

Is There Progress in Morality?

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I. INTRODUCTION

My question, which is central to the business of moral philosophy, is implicitly addressed by many philosophers, yet explicitly addressed by only a few. In this paper I address the question head-on, and propose a qualified affirmative answer.

First, however, it is important to be clear about what is meant by ‘morality’ and ‘progress’, and what the meaning of ‘is’ is. My characterizations will not be exact, but I hope they will be precise enough to specify a domain that can be productively investigated.

The moral progress with which I am concerned is not that which consists entirely in improvements in our understanding of the semantics of moral discourse, nor entirely in the development of increasingly adequate normative theories. My interest is in whether there is progress on the ground – with whether, in some sense, morality is ascendant in a particular domain. Of course, progress in metaethics and moral theory may contribute to progress in moral practice, but whether or not this is so I shall not try to say here.¹ Nor will I worry about the distinction that some have drawn between ethics and morality. What matters for me is the contrast between the right and the good, on one hand, and the wrong and the bad, on the other, where these categories are broadly construed.

II. THE NAÏVE CONCEPTION

Let us begin with a simple, abstract account of what moral progress consists in. Call this the *Naïve Conception*:

Moral progress occurs when a subsequent state of affairs is better than a preceding one, or when right acts become increasingly prevalent.²

While it might be granted that this account would be broadly acceptable to a broad range of philosophers, it still might be thought that it is more congenial to some normative views than to others. Con-

¹ But see my *Morality's Progress: Essays on Humans, Other Animals, and the Rest of Nature*, Oxford, 2002, ch. 2.

² A cautionary note: the Naïve Conception does not imply that claims about moral progress require a complete ordering of states of affairs within a universe of discourse; a partial ordering can be sufficient. For example, we may know that A is better than B, but be clueless about C's relation to either A or B, yet we could claim that moral progress had occurred in the transition from B to A.

sequentialists, for example, will be comfortable with the idea that states of affairs can be ordered according to their goodness, and many deontologists will be satisfied by an account of moral progress in terms of the prevalence of right acts. But what about Kantians and virtue theorists? Their favoured objects of evaluation – the will and agents, respectively – do not directly figure in the Naïve Conception.

Virtue theory can, I think, be accommodated by the Naïve Conception. This would involve seeing moral progress as consisting in the moral improvement of humanity, and information about the prevalence of right acts at particular times as proxy for how the project of improvement is faring. Another approach would be to count the occurrence of various virtues as part of what gives value to states of affairs.

Kant's writings on moral progress are extremely rich but sometimes sketchy, often obscure, and deeply entangled with various parts of his systematic philosophy. In his philosophy of religion Kant is concerned with individual moral progress, especially as viewed in the eyes of God. For Kant, this concern is closely connected to the question of immortality. In his writings on philosophy of history, Kant is concerned with the moral progress of societies and nations. Here his focus is much more political and empirical than in his philosophy of religion. In such writings as 'Perpetual Peace' he makes concrete proposals for improving the human condition that foreshadow the contemporary human rights movement. However, Kant was explicit that moral progress in this sense does not necessarily constitute moral progress in the deeper sense which he associates with the idea of moral worthiness. In addressing the question of 'what profit will progress toward the better yield humanity?' he writes:

Not an ever-growing quantity of morality with regard to intention, but an increase of the products of legality in dutiful actions whatever their motive. That is, the profit (result) of man's striving toward the better can be assumed to reside alone in the good deeds of men, which will become better and better and more and more numerous...we have only empirical data (experiences) upon which we are founding this prediction, namely, the physical cause of our actions as these actually occur as phenomena; and not the moral cause – the only one which can be established purely a priori – which contains the concept of duty with respect to what ought to happen.³

Since our focus here is on 'the good deeds of men', so long as we recognize that this does not exhaust Kant's account of our duties, we can assimilate his views to the Naïve Conception by treating him as a kind of deontologist who holds that moral progress occurs when right acts become more prevalent.⁴

³ I. Kant, 'An Old Question Raised Again: Is the Human Race Constantly Progressing?', *Kant on History*, ed. L. W. Beck, Indianapolis, IN, 1963, p. 151.

⁴ See B. Herman, *The Practice of Moral Judgement*, Cambridge, MA, 1993, ch. 10 for some reminders that Kant is not, in the deepest sense, a deontologist.

In the end it seems to me that the Naïve Conception can provide a notion of moral progress consistent with most normative views in moral philosophy.

However, another challenge can be raised. It might be suggested that the Naïve Conception is more at home with some metaethical views than with others. Moral realism, for example, would seem to provide a natural explanation for how states of affairs can be ranked according to their goodness.⁵ On this view, the point of moral language is to correspond to the moral order, and the role of moral action is to exemplify or conform to it. Moral progress is assessed on the basis of how adequately our moral thought and action reflect this objective order in temporally successive stages. It might be thought that alternative metaethical views, which may be plausible in their own right, are implausible when conjoined with the Naïve Conception; and that this counts against the Naïve Conception rather than against these alternative views.

An alternative to moral realism might be a view that sees morality as a human construction grounded in evolutionary history.⁶ On such a view morality is a behavioural system, with an attendant psychology, that has evolved among some social animals for the purposes of regulating their interactions. It might be thought that, from this perspective, there is no such thing as moral progress, or that there is nothing for moral progress to consist in except better-regulated social interactions.

But what does it mean for social interactions to be better regulated? It might be thought that on an evolutionary account this must ultimately be understood in terms of the primary currency of evolutionary theory: biological fitness.⁷ From here it may seem a short step to the view that moral progress would consist in a behavioural system becoming ever more conducive to promoting the biological fitness of those who participate in it.

The Naïve Conception is a nice instrument for contrasting these two views of moral progress. According to the Naïve Conception, moral progress occurs when a subsequent state of affairs is better than the preceding one. Moral realism understands 'better than' as something like 'more adequately reflects moral reality', while the evolutionary

⁵ For further discussion of moral realism, see *Morality's Progress*, ch. 16.

