offer misplaced gratitude for treatment that is simply one's due.[[7]](#footnote-7) And it is to resist the idea that members of subordinate groups are not entitled to morally judge members of dominant groups and, thus, are not entitled to express anger at moral mistreatment.[[8]](#footnote-8) Because one's own mistreatment is connected to that of fellow subordinates, the resistance required by a principle of self-respect is likely to be not just resistance to one's own mistreatment but a general resistance to a system of domination.

Similarly, from the standpoint of the subordinated, the principle of accepting only mutually agreeable rules is primarily a principle of resistance. Since we are not now in Rawls’s “original position” (a position of ideal freedom and equality, from which the principles to govern our choices would be chosen) but find ourselves immersed in a practice of morality already underway, and since much of that practice supports systems of domination, to accept only mutually agreeable rules will inevitably mean to refuse to abide by existing social norms to which women, blacks, gays and lesbians, and the poor would not have consented had they occupied positions as free and equal participants in the social scheme.[[9]](#footnote-9) This principle may also require resisting decision-making arrangements that exclude participation by those whose lives will be significantly affected by those decisions (for example, the policy of having experts within welfare bureaucracies make unilateral decisions for their clients).[[10]](#footnote-10) At a theoretical level, it may require resisting philosophical constructions of impartial decision making that exclude the very dialogue with real others that might secure the genuine impartiality necessary for locating rules that in fact could be mutually agreed to by all.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Acting on the principle of pursuing one's own conception of the good will also largely be a matter of resisting those conceptions socially prescribed as appropriate for one's social group--as women have historically tried to resist patriarchal marriage by refusing to marry, by constructing "Boston marriages" with other women, by cross-dressing and marrying women, and by divorcing out of inegalitarian marriages. As these examples suggest, it may also require pursuing conceptions of the good that are socially deemed unwise, unnatural, or irrationally risky—conceptions that are inconceivable within the dominant view as possible conceptions of the good. In addition, it will require resistance both to the culturally normalized but unfair distributions of resources to the subordinated (distributions that constrain their pursuit of the good) and resistance to their lack of credibility as judges of the good (a lack that undermines social negotiation for conditions more conducive to their flourishing).[[12]](#footnote-12)

Finally, the principle of moral character will be a principle of refusing to comply with social definitions of the virtues appropriate to one's station that in fact crush or cramp genuine expressions of virtue. Central to the application of this principle of moral character will be resistance to ideologies and social practices that naturalize and normalize the idea that there are different, and differently valued, virtues for different social groups. In particular, it will be necessary to resist the maddening idea that there is a set of virtues appropriate to generic, mature humans and a different incompatible set of virtues appropriate to women or other social groups.[[13]](#footnote-13) Sometimes it will be necessary to resist ideologies and practices that construct the absence of virtue as a natural, unalterable feature of some social groups.

<1> III. The Moral Ideal of Doing the Right Thing

Although resistance is often personally costly, it is also morally attractive. These four principles, which under unjust conditions become principles of resistance, are connected to a particular moral ideal. That ideal is the ideal of a life beyond self-reproach. One aim of moral life is to become sufficiently critically reflective, sufficiently motivated, and sufficiently alive to one's own moral status, to the importance of a cooperative scheme, to one's options for constructing a good life, and to one's possibilities for virtue that one need not reproach oneself later for having been servile or unfair or thoughtless about the good or vicious. It is an ideal fit for self-determining beings who are custodians of their own lives and who are capable of deciding for themselves what shape those lives should take. It is, I think, a correct ideal. This is, in part, what we are trying to do when we participate in the enterprise of morality.[[14]](#footnote-14)

To say that it is an ideal is to say that real human lives are not in fact going to be beyond reproach. Negligence, narrow-mindedness, a desire to retain privileges, cowardice, and the like will make for culpable fallings short of the ideal. In addition, when dominance and subordination are conventionalized and rendered natural, normal, and unproblematic, when necessary knowledges are suppressed (for example, knowledge of the history of oppression), or when critical moral concepts are not socially available (for example, the concept of date or marital rape), then there is a live possibility that a person will just not be able to see how morally badly her or his life is going. Loving devotion turns out to have been servility. Living up to one's station and its duties turns out to have been complicity with injustice. Being a good X turns out to have meant the cultivation of vice rather than virtue. These are moral failures. They are failures of one's life to embody the ideal of doing the right thing in spite of one's best efforts. One kind of moral failure, then, that is an especially live possibility when injustice is conventionalized so that agents themselves are not well positioned to determine what the right thing is, is the possibility that trying to do the right thing might *end* in failure.[[15]](#footnote-15) The more paradoxical possibility, which I pursue here, is the possibility that resistantly trying to do the right thing might *produce* moral failure. How could that be? I begin by describing the kind of failure that I think resistantly trying to do the right thing produces. I then turn to reasons for thinking this is a specifically moral form of failure.

