Cheshire Calhoun
Moral Aims: Essays on the Importance of Getting It Right and Practicing Morality with Others
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Reviewed by Krista K. Thomason, 2018

Krista K. Thomason is an assistant professor of philosophy at Swarthmore College. Her main areas of research are moral psychology, Kant's moral philosophy, and human rights. Her work appears in such journals as *Kantian Review* and *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*. She is the author of *Naked: The Dark Side of Shame and Moral Life*, which was released by Oxford University Press in January 2018.

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Moral Aims is a collection of nine of Cheshire Calhoun's previously published essays, with a new introduction. Those of us who draw inspiration from Calhoun's work will, of course, find it helpful to have the essays all in one place, and the new introduction provides a great deal of context for her philosophical thought. Rereading the essays in *Moral Aims* reminds us how timeless Calhoun's work is. Though the most recent essays in the book were published over a decade ago, their subject matter could appear in any philosophy journal today and not seem out of place at all. Indeed, much of Calhoun's work is at this moment *more* timely and relevant than some contemporary ethics and feminist philosophy.

The collection contains the following selections: "Moral Failure," "An Apology for Moral Shame," "The Virtue of Civility," "Common Decency," "Standing for Something," "Kant and Compliance with Conventionalized Injustice," "Responsibility and Reproach," "Emotional Work," and "Changing One's Heart." The themes of the essays are broad, but they are all related to Calhoun's central philosophical concerns, which she explains in the new introduction. Rather than discuss any one or all of the essays in detail, I will instead focus on the ways in which Calhoun characterizes her philosophical project.

On Calhoun's view, moral philosophers face two challenges. The first challenge is "getting it right"—that is, trying to figure out what morality really requires of all of us as moral agents (2). This is the fully normative task of moral philosophy, which cannot be accomplished without, as Calhoun puts it, "going hypothetical" (2). What morality actually demands may not (and indeed often does not) concur with what people in fact believe or do. Therefore, trying to determine what moral agents should do cannot rely on determining what they have done or what they are doing. Moral agents in the world often get moral demands wrong, and it is part of the task of moral philosophy to try to get it right.

For Calhoun, moral philosophers sometimes take this task to be their primary or exclusive one. In doing so, they overlook what she sees as the second challenge that they must face. This second challenge involves what she calls the "social practice of morality" (6). The social practice of morality involves the "shared moral understandings" we have come to have in trying to make sense of and bring into fruition what we think morality requires (6). To confront the social practice of morality, moral philosophers have to abandon the fully normative and hypothetical

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perspective that comprises the first task. But the two tasks are not unrelated; indeed, it is the tensions and overlaps between them that capture Calhoun's main philosophical interests.

Let me use an example to help illustrate this fraught relationship. Imagine that we think morality requires us to respect our parents. Moral agents in the world, in particular times and places, try to live that value or put it into practice. In order to do so, we must draw on "the resources provided by socially available concepts and methods of moral reasoning" (7). As a result, what counts as "having respect for one's parents" can be made morally intelligible in the world only by using shared moral understandings. These shared moral understandings vary in different times and places. For my mother-in-law, who grew up in a small town in the rural American south during the 1950s, respecting her parents meant she had to adhere to strict rules about how women should and should not behave. Had she tried to buck those norms and to argue that they were based on gendered double standards, she would have been "read" or "interpreted" by her parents, her family, and the rest of her community as disrespectful. In other words, in order for her to live or put into practice what morality demanded, she had to rely on the commonly available ways of making that value intelligible to others.

These conflicts or tensions between morality and its social practice are the main topic of "Moral Failure," "An Apology for Moral Shame," "The Virtue of Civility," and "Common Decency." Although moral philosophers might be tempted to disregard or subordinate the social practice of morality to the normative demands of morality, Calhoun advocates taking the social practice of morality seriously. There is, on Calhoun's view, a very real way in which we can be morally in the right and yet be moral failures in the realm of social practice. Women in times and places like the one my mother-in-law grew up in who decide to loudly and publicly reject gendered double standards "will simply look like they are doing the wrong thing" from the perspective of the social practice of morality (37). This is a moral failure, on Calhoun's view (though not a culpable or blameworthy one). Morality requires us to live up to its demands, but we have to do so in the context of our social worlds. We have to figure out how to do what is right while making ourselves morally intelligible at the same time. Unfortunately, being morally intelligible to others does not always perfectly overlap with doing what is right.

