

THE EVOLUTION
OF MORAL PROGRESS

A BIOCULTURAL THEORY

ALLEN BUCHANAN
AND
RUSSELL POWELL

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CHAPTER 3

A Pluralistic, Dynamic Conception of Moral Progress

An appreciation of the weaknesses of reductionist and more broadly monistic accounts of moral progress—whether they are grounded in valid norm compliance or in functional performance—suggests the cogency of a *pluralistic* account, one that recognizes there is more than one irreducible type of moral progress.¹ Just as importantly, a healthy appreciation of human fallibility regarding the nature and demands of morality suggests that one should be wary of determinate fixed content accounts of moral progress of any kind, whether they are reductionist or not. The point is that human beings have often (perhaps more often than not) been wrong about some aspects of morality and that there is no reason to believe that the sources of their errors have

¹ So far, we have only argued for a nonreductionist account that is modestly pluralistic. A more expansive pluralism may be worth considering. For example, one might hold that improvements in moral concepts also are morally progressive, independently of whether these improvements contribute to better compliance with valid norms, better motivation, or better embodiment of the virtues. Although we will not attempt here to determine definitively the scope of moral progress pluralism, our surmise is that improvements in moral concepts, as well as in moral reasoning and the concept of morality itself, are instances of epistemic progress but are moral progress only insofar as they contribute either to better compliance with moral norms or to better motivations or the flourishing of the moral virtues.

been eliminated. On the contrary, the burgeoning psychological literature on normal cognitive biases and errors, motivated reasoning, the persistence of false beliefs in the face of corrective information, and epistemically flawed cognitive dissonance resolution mechanisms should dissipate any complacency that we today are immune to the moral errors of previous generations of human beings. A more epistemically responsible course is to reject the assumption that we now know everything about morality that is needed for making sound judgments about moral progress. That means avoiding fixed determinate content accounts of moral progress.

Advantages of a Pluralistic Provisional Understanding of Moral Progress

A pluralistic, provisional account is one that (1) acknowledges that there is or may be a plurality of valid basic moral principles, (2) counts better compliance (not mere conformity) with valid moral norms as moral progress, but also (3) recognizes that there are other irreducible types of moral progress as well, and (4) regards our current beliefs as to which moral norms are valid, as well as our current understandings of improvements in moral concepts, of the virtues, and of moral reasoning as only provisional, subject to revision over time.

If one assumes that moral judgment, moral reasoning, and understandings of moral virtues, of moral concepts, and of morality itself are fallible and subject to revision over time, then it is ill-advised to characterize moral progress simply as increasingly adequate compliance with moral norms that are now thought to be valid or to equate moral progress with the performance of some function we can now identify. To do so ignores an important point, namely, that our basic understanding of moral progress should reflect our fallibility and should acknowledge our capacity for open-ended normativity, which enables us to detect errors in our thinking about moral progress and to correct them

accordingly. This in turn suggests that a sound conception of moral progress will understand its own characterization of moral progress as only provisional—as *the best we can do for now*.

To elaborate: on a provisional account of moral progress, the list of apparently distinct types of moral progress set out in Chapter 1 should be seen as subject to revision in two respects. First, it may well be that some items on the list, such as better understandings of moral concepts, may be reducible in this sense: such epistemic gains may be moral improvements only insofar as they contribute either to better compliance with valid moral norms or to better motivation or virtues or better moral reasoning.² Second, it might turn out that some items on the list are not cases of moral progress at all.³ In light of the history of errors regarding morality and a recognition that members of the present generation of human beings are afflicted with many cognitive biases and social-epistemic sources of error, any attempt to characterize moral progress ought to be presented as provisional so as to exhibit appropriate epistemic modesty.

It is worth noting that the epistemic or fallibilist objection to all fixed determinate content accounts of moral progress holds regardless of the metaphysical views that such accounts presuppose. For instance, the objection stands even if robust moral realism is true—that is, even if there is some set of permanently valid substantive moral norms grounded in moral truths that are wholly independent of actual or idealized practical reasoning and

² For reasons adduced earlier, it seems unlikely that we would at some later date come to view progress in motivation as reducible to better norm compliance. It is possible, however, that some other types of moral progress that we identify might turn out to be reducible to better norm compliance or some other type of moral progress.