<1> IV. Illegibility and Unreasonableness

One of the most important effects of liberation movements is that they produce critiques of conventional moral norms. Such critiques show why compliance with conventional moral norms is not, in fact, a way of doing the right thing but is instead a way of participating in and sustaining systems of domination. The feminist movement, for example, challenged a conventional assumption that wives who take on the principal burden of unpaid domestic labor are simply doing their fair share--fair because this is what wives owe to their families. It also challenged the idea that a good life for women must include childrearing and personal attachment to a man. The lesbian and gay movement challenged a conventional assumption that making one's lesbianism or homosexuality known is, among other things, rude and shameless. Some of the moral critiques produced by liberation movements have now been conventionalized. They have become part of our common stock of moral understandings. This is not to say that everyone endorses those critiques. It is to say that everyone finds them familiar and comprehensible. So, for instance, a black man's angry response at being called “boy” or a woman's filing sexual harassment charges are now legible as affirmations of self-respect. What both are morally up to doesn't need explaining.

However, when large portions of dominance systems continue to be conventionalized, formulating moral critiques will produce what I have elsewhere called "abnormal moral contexts."[[16]](#footnote-16) Abnormal moral contexts occur when some segment of a society produces advances in moral knowledge that outrun the social mechanisms for disseminating and normalizing that knowledge in the society as a whole. In that case, a gap opens between what "everyone knows" is the right thing to do and what from a (presumably) advantaged epistemic position is viewed as the right thing to do. The gap, of course, will be obvious only to those who take themselves to be reasoning from a more advanced, socially critical point of view--as feminists, for example, generally take themselves to be doing. It is that gap that makes doing the right thing, as determined from this socially critical point of view, necessarily a form of resistance.

To do the right thing under circumstances where dominance systems are conventionalized requires rejectingbroadly shared social assumptions about the moral place persons are entitled to claim for themselves, about which practices are morally legitimate, about what counts as courage, generosity, proper pride, and so forth, and about which forms of life count as good ones. Of course, from the point of view of those who don't have access to these critiques and the evidence that supports them, these acts of resistance will not be legible as either acts of resistance or as attempts to do the right thing. They will simply look like doing the wrong thing. Refusing to be grateful for help with the housework will appear to be ingratitude. Refusing custody of one's children upon divorce will appear coldly unloving rather than a resistance to compulsory motherhood. Kissing one's domestic partner in public will appear confrontationally obscene rather than affectionate.

I have chosen the terms "legible" and "illegible" to underscore the fact that the social practice of morality depends heavily on our being able to "read" the meaning of others’ actions. To take a simple example, were expressions of gratitude, such as saying "thank you," not interpretable by recipients as an expression of gratitude, this particular moral exchange would break down. Under these conditions, a person might privately intend to express gratitude, but if the expression is illegible, there is a real sense in which no gratitude is actually *expressed*.

When moral resisters have the opportunity to explain what they are doing, and thus make their actions legible, they may still be unable to make themselves seem reasonably justified. Their justifications may be received as wildly implausible, irrational, based on patently false assumptions, and thus not really justifications at all. The difficulty of justifying oneself is often further complicated by the fact that subordinate groups typically are also socially constructed as defective reasoners.

Moral resisters' commitment to doing the right thing thus risks producing two forms of failure: a failure to make what one is morally up to legible to others and a failure to provide justifications that are recognizable to others as justifications.

<1> V. Moral Failure and the Ideal of a Shared Scheme of Social Cooperation

But why think that these failures are moral? Why think that a life characterized by abnormally frequent illegibility or by abnormally frequent inability to defend one's actions in terms others find meaningful ismorally defective, lacks the moral excellence one expects of a moral life, and is an occasion for moral regret and possibly also moral shame? Quite the contrary, living a genuinely self-respecting life, refusing to comply with unjust practices, correctly conceiving and enacting the virtues, and living out a genuinely estimable life plan all seem reasons for moral self-congratulation. If failure is to attach anywhere, it seems more reasonable to attach it to those whose lack of critical distance from social moral norms prevents them from seeing and finding meaningful what moral resisters are up to. If another cannot see being out of the closet as an affirmation of self-respect, isn't thefailure theirs rather than the uncloseted person's?