⁶ See *Morality's Progress*, chs. 14–16; also P. Singer, *The Expanding Circle: Ethics and Sociobiology*, New York, 1981; A. Gibbard, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings*, Oxford, 1990; and R. Nozick, *Invariances: The Structure of the Objective World*, Cambridge, 2001.

⁷ A fairly standard definition of 'fitness' can be found in E. Mayr, *One Long Argument: Charles Darwin and the Genesis of Modern Evolutionary Thought*, Cambridge, MA, 1991, p. 189: '[t]he relative ability of an organism to survive and transmit its genes to the gene pool of the next generation' (some would omit the words 'survive and').

view understands 'better than' as something like 'is more conducive to biological fitness'.

Moral realism is rejected by many philosophers because of the thought that it must rely on either supernatural or 'queer' properties in order to explain why we are motivated to pursue the good. Normally, objective properties such as length, and perhaps colour and taste,⁸ are not intrinsically motivating; whether or not we seek to realize them depends on our desires. Yet we do seem intrinsically motivated to seek what we regard as good. Perhaps goodness is 'queer' among properties in being both objective and intrinsically motivating; or perhaps we are motivated to seek goodness because doing so has some external warrant (e.g. God requires it). But to many philosophers, the most plausible explanation for why we seek the good is that the idea of goodness is our own construction, and it is a condition on what we count as good that we are motivated to seek it.⁹ A further consideration that inclines some towards the evolutionary view is that any respectable theory will have to find some place for evolutionary considerations (even if only to push them aside), and evolutionary accounts of morality discharge this obligation in a big way.¹⁰

While the evolutionary conception of morality may appear plausible in other respects, it is doubtful that our intuitive idea of moral progress can be understood in terms of promoting biological fitness. Whatever exactly moral progress consists in, it is plausible (for reasons I will explain later) to suppose that it involves at least the following: the abolition of war and slavery, the reduction of poverty and class privilege, the extension of liberty, the empowerment of marginalized groups, and respect for animals and nature. But there is no reason to believe that a society that is morally progressive in these terms is on the way to the greater biological fitness of its members than one that is not. Nor is it plausible to suppose that a society whose members' genes are better represented in the next generation is one that we would regard as morally progressive (it may be, for example, a society that is characterized by a high incidence of rape).

The problem appears to be this. Moral realism may respect our intuitions about moral progress but it violates our metaphysical sensibilities. The evolutionary perspective, on the other hand, pro-

⁸ There is a debate about just how objective 'secondary' properties such as colour and taste really are. For an introduction to the literature, see A. Byrne and D. R. Hilbert, *Readings on Color*, Cambridge, MA, 1997.

⁹ This argument roughly follows J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, Harmondsworth, 1977. Of course, not everyone is persuaded. For an introduction to the literature, see G. Sayre-McCord, *Essays on Moral Realism*, Ithaca, NY, 1988.

¹⁰ There are interesting ways of trying to link evolutionary epistemology to realism, but the practical nature of our assessments of value appears to present a special obstacle to providing such an account for the moral domain.

vides metaphysical comfort but at the cost of our views about moral progress. How do we get out of this jam?

In my characterization of the evolutionary account of morality, I slipped into describing it as another version of realism. In this case the objective reality which morality is supposed to mirror is that expressed by evolutionary biology, with the ultimate value being evolutionary fitness. But to reject realism is to reject altogether the idea that the function of morality is to mirror an external reality, and that progress is to be assessed by its success in so mirroring. In so far as the evolutionary story provides an alternative to the first conception, it must provide the makings of an account in which morality is autonomous, not a shadow of something external to itself. This requires a different understanding of the evolutionary account than the one expressed earlier.

We can begin to formulate this different understanding by distinguishing the project of explaining a phenomenon from characterizing its content, and both of these from the project of justification. The evolutionary account should be understood as explaining why morality evolved and persists among creatures like us, but it should not be construed as determining the content of morality. The explanation of why morality exists will surely refer to biological fitness, but, once called into existence, morality has the power to issue its own imperatives. This is because the twin motors of morality, reason and sentiment, each have the power to be the source of moral prescriptions and to project our concern beyond ourselves. Both embody, in different ways, impulses towards ever greater abstraction and impartiality.

Peter Singer emphasizes the role of reason in ethics. He suggests that reason evolved and has been sustained in creatures like us because of the advantages it confers in finding food and avoiding danger. But once a creature begins to reason, the results are unpredictable: 'Beginning to reason is like stepping onto an escalator that leads upward and out of sight. Once we take the first step, the distance to be travelled is independent of our will and we cannot know in advance where we shall end.'¹¹ The reasoner may adopt new beliefs when they come to be seen as consequences of beliefs already held, or give up familiar beliefs that come to be viewed as resting on shaky grounds. The demands for coherence, consistency, and the other features characteristic of reason can take the reasoner to surprising and unanticipated destinations.

According to Singer, morality develops because of the role that reason plays in our social lives: 'In a dispute between members of a cohesive group of reasoning beings, the demand for a reason is

¹¹ Singer, *The Expanding Circle*, p. 88.

a demand for a justification that can be accepted by the group as a whole.¹² Once we begin to respond to the demand for impersonal justifications of our behaviour, this can lead to moral change. This is exactly what Singer thinks has occurred from the time of the Hebrews and Greeks to the present.