³ Some cases of apparently proper de-moralization might turn out not to be morally progressive after all, once the full, long-term consequences of abandoning the norm in question come to light. Consider the norm against unmarried women having children. It is perhaps possible that in unjust societies, where unmarried poor women are unlikely to receive adequate social and economic support, sustaining this norm might be morally preferable all things considered.

invariant across different human environments and evaluative standpoints. Robust realist views can evade the epistemic or fallibilist objection only by adopting an extremely implausible moral epistemology, according to which human beings now have the ability to discern all the moral facts. Given the errors of our predecessors, there is little reason to believe that we are in so happy a condition. So, even those who espouse a robust realist meta-ethics should reject determinate fixed content understandings of moral progress, if conceptions of moral progress are supposed to provide adequate guidance for making judgments about whether moral progress has occurred, is occurring, or is likely to occur in the future. Determinate fixed content views, when paired with a robust realist meta-ethics, fail to acknowledge—at their peril—the difficulty of knowing whether we currently possess an accurate and exhaustive understanding of valid moral norms.

If, in contrast, advocates of determinate fixed content accounts subscribe to some version of meta-ethical constructivism, then the epistemic objection applies with equal or perhaps even greater force. If valid moral norms are those that would result from some idealized procedure of practical reasoning, then our actual judgments about the set of valid moral norms will be inevitably speculative and subject to revision since the conditions under which we engage in moral reasoning are always less than ideal. Revision might be called for if we came to approximate more closely the ideal reasoning procedure or if we came to realize that our current reasoning approximates it less closely than we had previously thought. Indeed, any estimate of how close we are now to engaging in ideal procedures is itself contingent on subjective credences. To characterize moral progress as increasing conformity to some fixed set of norms now thought to be valid because we believe they would be the outcome of an ideal procedure would be to ignore this implication of constructivism.⁴

⁴ For what may be the most sophisticated and empirically informed development of the notion of constructivism and its relevance to moral progress, see

So, on both robust realist and constructivist meta-ethical views, determinate fixed content accounts of moral progress look less cogent than provisional accounts.

Suppose that in response to these moral epistemological criticisms, proponents of determinate fixed content accounts, or functionalist accounts for that matter, were simply to tack on a “provisional” caveat in recognition of human moral-epistemic limitations. Would this enable them to avoid our criticisms? In fact, one might think that all considered moral judgments, including judgments about moral progress, should contain implicit “provisional” disclaimers that hedge for moral error, even if their proponents do not make these provisos explicit. Tacking on a “provisional” qualifier would not save fixed content or functionalist accounts of moral progress, however, since as we have seen these accounts hinge on controversial assumptions about the specific content of fundamental moral principles, about the fixedness of this content across institutional contexts, about the possibility of reducing all types of moral progress to one type, and so on. The inherent corrigibility of moral progress judgments only (if significantly) exacerbates these problems; they are serious enough quite apart from the problem of corrigibility.

Thus, something more abstract—something not tied to any particular substantive moral norms or functions or even to an indeterminate fixed content—is needed for a cogent characterization of moral progress. A conception of moral progress ought to be consistent with an appreciation of the open-ended normativity of the ethical and the epistemic limitations of our ability to predict where the ongoing process of critical reflection will lead. Whatever it takes moral progress to be must include the proviso that what it says should be subject to revision in the light of better understandings of morality. The possibility that we might come

to understand morality in rather radically different ways means that we cannot even assume that what we now think of as an accurate catalog of types of moral progress is correct.

A provisional conception of moral progress is not only epistemically but also morally preferable, given that human beings are prone to moral errors that can have disastrous consequences. Acknowledging that our current understanding of morality and hence our current understanding of moral progress are subject to revision encourages humility, and thus may serve to reduce the risk of destructive hubris or ideology to which earlier thinking about moral progress often succumbed. A moment’s reflection on the many crimes committed in the name of moral progress indicates that this feature of an open-ended conception is a significant point in its favor. Indeed, revising one’s conception of moral progress so as to take into account its epistemic limitations is itself an instance of moral (not merely epistemic) progress, at least insofar as it reduces the risk of wrongdoing in the service of misguided understandings of moral progress.