In addition, moral philosophers standardly distinguish between morality as a system of social norms--a culture's moral code--and morality as a set of prescriptions that are justifiable from a critical, reflective, theoretical point of view. Because social moralities may not survive critical review, they are better thought of simply as *social* norms rather than as constitutive of morality. It is from the point of view of social norms that moral resisters' actions are illegible or without minimal justification. From a genuinely moral point of view, what they are up to morally is perfectly legible. To view failures of social legibility and justifiability as moral failures thus seems to confuse social norms with genuine morality. If there is any failure here, it is merely social, not moral. Indeed, moral resisters may well be social failures, regarded as deviant, outlaw, perverse, crazy, extremist. Being so regarded does not reflect on their moral excellence.

These are compelling objections. However, I think they rest on three interconnected, mistaken assumptions: (1) that the moral ideal of doing the right thing is the only relevant ideal for assessing the moral excellence of lives; (2) that the successful social enactment of morality is not itself a moral ideal; and (3) that if there are multiple moral ideals, they cannot be in such fundamental tension with each other that it is impossible to orient one's life toward all of them simultaneously.

I take the second assumption first, since it is the heart of the matter. Morality is fundamentally social, and one common way of stating this idea is to say that morality is a scheme of social cooperation. The fact that morality is a scheme of social cooperation suggests that the distinction between social norms and genuine morality is misleading. Indeed, any attempt to cleanly distinguish social norms from genuine morality is like the attempt to imagine an unperceived world. As Bishop Berkeley pointed out, in the very process of imagining an unperceived world, we covertly insert a perceiver--ourselves. So, too, in conceiving a distinction between genuine morality and social norms, we do not purify morality of the social. Instead, we covertly insert a different social world into the picture, one in which what we take to be genuine moral norms are also socially normative. Kant's “kingdom of ends” is a hypothetical social world. In that world, universal moral laws are social norms. The "ends" in this kingdom are social participants in a practice of morality. They share common moral understandings of what things mean morally (for example, of when gratitude is misplaced or what treatments are humiliating). The correct contrast, then, is not between genuine and merely social morality but between two different social moralities, one hypothetical and the other actual, where we take the hypothetical one to be preferable to the actual one.

The original objection to counting as a moral failure resisters' failure to make legible what they are morally up to might, then, be more accurately put this way: moral resisters, whose actions are illegible according to actual social norms, have not failed morally, because their actions are legible according to a more nearly correct, although hypothetical, set of social norms. In other words, the only thing that really matters so far as moral success or failure is concerned is the ideal of getting it right.

But is it? Is getting it right the only thing we aim to do when we participate in the practice of morality? Or do we aim at other things as well, things that might depend upon our being able to make what we are morally up to comprehensible and justifiable to others?

Let us return to the idea that morality is a scheme of social cooperation. That morality is a scheme of social cooperation means that even though individuals are to guide their behavior by moral rules, moral rules are not designed for individuals. They are designed instead for the social worlds that individuals inhabit. Similarly, even though individuals are to cultivate virtues, the point of virtue is not just to make our individual lives good but to make our common lives good. The shared cultivation of virtue enables us to count on others to do the things that need doing. Because morality is a scheme of social cooperation, both the attempts of philosophers to frame justifiable schemes of social cooperation and the efforts of individuals to do the right thing have the same practical aim: to put into play in our social world a shared set of understandings about how we are to do things morally together. It makes no sense to engage in critical moral reflection or to attempt to do the right thing without this practical aim. To do so would require treating morality as a kind of private language whose rules or conceptions of virtue need not be accessible or meaningful to anyone else.