The idea of a disinterested defense of one's conduct emerges because of the social nature of human beings and the requirements of group living, but in the thought of reasoning beings, it takes on a logic of its own which leads to its extensions beyond the bounds of the group.¹³

The result is an expanding circle of moral concern that progressively broadens '...from the family and tribe to the nation and race, and we are beginning to recognize that our obligations extend to all human beings'.¹⁴ Eventually, Singer believes, this mechanism leads to encompassing all sentient beings in the circle of moral concern.¹⁵

However we should be cautious about what conclusions we draw from these observations. If what I have said is correct, then the evolutionary view of morality does not exclude the possibility of moral progress but neither does it ensure it. To suppose otherwise is to deny the autonomy of morality. It would be to fall into the old trap of thinking that evolution itself is inevitably progressive, taking life from the simpler and less valuable, to the grander and more complex.¹⁶ Evolution may have brought morality into existence and established the parameters of what might constitute possible moralities for creatures like us, but the particular moral ideals that emerge can be quite various. Biology does not dictate the content of morality because morality is a human construction as well as an evolutionary phenomenon. Even if 'selfish' genes construct us in order to further their own

¹² Singer, *The Expanding Circle*, p. 93. The idea that the demand for reasons is a demand for a justification that can be accepted by others is surprisingly similar to Scanlon's formulation of contractualism in 'Contractualism and Utilitarianism', *Utilitarianism and Beyond*, ed. A. Sen and B. Williams. Cambridge, 1982. In that paper Scanlon suggests that utilitarians have no account of distinctively moral reasons; he cites other writings of Singer's, but not *The Expanding Circle*.

¹³ Singer, *The Expanding Circle*, p. 114.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 120. Singer's story of the way reason brought him to his animal liberationist position is an instance of this narrative; see his *Animal Liberation*, New York, 2002.

¹⁵ A similar story, derived from Hume, can be told about what Annette Baier calls 'the progress of the sentiments' (in *A Progress of Sentiments: Reflections on Hume's Treatise*, Cambridge, MA, 1991), and what Richard Rorty calls 'sentimental education' (in 'Human Rights, Rationality, and Sentimentality', *Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers Volume 3*, New York, 1998). Indeed, I think the sentimentalist story is more plausible than the rationalist one. For discussion, see J. Haidt, 'The Emotional Dog and the Rational Tail: A Social Intuitionist Approach to Moral Judgment', *Psychological Review*, cviii (2001).

¹⁶ See M. Ruse, 'The Significance of Evolution', *A Companion to Ethics*, ed. P. Singer, Oxford, 1991, for discussion of this fallacy.

'interests', once constructed, we often act in ways that are contrary to the 'interests' of our genes.¹⁷ For example, one moral ideal that I share with many environmentalists is voluntary childlessness (or that, at most, people should have only one child).¹⁸ In almost every case acting on this principle is to act against one's own biological fitness.¹⁹

How could evolution have produced creatures who act in such a way? Why have they not been extinguished in favour of those whose moralities support the pursuit of their own biological fitness?

While the answers to these questions are not fully settled, a picture is beginning to emerge. The key, as Darwin understood, is group selection. Darwin wrote:

A tribe including many members who, from possessing in a high degree patriotism, fidelity, obedience, courage and sympathy, were always ready to aid one another, and to sacrifice themselves for the common good would be victorious over most other tribes, and this would be natural selection.²⁰

This insight, regarded by some as a howler, was largely obscured for much of the last generation by a single-minded focus on the gene as the unit of selection; and the relative neglect of development, culture, and the importance of both the physical and social environments in evolutionary history.²¹

Let us call those who act in such a way as to benefit others at the expense of their own fitness 'altruists', and those who always pursue their own fitness, 'the selfish'. While altruists do badly in communities dominated by the selfish, they will often do better in altruistic communities than the selfish will do in selfish communities. Group selection, in order to occur, requires a particular structure of both

¹⁷ The idea of the 'selfish gene' was popularized by Richard Dawkins in *The Selfish Gene*, New York, 1978. I place 'selfish' and 'interests' in shudder quotes because it is a *façon de parler* at best to suppose that genes have interests and are selfish. For discussion, see Singer, *The Expanding Circle*, pp. 126–33.

¹⁸ For a defence of this principle see B. McKibben, *Maybe One: A Personal and Environmental Argument for Single Child Families*, New York, 1998.

¹⁹ However, there are cases, some of which are predicted by Hamilton's theory of inclusive fitness, in which reducing fertility can increase biological fitness. Among humans this can occur when it enables parents to invest more heavily in fewer offspring, increasing the chances of each successfully reproducing, thus increasing the overall likelihood that the parents' genes will be represented in future generations. Despite these cases, it is clear that many instances of voluntary fertility reduction diminish agents' biological fitness. See W. D. Hamilton, 'The Genetical Evolution of Social Behavior I and II', *Journal of Theoretical Biology*, vii (1963).

²⁰ As quoted in L. Dugatkin, *Cheating Monkeys and Citizen Bees*, Cambridge, MA, 1999, p. 140.

²¹ There are many researchers responsible for developing the picture that I sketch below, but see especially E. Sober and D. S. Wilson, *Unto Others: The Evolution and Psychology of Unselfish Behavior*, Cambridge, MA, 1998, and C. Boehm, *Hierarchy in the Forest*, Cambridge, MA, 1999.

intra-group and inter-group selection. The benefits of being selfish in a group must be relatively low, while the benefits of being part of a group with a high number of altruists must be relatively high. Still, even in such cases, existing group selection models predict that the selfish will do better than altruists even within groups dominated by altruists. For groups dominated by altruists to sustain themselves, community policing is required (of which morality can be an instance), and the continuous recruitment of altruistic individuals (the expanding circle).

How and whether any of this works in practice is highly sensitive to specific traits and features of the environment. There are also further complications in the case of complex social animals such as humans in which group membership is plural and flexible. Moreover, biological altruism is at most a single feature of morality and is more plausibly construed as a feature that subserves morality. Particular moralities are best viewed, from the perspective that I am sketching, as largely cultural phenomena subserved by various capacities and dispositions, which are themselves complex products of development and genetics. They are sustained, in part, because they are constructed from multi-purpose devices that play various other roles in our lives. Flack and de Waal identify the capacities for empathy and sympathy, and behaviours such as reciprocity, food-sharing, reconciliation, consolation, conflict intervention, and mediation as some of these building blocks of morality.²² Even without full-blown moralities, there is reason for such capacities and behaviours to evolve and persist. Thus we can generally say that autonomous moralities evolve and survive because they may, under some conditions, confer fitness advantages; and their complexity in construction, and inter-group and intra-group relationships, make it difficult to eliminate them.