It seems to me that Calhoun's central philosophical concern about the tensions between morality and its social practice are as much alive if not more so than when her essays on the topic were initially published. One might be tempted to argue that moral philosophers have begun to take social practices more seriously. There has been more work on the "empirical" or "descriptive" aspects of morality with increasing connections made among philosophy, empirical psychology, and sociology. One need only note the rise in poster sessions at the American Philosophical Association meetings to see evidence of this trend. Yet I think this is not what Calhoun has in mind. She does not advocate that we take the social practice of morality to be the primary domain of moral philosophy—in doing so we simply invert the traditional hierarchy rather than valuing both perspectives. As she puts it, social practice is not merely "a datum to be described" (9). Moreover, carefully studying the details of morality as it occurs in practice fails to give us direction in navigating the conflict. The fully normative aspect of moral philosophy is important in helping us determine how to revise the social practices that we find unfair or wanting. It is not clear that giving pride of place to the social practice helps us make ourselves more intelligible when we want to try to change the way things are.

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I want to close by thinking about how we live with the tension between what morality requires and the social practice of morality. It seems that in order to live with this tension well, we have to figure out how to be good social practitioners of morality. We have to somehow take our cues from both the normative dimension and the social dimension. What, in Calhoun's view, would this look like? Essays like "The Virtue of Civility," "Common Decency," and "Standing for Something" help make this vision clearer. Moral agents have to be sensitive to their moral intelligibility. It will not do to simply adopt the mantle of moral revolutionary and mow down anyone who stands in the way. In the social practice of morality, moral understandings are *shared*; they must be arrived at through thinking together about what moral demands are and should be. As a result, we must care about civil discourse, respectful behavior, and common decency. There will be times when we have to care about these things even when doing so prevents us from putting the proper demands of morality into practice in the way that they should be. This is the burden of taking social practice seriously. It is common nowadays to claim that, especially for members of marginalized groups, valuing civility and common decency directly competes with liberation from oppression. Why, these arguments often go, should marginalized people have to be civil and decent to those who are not civil and decent in return? I take it the problem with these arguments, as Calhoun might see it, is that they simply deny the importance of social practice. The social practice of morality is the only place where morality happens in the world where we live. As Calhoun puts it, "There is a real sense in which the social practice of morality, whatever its imperfections may be, is the only moral game in town" (10). Those who insist—whoever they may be, marginalized or not—that they do not have to make themselves morally intelligible to others and go on acting as they wish will simply turn out to be moral failures in Calhoun's sense of the term. They are not blameworthy for these failures, but no one will be able to morally "read" them.

It would be likewise a mistake, however, to think that the only path to moral intelligibility is to adopt whole hog the shared moral understandings we currently have even if they are oppressive and unjust. It is this element of the difficulty that I think readers (particularly moral philosophers, perhaps) would like more of from *Moral Aims*. How can we be concerned about moral intelligibility while at the same time trying to amend the way moral demands are practiced? To return to my mother-in-law, there were some ways in which she was able to resist some unfair norms. She obtained a master's degree, which was unusual for a rural southern girl during that time period. Here she had the support of her family: her parents frequently stood up to unwelcome comments from her community about how "educated" (meant pejoratively) she was. In some ways, this supports Calhoun's claims. In order for my mother-in-law to be even partially successful in being both educated and "properly" female, she had to have the support of at least some people around her. She also had the help of shifting gender expectations in other parts of the country. There were more examples of women doing what they wanted to do that she and her parents could point to. These things helped make her at least partially intelligible. Additionally, she had to possess some internal resistance to the norms imposed upon her. She had to be brave and ambitious enough to steel herself against the criticism she constantly faced. Her parents had to be willing to trust her judgment and they had to care enough about her flourishing to stand up to the community's expectations. How do we come into possession of thoughts like these that enable us to see past the social practice of morality? Is it by reflecting on the normative and hypothetical moral point of view? I take it some moral philosophers will argue that this is

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precisely what gives us critical distance from our social practices such that we can critique them. What I think I would like Calhoun to say more about is how we carve out this normative space for ourselves in the midst of social practice.

Calhoun's work has always been thoughtful and engaging, and the essays from *Moral Aims* are as philosophically rich and relevant as they were when they were originally published. Moral philosophy and feminist philosophy would do well to keep her work in mind as a model both for content and for style. She does not shy away from difficult and challenging aspects of moral life in favor of tidy solvable problems. She sees the troubled waters of morality and its social practice and dives right into the wake.