It is no surprise, then, that moral theories so often articulate justification as a matter of justifying ourselves *to others*, with the aim of securing shared moral understandings that can guide our common life together. Role reversal tests embody this social conception of justification in a modest way by focusing our attention on what individual others might think of our proposals. Social contract theories like those of Hobbes and Rawls, dialogic models like Habermas's, and legislative models like Kant's in the third formulation of the categorical imperative (that of the kingdom of ends) employ more fundamentally social conceptions of justification (even if the society is a hypothetical one). More obviously social conceptions of justification (because less hypothetical) are communitarian models where justification appeals to traditions and understandings that are actually shared, and some feminist reconstructions of dialogic models that employ real, rather than ideal, discourse situations. Common to all of these approaches is the assumption that what we are aiming at in the process of justification is mutual agreement to a common scheme of social cooperation. The moral ideal operating in theories of justification is the ideal of making ourselves intelligible to others--so that, for example, any contractor behind a Rawlsian “veil of ignorance” can take up our position--and of actually reaching shared moral understandings.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Now, whether we are in truth justifiedin what we do as real moral actors may depend only on what would happen in a hypothetical social world, like that of the Rawlsian original position, in which we attempt to justify our actions to hypothetical others. Thus orienting our lives toward the ideal of doing the right thing may not require that we are able to justify ourselves to real others in our actual social world. This is especially true in social worlds where the real participants suffer from epistemic defects, such as socialization to accept dominance systems as natural, normal, and legitimate. But even if being justified is detachable from how others receive us in our actual social, moral world, the ideal of being able to make ourselves intelligible and to reach shared moral understandings continues to operate in our actual social world. Hypothetical social worlds, like those of the Rawlsian original position and the ideal discourse situation, help us to specify what the ideal is, what we ultimately want out of our moral lives--namely, shared moral understandings.

But that ideal does not operate only in hypothetical worlds. As participants in an actual moral practice, we operate under the ideal of participating in a shared scheme of social cooperation. Maximally, a shared scheme is one in which there is full consensus on who has which moral status, on which principles and practices are legitimate, on what constitutes particular virtues, and on what falls within the range of possible conceptions of the good. Minimally, a shared moral scheme means that we share enough moral understandings that we can successfully interpret what others are morally up to and see their reasons as providing some justification even if we ultimately disagree. To abandon the ideal of a shared scheme of cooperation would be to give up hope for the possibility of a moral practice in our actual social world.

<1> VI. Two Ideals

I suggest, then, that there are two ideals for what moral lives should look like. One is the familiar ideal of getting it right. The search for correct principles and adequate justifications is part of realizing this ideal. The other is the ideal of participating in a shared scheme of social cooperation. Communicating our moral views to others, offering explanations and justifications, seeking consensus is part of realizing this ideal.

What distinguishes the two moral ideals is that orienting our lives toward the first is up to us in a way that orienting our lives toward the second is not. It is substantially up to me whether I govern my life by principles, conceptions of virtue, and a conception of the range of possible good lives that would be shared in a hypothetical social world.[[18]](#footnote-18) It is substantially *not* up to me whether my life is at the same time also oriented toward reaching common moral understandings. Whether it is also so oriented largely depends on who my fellow moral practitioners are and on the possibilities for reception. Bad moral luck may undermine the aim of participating in a shared scheme of social cooperation in which we can make what we are morally up to legible to others. Self-respect may be persistently received as arrogance, integrity as irrational extremism, generosity as merely fulfilling an obligation, love as perversity, demanding fairness as demanding "special rights," sustaining a family as leaching off the system, and so on.

What the two ideals share in common is that both provide yardsticks, independently of considerations of praiseworthiness or blameworthiness, for measuring the excellence and success of our moral lives. I may not be to blame that my life has been one of servility or arrogance or unfairness. But to discover after the fact that it has been so because of my moral misconceptions is to discover moral failure. It is a failure that merits moral regret and also shame, since I am now revealed, particularly in the eyes of others about whose opinion I care most, not to have measured up to a standard that applies to me. Similarly, although less obviously, to find that one's moral life is marked by abnormally frequent occasions of being morally illegible to others and of having one’s reasons rejected as not even minimally justifying is to find that one's moral life has failed. It has failed in much the way Van Gogh might have thought that his life as a participant in the social practice of art had failed. No matter how good his work was, his life as an artist was in part a failure, because art also aims at being shared. So, too, no matter how much one gets it morally right, one's life as a moral practitioner may end in failure, because the practice of morality also aims at a common moral life together.