A great deal more would have to be said to develop this picture, but if it is at all plausible in conception, then we can begin to see how autonomous moralities could evolve and persist. It is thus open to us to endorse an evolutionary understanding of morality and still hold out the possibility of moral progress understood in the way that I have suggested: as involving the abolition of war and slavery, the reduction of poverty and class privilege, the extension of liberty, the empowerment of marginalized groups, and respect for animals and nature. Morality does not float free of its biological basis, but neither is it determined by it.

²² J. Flack and F. de Waal, 'Primate Evolutionary Continuities vs. Human Uniqueness', *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, vii (2000).

III. AN INDEX OF MORAL PROGRESS

This, however, invites the next challenge. It is one thing to say that an evolutionary account of morality does not exclude this conception of moral progress, but it is another to say that this is the account that we should accept. Why should we think that moral progress can be assessed in the terms that I suggest?

One audacious idea is that moral progress consists in the increasing dominance of objective, impersonal, or agent-neutral reasons for action over subjective, personal, or agent-relative reasons.²³ Seen from this perspective, the values that appear on my index of moral progress are landmarks on the road to objectivity, since they demand a relatively large universe of moral concern (including, e.g., animals and nature) and specify a relatively high degree of other-regarding behaviour (e.g. the reduction of poverty and class privilege, and the empowerment of marginalized groups). This accords nicely with Singer's view of reason as an escalator that leads one to expand the circle of moral concern. From this perspective moral progress involves moving from a tribal morality, for example, to a more universal one, and this can be seen as a move towards greater objectivity, impersonality, and so forth. On such a view moral progress would come to an end only with the complete conquest of personal reasons by impersonal ones.²⁴

Many, however, would resist this conclusion because they see impersonal morality as desiccated, lacking the substantive commitments and values that make life worth living. Thomas Nagel goes further when he writes that '[o]bjectivity needs subjective material to work on' and there is a limit on '[h]ow far outside ourselves we can go without losing contact with this essential material'.²⁵ Yet Nagel generally sees moral progress as moving away from personal concerns, towards greater objectivity and impersonality. He appears to think that the moralities that have historically prevailed have given too much privilege to the personal point of view, but that the best morality would be one that 'harmonizes' these perspectives.²⁶ Demonstrating

²³ There is a point to distinguishing between the terms on each side of the contrast but for present purposes we can be fairly relaxed in our usage without causing much trouble.

²⁴ Perhaps this is analogous to the idea that science will come to an end with the completion of the true picture of the universe. See J. Horgan, *The End of Science: Facing the Limits of Knowledge in the Twilight of the Scientific Age*, Reading, 1996.

²⁵ Thomas Nagel, *The View From Nowhere*, Oxford, 1986, p. 186.

²⁶ The metaphor of harmony is different from the metaphor of balance. While balancing might involve one perspective outweighing another, harmonizing occurs when 'the claims of objectivity ... come to form a ... part of each individual's conception of himself' (ibid.).

this would require showing that, at each point along some region of a continuum, the impersonal point of view should prevail, but that at some point we enter another region in which the impersonal point of view should no longer win. However, having given so much credence to the impersonal point of view it would be difficult to show at any particular point why its power should flag.

This may be the story that reason tells, but there are evolutionary considerations that suggest that the impersonal point of view can never win a complete and decisive victory over its rivals. If the picture that I have sketched about the evolution and persistence of morality is plausible, then morality survives because of group selection, and group selection requires competition between groups. A fully impersonal morality would efface the distinctions between groups, thus disabling group selection, leading to the extinction of morality. Or so one might speculate.

However, the failure of a fully impersonal morality would not threaten the plausibility of my index. While such a morality would endorse values at least as universal and demanding as those that appear on my index, these values can be defended short of embracing a fully impersonal morality. In order to see this, it would be helpful to consider what it means to be an index of moral progress, and this requires elaborating the idea of a theory of value, which in turn requires filling out the notion of a normative theory.

A plausible normative theory includes both a value theory and a set of deontic principles.²⁷ The value theory specifies what matters, and the deontic principles determine how we should act in choice situations in which various alternatives would have different effects on the prevalence or distribution of what matters.²⁸ A value theory can be represented as an abstract structure that specifies a set of fundamental values that, when conjoined with propositions about particular people, societies and so forth, implies a nested hierarchy of less fundamental values. I will call more fundamental values 'deep values', and less fundamental values 'shallow values'. Values can stand in relations of 'deeper' and 'shallower' with respect to each other.²⁹

²⁷ Thus I reject as implausible, normative theories such as absolute deontology which have no place for value theory, since they hold that morality consists entirely in conformity to exceptionless rules.

²⁸ For those who think that the class of normative theories is a superset of the class of moral theories it should be clear from the context that the normative theories I am concerned with here are moral theories. I refrain from saying this in the main body of the text since, on my view, a normative theory is only part of a moral theory. But these are pedantic points, not worth pursuing for present purposes. However, before abandoning pedantry, I want to add that prevalence and distribution may be only two of the relevant dimensions which distinguish actions in choice situations.

²⁹ While my rhetoric here may sound foundationalist I think that this way of

An index can be related to a particular value theory in a number of different ways. The items on an index could directly specify deep values, or they could specify shallower values implied by deeper values in conjunction with other premises. Different items on an index could occur at different levels in a value theory. For example, a particular value theory might demand both the extension of liberty and the reduction of poverty, but find one of these values deeper than the other. Another value theory might reverse this relation. A theory could also fail to acknowledge an item as a value, yet treat it as a key indicator as to whether or not a particular value is expressed in some state of the world. For example, a theory may for its own reasons refuse to acknowledge the abolition of slavery as a value, instead taking it as an indicator of whether what is acknowledged as a value, say respect for persons, prevails in the world at a particular time. Some theories may simply refuse to acknowledge some of the items on the index. Other theories may countenance values that do not occur on the index. Since there is a great deal of variation in the ways in which the items on my index might be taken up in various theories of value, it is plausible to suppose that a wide range of value theories would find some place for them. This is just a fancy way of saying that it is hard to imagine a plausible theory of value that does not acknowledge the importance of abolishing war, slavery, reducing poverty and so on. This is important because it explains why my proposed index could be endorsed by a wide range of those who have dramatically different views about the foundations of value (i.e. those who restrict it to desirable consciousness, preference-satisfaction, welfare, the realization of capacities, or some other feature(s)). Each theory could endorse the index, but see it (or some of its elements) as standing in different relations to what they regard as fundamental values. Understood in this way, from the perspective of different theories of value improvement with respect to the index could be constitutive of, provide necessary or sufficient conditions for, or provide a strong criterion of, moral progress. Different theories could endorse this index, yet see it standing in different relations to moral progress.