This failure merits moral regret. It is less obvious that it merits shame. What would seem to bar this sort of failure's being a fit subject for shame is that if one really is getting it right, then one has nothing to be ashamed *of.* If others mistake objecting to unfair treatment as arrogance, nagging, shrillness, demanding special treatment or special rights, that is simply their mistake. The moral resister is not really any of these things. She has no reason for shame. But the line between reality and appearance may not be so sharp. Our actions have meanings in the social world. Individuals cannot change those meanings at will.[[19]](#footnote-19) A woman who persistently complains that her husband is not doing enough domestic labor *is* a nag. That is what her actions mean in this social world, even if, from the point of view of the hypothetical social world that guides her decision-making, her actions also mean standing up for fair treatment. Because our actions have social meanings, who we are and thus our sources of shame will be partly determined by who others take us to be.[[20]](#footnote-20)

This result may seem unfair. Morality sets before us the task of living well. Now it seems that one might fail simply because of the collective backwardness of those with whom we must interact. But this objection rests on a mistake. Morality sets before us the *task* of doing the right thing. Success on this dimension is not a function of how others receive us. Living a moral life that is successful on all relevant dimensions, however, includes more that successfully executing this task. Consider an analogy with teaching. Successful teaching only partly depends on successfully executing such tasks as preparing and giving comprehensible lectures and grading fairly. It also depends on class chemistry, students' willingness to work, their interest in the subject and the like. These are not tasks. Teaching may fail due to these non-task factors. In this case, the only way to avoid the conclusion that one has failed as a teacher is to reduce teaching to a set of tasks performable by the teacher alone. But this approach wrongly treats teaching as in individualistic enterprise. Teaching is a fundamentally social activity. Successful participation in this social activity depends both on the parts that are up to oneself and the parts that are up to others. So, too, in the case of morality.

If success depends both on what is up to us (correct task execution in getting it right) and on what is up to others (reception of what one does as a meaningful part of a shared scheme of social cooperation), then there is no guarantee that both moral ideals will be realized simultaneously. Indeed, as I have been suggesting, when getting it right requires repudiating shared moral understandings, success on this dimension may *produce* failure on the other.

Central features of moral philosophizing often work to obscure both the ideal of participating in a shared scheme of social cooperation and the possible conflict between this ideal and that of getting it right. The (perfectly appropriate) focus on determining correct moral principles and adequate justifications can easily lead to the impression that getting it right is all that matters. Moral philosophizing may also make the reception of one's moral activity seem far less problematic that it actually is. Using hypothetical worlds peopled by reasonable beings who would, of course, agree to correct moral principles is one way of doing so. Relying heavily on shared intuitions is another way.[[21]](#footnote-21) Eschewing radical social critique in favor of moral fine-tuning or more theoretical topics is yet another.

In a different way, the highly discursive nature of philosophical practice works to obscure how problematic real-life moral communication may be. Making one's choices legible and one's reasons acceptable as justifying reasons is much more likely of success when choices and reasons can be carefully formulated in essays and books. As a philosopher, for example, Claudia Card can devote an entire chapter to articulating what she means by "lesbian" and thus what she is morally up to when she stands up for her lesbian life. As a participant in the daily practice of morality, she does not have this luxury. As a result, exercises of integrity, like hers, that involve rejecting conventional meanings are bound to be and remain illegible to others as an exercise of integrity or even as minimally justified.

In making moral communication with others seem unproblematic, moral philosophy obscures the possibility that our moral lives will not in fact be conducted within a minimally shared scheme of social cooperation and that our moral practice will be an idiosyncratic performance. The point here is not that there is something wrong with moral philosophy. The point is that central features of moral philosophizing make it difficult to entertain thoughts about what is happening to moral resisters' lives in abnormal moral contexts as they try to get it right. Thus we aren't invited to think about what we would say about such a life, especially if it were our own. Would we think it tragic that a life devoted to doing the right thing was incomprehensible to others or vilified as perverse, irrational or immoral?[[22]](#footnote-22)Would we think our lives had turned out as moral lives are not supposed to? Would our pride in doing the right thing be spoiled with shame for the other, social meanings of our actions? And would we find it forgivable, because understandable, if someone chose participation in a common moral life over doing the right thing?

The answer to all of these questions seems to me to be yes. Indeed, there would be something perverse about a person who cares only about how things would go between herself and others in a hypothetical, morally more perfect social world and who is morally untroubled by the fact that in her actual exchanges with others she is received as arrogant, unfair, ungrateful, selfish, uncivil, and intolerant.[[23]](#footnote-23)

In sum, moral revolutionaries are to be admired for their commitment to doing the right thing. Even so, their lives will be, in part, moral failures. It is part of the tragedy of morally ill-formed social worlds that the morally best will have reason to regret how their lives turn out morally.