Consider the first clause of the index: the abolition of war and slavery. Any theory that is committed to the importance of basic rights or goods, or of the presumption that people's preferences should be satisfied, or asserts the importance of human happiness ought to be willing to find a place for these aspirations somewhere in its value

representing a theory of value is consistent with alternative models, such as coherentist ones. I could just as well speak of 'central' and 'peripheral' values as deep and shallow ones, though it would be stylistically awkward to do so. For more on foundationalism in ethics, see my 'Method in Moral Theory', Singer, ed.

theory. The same is true of the items specified in the second clause of the index: the reduction of poverty and class privilege. The third clause focuses on the extension of liberty, a good that has been appealed to by virtually every moral and political theory. The fourth clause focuses on participatory values: empowering marginalized groups. Anyone who believes that participation matters, either in itself or as a means of realizing the goods specified in the other clauses, should be willing to accept these items as part of an index of moral progress. The fifth clause, which concerns respect for animals and nature, may be the most controversial because it challenges conventional views about the boundaries of the moral domain. This is not a reason to reject it, however, since the expansion of the moral domain has historically been one of the central features of what we count as moral progress.³⁰ The classical utilitarians are paradigm moral progressives because of their insistence on taking seriously the interests of all who are affected by an action or policy, not only the rich and powerful. This led them to advocate the rights of women, the abolition of slavery, and even to consider the rights of animals. I cannot help but believe that the air of controversy that hangs over this fifth clause stems from the fact that many people (including most philosophers) have either dismissed these concerns with little thought, or ignored them altogether.

I have claimed that a wide variety of theorists would be able to endorse the elements of the index of moral progress that I have announced. However, it is clear that the index would not be acceptable to everyone. It would be rejected by some who believe that moral values are constituted by religious values, and that moral progress consists in the spread of Christianity or Buddhism, or increasing fidelity to the Koran or Torah.³¹ Others might loftily object that the index is ethnocentric. War, slavery, hierarchy, paternalism, and the domination of nature are central to the ways of life of various cultures around the world. Who am I to denounce them?

A full answer to the charge of ethnocentrism would be a large undertaking. I will confine myself to only two brief observations. First, most cultures are not simple, unbreakable units whose participants are single-minded in their support of prevailing practices. Intra-cultural diversity is as ubiquitous among humans as inter-cultural diversity. Every slave culture has had its dissenters. There were abolitionists, anti-racists, and proletarian revolutionaries even among the soldiers

³⁰ This view has been endorsed by such thinkers as Aldo Leopold (*A Sand County Almanac*, Oxford, 1949, pp. 201–3), Peter Singer (*The Expanding Circle*, pp. 111–24), Richard Rorty (Rorty, pp. 177 f.), and Robert Nozick (Nozick, pp. 278–80).

³¹ For an amusing attack on this view see Simon Blackburn, *Being Good: An Introduction to Ethics*, Oxford, 2001.

who imposed European domination on the New World.³² Second, the goods that appear on my index are both extremely important and general, and a variety of reasons for valuing them become manifest as soon as one begins to think impartially about them. Perhaps there is something ethnocentric about impartiality, but without taking up some such perspective it is difficult to see how a serious moral charge of ethnocentrism could be mounted. From the perspective of a thoroughgoing relativism, my ethnocentric philosophizing should be seen as simply expressing the attitudes of my culture, thus immune from the universalistic moral denunciations of those who would condemn me.³³

In addition to those who would object to my index on these grounds, there are those within the western philosophical tradition who would reject it as well: for example, a certain kind of perfectionist. Perfectionism can be characterized as the moral view that directs us to 'maximize the achievement of human excellence in art, science, and culture'.³⁴ A perfectionist might take the heights of human intellectual and artistic achievement as the index of moral progress, rather than the concerns about war, poverty, and so on that appear on my index. Such a theorist might see morality regressing since the time of the Renaissance, while a hedonistic utilitarian who values the maximization of pleasure might see it as progressing.

There are different versions of perfectionism. Perfectionism has been an unpopular doctrine in twentieth century philosophy in part because it has often been identified with what we might call brutal perfectionism. Brutal perfectionism is indifferent to suffering, or perhaps even attaches positive value to it.³⁵ From this perspective, increases or reductions in suffering would not bear on the question of moral progress, or would affect it paradoxically.³⁶ However an alternative version of perfectionism, which we might call soft perfectionism, might be seen as more plausible. This theory could be viewed as simply

³² For a fascinating discussion see P. Linebaugh, and R. Marcus, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic*, Boston, MA, 2001.

³³ Cf. the discussion of the post-modern mullah in my 'The Poverty of Postmodern Theory', *University of Colorado Law Review*, lxii (1991).

³⁴ J. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Cambridge, MA, 1971, p. 325. See T. Hurka, *Perfectionism*, Oxford, 1993, for a slightly different characterization of perfectionism and a thorough discussion.

³⁵ Although there is intense scholarly debate about how to interpret Nietzsche, he sometimes seems to embrace brutal perfectionism, for example when he writes that 'the wretchedness of struggling men must grow still greater in order to make possible the production of a world of art for a small number of Olympian men.' For discussion of Nietzsche's views in this regard, and relevant citations, see J. Glover, *Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century*, London, 1999, ch. 2.

³⁶ By 'affecting paradoxically' I mean that, contrary to what most of us believe, increases in suffering would indicate moral progress rather than regression.

advocating the inclusion of perfectionist values in the index of moral progress along with the other items that I have identified.

While soft perfectionism is a tempting view, the realization of perfectionist values has historically often been in conflict with the more egalitarian values that are included on my index. It is simply not plausible to suppose that the heights of Greek civilization could have been achieved without such hierarchical institutions as slavery.³⁷ The connection between the realization of perfectionist ideals and human exploitation is quite direct in the Baroque churches of Italy. Il Gesù, the mother church of the Jesuit order, is the most ornate church in Christendom with the exception of St Peter's, and an aesthetic marvel of the highest order. It is rumoured that much of the gold and silver with which Il Gesù is decorated was brought directly from the New World. Las Casas, the Dominican priest who travelled on some of the early Spanish missions of conquest, described his countrymen's methods of obtaining gold in this way: 'The Spaniards slew many Indians by hanging, burning, and being torn to pieces by savage dogs, also by cutting the hands and feet and heads and tongues, and for no other reason than to spread terror and induce the Indians to give them gold.'³⁸ Other, equally horrifying, methods of extracting wealth were used as well. By the end of the sixteenth century, between sixty and eighty million native inhabitants of Spanish America had been killed, worked to death, or died from introduced diseases.³⁹

Despite the difficulties involved in soft perfectionism, the idea that moral progress consists in the marriage of egalitarian and perfectionist ideas is a powerful one, and is at the heart of the social vision of John Stuart Mill. Mill, a self-proclaimed hedonistic utilitarian, thought that the realization of perfectionist values would be part of a pleasure-maximizing regime. This suggests that it is at least worth trying to take up perfectionist concerns within the range of theories that endorse my index of moral progress. A full discussion of how this might be done would take us too far afield, however. For present purposes, I will stick with my index in the hope that it succeeds in taking up perfectionist values where it is plausible to do so.

³⁷ Or more strongly still, 'Without slavery, no Greek state, no Greek art and science; without slavery, no Roman Empire. Without Hellenism and the Roman Empire at the base, also no modern Europe' (B. Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, Berkeley, 1993, p. 171, quoting Friedrich Engels).

³⁸ B. De Las Casas, *The Devastation of the Indies*, Baltimore, 1974, p. 78.

³⁹ D. Stannard, *American Holocaust*, New York, 1992, p. 95. The demography of the Americas prior to European contact is a highly contested and politically charged subject. Stannard is not an extreme voice in the discussion, but even if his estimate is too high by an order of magnitude, the numbers are still horrifying. For a recent discussion of some of these issues see S. Krech III, *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History*, New York, 1999.

In the end I see no way to fully defend an index of moral progress short of defending the range of normative theories which find a place for the values it expresses. About all one can do in defending a normative theory, in my opinion, is to appeal to its intrinsic plausibility, and then demonstrate that it suffers from fewer and less severe infirmities and failures than alternative views. The late coach Vince Lombardi may have been right about football when he said that the best offence is a good defence, but the reverse is true when defending a particular normative point of view.

IV. JUDGEMENTS ABOUT MORAL PROGRESS

Judgements about moral progress are comparative judgements about the value of states of affairs or the prevalence of right actions, but not all such comparative judgements are judgements about moral progress. For this reason it is clear that the Naïve Conception must be qualified. While I shall not attempt to refine the Naïve Conception into an exceptionless account of the necessary and sufficient conditions for moral progress, some observations are in order.

Generally, claims about moral progress presuppose that some significant relations obtain between the states of affairs being compared. Specifically, for the language of progress to take hold, at least the following must be true: there must be close causal, cultural, and temporal connections between the states of affairs in question. State of affairs A may be better than state of affairs B, but if there is no causal connection between A and B, then the transition from B to A cannot be said to constitute progress.⁴⁰ For this reason it would make little sense to assert that any relations of moral progress obtain between classical Athens and the Inca Empire. Although there were causal relations between Europe and Africa, there would be little point in making claims about moral progress on the basis of comparing sixteenth century Lisbon with twentieth century Maputo: they lack a common cultural milieu. Even if we suppose that causal and cultural connections run from fourth century BC Athens to twenty-first century Washington, it may still not be possible to assess in a meaningful way whether or not moral progress has occurred in this case: the relevant states of affairs are too temporally remote from each

⁴⁰ Nor will any old causal relation do, as I am grateful to Marsha Mason for reminding me. Suppose that all the same people exist at the same levels of happiness in state of affairs A and its consequent, state of affairs B, but that there is an additional slightly happy person who also exists in B. This would not be sufficient for supposing that the transition from A to B constitutes moral progress. The moral of the story is that we cannot simply breed our way to moral progress.

other.⁴¹ Finally, there is a general problem with sweeping claims about moral progress from epoch to epoch or society to society: there are an indefinite number of dimensions on which such judgements might be made, and no obvious way of aggregating them.⁴²

Of course, it is often contestable whether or not a judgment about moral progress can be made with respect to the relation between two states of affairs. This is because for states of affairs to figure in such judgments, they must be relevantly similar, and as Nelson Goodman taught us, very little of general interest can be said about what constitutes relevant similarity.⁴³ Similarity is not given to us by the formal features of what is being compared, but is deeply affected by our interests and purposes, and these can shift from moment to moment. Indeed, a great deal of practical argument about moral progress turns on whether states of affairs are similar enough for judgements about moral progress to be meaningful.