1. \* Two works have particularly influenced the content of this chapter: Claudia Card's *The Unnatural Lottery: Character and Moral Luck* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996) and Margaret Urban Walker's *Moral Understandings: A Feminist Studies in Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 1998). My particular approach to moral failure grows out of themes I develop in chap. 2, “An Apology for Moral Shame”; chap. 5, “Standing for Something”; chap. 6, "Kant and Compliance with Conventionalized Injustice"; and chap. 7 "Responsibility & Reproach." [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. On the idea that our attributions of responsibility are connected to expectations about what is statistically normal, see Ferdinand Shoeman,”Statistical Norms and Moral Attributions,” in *Responsibility, Character, and the Emotions: New Essays in Moral Psychology*, ed. Ferdinand Shoeman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); and Jeffrie G. Murphy, “Moral Death: A Kantian Essay on Psychopathology,” in *Ethics and Personality*, ed. John Deigh (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Thomas Nagel, "Moral Luck," in *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), esp. chap. 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Card, *The Unnatural Lottery.* [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. On the construction of gay and lesbian identities as demeaning and defaming ones, see Claudia Card, *Lesbian Choices* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 151-68. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Thomas E. Hill, Jr., "Servility and Self-Respect," in *Autonomy and Self-Respect* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 4-18. It is from this piece that the principle of self-respect I suggest is derived. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Elizabeth V. Spelman, "Anger and Insubordination," in *Women, Knowledge, and Reality: Explorations in Feminist Philosophy*, ed. Ann Garry and Marilyn Pearsall (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. On the “original position,” John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), 17-22. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), and Kathryn Pyne Addelson *Moral Passages: Toward a Collectivist Moral Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1994). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See Seyla Behabib, *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*; and Marilyn Friedman, *What are Friends For? Feminist Perspectives on Personal Relationships and Moral Theory* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. On epistemic credibility, see Walker, *Moral Understandings*. I have argued in "Family Outlaws: Rethinking the Connections between Feminism, Lesbianism, and the Family,” in *Feminism and Families*, ed. Hilde Lindemann Nelson (New York: Routledge, 1996), that gays and lesbians lack definitional authority with respect to the family and thus do not have the same standing that heterosexuals do recommend changes in family law. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Kathryn Pauly Morgan, "Women and Moral Madness," in *Science, Morality, and Feminist Theory*, ed. Marsha Hanen and Kai Nielsen (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1979). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Feminists have been highly critical of conventional accounts of the autonomous person. But those criticisms are, I think, less critiques of the ideal of living beyond reproach and more critiques of the lack of realism, often characteristic of moral philosophies that ignore our actual social context, about how possible it is to live such a life. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. For a discussion of the difficulties involved in "getting it right," as well as a critical evaluation of some now standard attempts to "get it right" in academia (by, for example, promoting affirmative action), see Marilyn Frye's "Getting It Right," in *Willful Virgin: Essays in Feminism 1976-1992* (Freedom, CA: Crossing Press, 1992). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Chap. 7, "Responsibility and Reproach." [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. On the “veil of ignorance,” which screens out the particulars that enable us to distinguish one individual (such as ourselves) from another, see Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 136-42. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. I say "substantially" because the control we have over getting it right is a matter of degree and is also vulnerable to luck. As actual moral reasoners, we are embedded in social worlds that may provide better or worse resources for successfully conducting the sort of inquiry required by hypothetical contract or discourse scenarios. It has for that reason been a central feminist critique of Rawls that the method of going behind a veil of ignorance and of imagining oneself in multiple social positions or as bearers of multiple conceptions of the good is not a method that real moral reasoners can employ in its pure form. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Claudia Card develops this point more elegantly and forcefully that I do here (*The Unnatural Lottery*, 140-62). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. In chap. 2, “An Apology for Moral Shame,” I discuss and critique the idea that the mature, autonomous agent should only feel shamed by moral criticisms she regards as correct and not also shamed by who she is in the eyes of fellow practitioners even if she regards their moral criticisms as misguided. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. "Shared" here amounts to one of two things. Either moral arguments draw on the most conventionalized and socially legitimated moral beliefs (for example, that it is wrong to inflict gratuitous suffering), or they draw on moral beliefs that are shared by those who also share the philosopher’s gender, race, and class location (for example, the belief that contractors in the Rawlsian original position should, of course, be heads of household). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. I owe to my colleague, Jill Gordon, the idea that such a life is tragic. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. One might try to capture the idea that it matters how our actual exchanges with others go by placing moral value on sustaining relationships. Unfortunately, this strategy factors considerations about how others will receive us into decisions about what the right thing to do would be. Others' misguided responses, however, should not be decisive in decisions about what morally ought to be done. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)