The upshot is that judgements about moral progress are, in some sense, local and pragmatic. They do not issue from a vacuum. We want to know whether or not moral progress has occurred for specific reasons that serve particular purposes. Often what will be worth comparing are particular practices within communities over relatively restricted periods of time. This should not surprise us. In my opinion, many important judgements are local and contrastive despite philosophers' penchant for seeing them as universal and unconditioned.⁴⁴

Recognizing the pragmatic and local nature of claims about moral progress may help to put to rest a nagging suspicion that those who make such claims on behalf of themselves or their societies are arrogant because they imply that they are morally better than those who have come before them. Putting aside complications involved in moving from claims about states of affairs and right actions to claims about agents, the most that could be said about such people is that

⁴¹ There are other complications regarding the temporal dimensions of judgements of moral progress. Suppose, for example, that the world is getting very bad, very fast, but at one point it improves slightly, but that this improvement is a necessary condition for the world becoming so bad, so fast. I doubt that we would say that this brief bump up constitutes moral progress.

⁴² But could we not say that morality had advanced to a higher level in fifth century BC Athens than in fifteenth century Peru? Such general claims about comparative moral development escape some of the difficulties that attach to similar claims about moral progress, but also invite some new objections. While the idea of moral progress with respect to a dimension can be made reasonably clear, those who speak in metaphors of 'higher' and 'lower' moralities 'advancing' and 'receding' have got some explaining to do.

⁴³ In 'Seven Strictures on Similarity', *Problems and Projects*, Indianapolis, 1972.

⁴⁴ In one of his movies Woody Allen complains that life seems meaningless since the Earth will someday fall into the sun. The humour arises from the character's failure to contextualize these facts. A lot of philosophy is funny in just this way.

they are claiming that they are better on some dimensions by their own lights than those who have come before. This is a suitably modest claim.

The view that I am urging may disappoint those who lust for a grand narrative about moral progress, one that would sweep through time, space, and society, leaving a vision of clarified humanity in its wake. But of course, such grand narratives are themselves often the source of staggering amounts of human misery.⁴⁵

V. MORAL PROGRESS DEFENDED

What claims about moral progress can we defend? Richard Rorty seems to take moral progress for granted, and even thinks that its pace has increased over the last two centuries: 'the nineteenth and twentieth centuries saw, among Europeans and Americans, an extraordinary increase in wealth, literacy, and leisure. This increase made possible an unprecedented acceleration of the rate of moral progress.'⁴⁶ Yet Christopher Lasch writes: 'How does it happen that serious people continue to believe in progress, in the face of massive evidence that might have been expected to refute the idea of progress once and for all?'⁴⁷

The historical record is undeniably equivocal and tragically ironic. The French Revolution produced both the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Terror. World War I, the war to end all wars, led to the bloodiest war in human history. In their attempt to stop a genocidal regime, the English-speaking democracies unleashed a total war against civilians and ushered in the nuclear age.

Piling up such anecdotes proves little. Still it is hard to read the historical record and not form some impressions. One impression I have is that language has changed. The rhetoric that promotes peace, human rights, and respect for nature is better entrenched today than it was in most previous periods in human history. Rather than being the language only of reformers and radicals on the margins of society, these sentiments are now voiced by some of the most powerful people in the world. The cynic will say that what this shows is not the progress of morality, but the growth of hypocrisy.⁴⁸ The same old corrupt behaviour is described in ever prettier terms. Still, there is a case to be

⁴⁵ See Glover, pt. 5. Of course, excessive 'localism' is not itself without risk. What is wanted (as usual) is something 'just right'.

⁴⁶ Rorty, p. 175. This remark seems to suggest that just as Europeans and Americans are leaving the world in the dust when it comes to economic progress, so they dominate with respect to moral progress as well.

⁴⁷ *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and its Critics*, New York, 1991, p. 13.

⁴⁸ 'Hypocrisy is the tribute vice pays to virtue', C. Brinton, *A History of Western Morals*, New York, 1990, p. 26, quoting La Rochefoucauld.

made for the idea that language matters. What people do is important, but it also matters how they justify their actions and what ends they claim to seek. But again the cynic will point out that while on the whole softer language may have become more prevalent, this kinder, gentler vocabulary has been available for a very long time. One has to only be reminded that the Golden Rule in its various formulations occurs in a great many ancient traditions to see that the language of moral progress was in place long before people had even begun to perform their greatest horrors.⁴⁹ Still, moral and political change in the last several centuries does seem to be away from hierarchy, towards greater egalitarianism.⁵⁰ The differences between people that were enforced in Europe and America well into the twentieth century would be intolerable today. The idea that a government could exclude most of its citizens from voting and still be representative sounds to us like a joke. It also appears that there has been a softening in human cruelty. Until the eighteenth century, the atrocities that occur today in ethnic and tribal wars were the norm in warfare rather than the exception. The cruel forms of public execution and the merriment they evoked occur nowhere in the world today. Even the common forms of amusement in early modern Europe – bear-baiting, cock-fighting, and so on – continue in only attenuated and atavistic forms. Perhaps we have become better in face-to-face encounters. Yet technology has given us the power to engage in remote destruction on a scale that is unprecedented. The amount of killing of humans, animals, and the rest of the biosphere that we engaged in during the last century would have been unthinkable by even the greatest of ancient tyrants. And although our kind of killing is often represented as precise, targeted, even ‘antiseptic’, anyone who has really tried to understand what goes on in modern slaughterhouses or contemporary warfare will come face-to-face with the same old horrors: people and animals burned alive, flayed, left to die in abject misery with little or no comfort, and so on.

It is clear that when it comes to the question of whether moral progress has occurred, that there are considerations on both sides. This argument is worth having because it reminds us of how much is in play when we consider the question of moral progress and how different the answer looks depending on our focus. But ultimately, nothing very satisfying can be said at this level of generality. We are back to the importance of thinking locally about moral progress, and that is what I will do in concluding this paper.

⁴⁹ See Singer, *A Companion to Ethics*, pt. 2 on the ubiquity of the Golden Rule.

⁵⁰ Of course if egalitarianism were the only criterion on which moral progress were assessed, then we might think that it has been a downhill slide since humans lived as hunter-gatherers.

In my lifetime, in America, there is one example that seems to me to provide a clear case of moral progress: the struggle against apartheid, which came to a head in the 1960s.

About the time that I was born, an unelected President from a border state that was traditionally aligned with the old Confederacy, took a major political risk under pressure from civil rights leader A. Philip Randolph: He issued an executive order outlawing racial segregation in the nation's military. It is difficult today to recapture the importance and courageousness of Truman's action. Although they were forced to serve in segregated units under the command of white officers, African-Americans had fought bravely in World War II. It might seem that such a demonstration of loyalty and courage would have been enough to convince even confirmed racists that blacks should be granted equality in this limited domain. For that matter, it might seem that integrating the military was a very small step towards justice in a society that was still lynching young black men. Yet this decision, which almost cost Truman the 1948 election, had far-reaching consequences. Six years after Truman's order the United States Supreme Court declared that segregated schools were inherently unequal, thus effectively requiring school integration throughout the nation. In the wake of this decision a new generation of black leaders came to prominence, leading demonstrations, boycotts and campaigns of civil disobedience in the fight against racial discrimination in public accommodations, voting, and housing. In 1964 another unelected president, this one from one of the states of the old Confederacy, persuaded Congress to pass the most sweeping civil rights law since Reconstruction. This was followed by a battery of other laws, and in 1967 by the appointment of Thurgood Marshall to the United States Supreme Court. Marshall, the first African-American to serve on the Court, had argued the school desegregation case before the Court thirteen years earlier. By 1970 the legal structure of apartheid had been abolished, affirmative action programmes were being instituted, and the national consciousness regarding race had been radically altered. Although racism had not been abolished, it was now shunned and outlawed in its most overt and blatant forms.

In light of this story it seems plausible to suppose, as a first approximation, that moral progress with respect to a subordinated group has four stages. The first stage involves recognizing the practices of subordination as presenting a moral issue, as opposed to a question of taste, etiquette, or personal preference.⁵¹ Having got this far we might

⁵¹ I am reminded of a girl in my school who was morally outraged by air pollution when most of us had never even heard the term. We were living in what we regarded as paradise: Northern California in the early 1960s. We had to strain to see the decrements of visibility that so outraged her. Finally, under her tutelage, we began to see what she

take a paternalistic interest in defending those who are being badly treated; we come to see them as objects of morally admirable charity. The next stage is to recognize that rather than being only the objects of charity, those who have been subordinated have rights not to be harmed. Finally, we may come to see them as bearers of 'positive rights', entitled to what they need in order to realize their ends.⁵²

How do these changes occur? This is an important and under-researched area of inquiry, and what I have to say here will be quite tentative.⁵³ As a beginning, it is helpful to distinguish between appeals that are launched from within the conceptual frameworks of those whose practices are the target of change, and those that originate from without.

Martin Luther King Jr. often appealed to principles that were taken to be foundational in America, such as 'all men are created equal'. When protesters were arrested for sitting in at 'whites only' lunch counters, he argued that it was they who were acting in the spirit of America, not the racist sheriffs who arrested and beat them. The problem was not that some young black people wanted to be served at a lunch counter, it was that American law and morality did not prevail in the states of the old South where service was being denied.

External assaults on conceptual frameworks that support subordination are often motivated by the failure of internal appeals. For example, frustrated by their inability to move the supporters of slavery by rational argument or appeals to human decency, nineteenth century abolitionists often aimed at something like religious conversion – this was often seen as the only hope for changing people who had been corrupted by slavery.⁵⁴ Similarly, animal rights activists often try to bring people to see animals in a new light – as complex, intelligent creatures, rather than as defective humans, governed only by instinct – and environmentalists try to bring us to see swamps as wetlands, and 'nature red in tooth in claw' as Darwin's entangled

was seeing, then to see it as a bad, then as a harm, and then as a moral problem. Thank you, Claudia Winckleman.

⁵² It should be obvious that this fourth stage has not been reached with respect to our attitudes toward most humans.

⁵³ See also Glover; Williams; M. M. Moody-Adams, *Fieldwork in Familiar Places: Morality, Culture, and Philosophy*, Cambridge, MA, 1997; 'The Idea of Moral Progress', *Metaphilosophy*, xxx (1999); D. Jamieson and K. VanderWerf, *Cultural Barriers to Behavior Change: General Recommendations and Resources for State Pollution Prevention Programs, A Report to US EPA*, Boulder, CO, 1993; *Preventing Pollution: Perspectives on Cultural Barriers and Facilitators, A Report to US EPA*, Boulder, CO, 1995.

⁵⁴ Kimberly Smith tells this story quite convincingly in her 'Storytelling, Sympathy and Moral Judgement in American Abolitionism', *Journal of Political Philosophy*, vi (1998).

bank.⁵⁵ This can be risky business. As Rorty points out, those who pursue this strategy often sound ‘crazy’ – until (and unless) they succeed.⁵⁶

These strategies are often employed in tandem. Often inconsistencies become clearer and arguments for extending principles become stronger if questions are reframed and reconceptualized. At the same time there is no reason to think that every case of moral change proceeds in the same way, or that I have even begun to catalogue the strategies that are available.

This paper will end where moral change begins. What I have tried to do is to characterize moral progress, and provide a brief account of a case in which it has occurred. However, it is difficult to live at a level as general and abstract even as the American fight for civil rights. We live short lives compared to human history, and in small neighbourhoods compared to the global community. It is from this point of view that our lives are lived and our motivation is gathered. This concern with the ‘particular’ requires no apology. To a great extent it is both the locus of judgements about moral progress, and the source of our motivation. It is unlikely ever to be otherwise for creatures such as us.⁵⁷

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⁵⁵ See my *Morality's Progress*, chs. 4–6, 14, 16.

⁵⁶ Rorty, p. 204.

⁵⁷ This essay revises and develops material that appears as ch. 1 in *Morality's Progress*. My thinking on these questions has advanced as a result of discussions with the 4M (Minnesota Monthly Moralphilosophy Meeting), and the Oxford Philosophical Society. I have been especially helped by M. Bacharach, J. Broome, E. Fricker, S. Keller, G. Lang, B. Longuenesse, K. Renshaw, P. Singer, E. Sober, D. Sloan Wilson, and V. Tiberius.