Meta-Moral Progress

There is another, more radical way in which a conception of moral progress might undergo revision. In the past, important forms of moral progress have frequently been achieved through means that involved significant moral costs. Sometimes these moral costs were anticipated by the agents of moral progress, sometimes not. In some instances, there may have been no alternative way to achieve the improvement. When this was the case, a change might still count as moral progress, all things considered, even if it were achieved at significant cost. Yet, other things being equal, moral progress that is achieved without moral costs is clearly morally preferable and more commendable. For example, the abolition of slavery in the British Empire was achieved without bloodshed, while abolition in the United States came only as the result of an extraordinarily bloody civil war in which around 700,000

combatants and many noncombatants perished. Further, an improvement that involved unnecessary moral costs would, *ceteris paribus*, be less morally commendable than one that did not—and in the extreme case might not even count as moral progress at all.

Suppose that one could identify a historical trend toward increasing opportunities for “cleaner” achievements of moral progress. Perhaps no overall trend of this sort is likely to be discernible; nonetheless, there might be evidence of such a trend in certain areas—for example, an increased frequency of the remedying of unjust inequalities through better laws and social policies rather than through violent revolution. That itself would count as moral progress. One might refer to such moral progress in the achievement of moral progress by a special term: “meta-moral progress.”

If the incidence of meta-moral progress continued to increase, a point might be reached at which, quite reasonably, a change would not be thought to count as moral progress unless it were achieved without significant moral costs. To put the point differently: as opportunities for “clean” moral progress increased, we might come to value what we would at first call meta-moral progress, the achievement of moral progress by increasingly moral means, to the point that our concept of moral progress itself underwent revision so that we eventually came to count as moral progress only those changes that came about “cleanly.” Regardless of whether such a revision would be reasonable or is likely to occur, a sophisticated conception of moral progress should encompass the idea that improvement in the means of achieving moral progress is an important aspect of moral progress and that a trend toward “clean” moral progress is itself a kind of moral progress. To acknowledge the possibility that awareness of the increasing incidence of meta-moral progress might result in a more demanding conception of moral progress—one that recognized only “cleanly” achieved moral improvements—we might say that our conception of moral progress should be not only provisional but also dynamic.

The Social Moral Epistemology of Moral Progress: Inequality as a Source of Cognitive Bias

A provisional, dynamic conception of moral progress has another attractive feature: it can capitalize on a very broadly reliabilist account of justified judgments about moral progress.⁵ If we recognize that moral thinking not only is self-reflectively critical and hence open-ended but also has the capacity to improve its results through devising strategies for protecting against its own failures, then we should be more confident in the products of our critical moral reflections if we have reason to believe that the circumstances in which we have arrived at them are conducive to better reasoning.

Identifying the conditions under which moral reasoning is less likely to be distorted by prejudice and ignorance can advance our understanding of moral progress. More precisely, judgments about whether moral progress has occurred or what would have to happen for moral progress to occur are more reliable (*ceteris paribus*) if they are formed in epistemic conditions that equip us with good relevant factual information (including information about the consequences of complying with the norms under consideration), that provide opportunities for critical deliberations that are not biased by the exclusion of alternative points of view, that include awareness of previous revisions of norms as well as alternatives to the norms under scrutiny, and that feature provisions for combatting predictable sources of bias.

One potent source of bias is inequality. As Elizabeth Anderson notes, members of groups that benefit from unjust social arrangements are characteristically subject to biases in their assessments of the capacities and predicament of the victims of injustices.⁶

⁵ Here, we use the term “reliabilist” in a very broad sense, without assuming, as many epistemological reliabilists do, that reliability is to be understood as accurate tracking of facts (in this case moral facts) that are completely independent of reasoning processes and of any mode of social construction.

⁶ Elizabeth Anderson, “The Social Epistemology of Morality: Learning from the Forgotten History of the Abolition of Slavery,” in Michael S. Brady

These biases often result from inequalities in power that insulate the powerful from social interactions in which the oppressed can participate as equals in interactions in which persons make and respond to claims upon one another—a process that may be essential for the development of justified moral beliefs and adequate moral concepts. Accordingly, judgments about whether a change is morally progressive are more reliable, other things being equal, when they are made under conditions in which inequalities are not of such a nature and magnitude as to produce predictable cognitive and affective (especially empathy) deficits and in which social practices and institutions allow individuals engaged in value-based discussions to interact on terms of equality.

A dramatic and disturbing illustration of how extreme social inequality can disable empathy is provided by Alexis de Tocqueville. In *Democracy in America* he quotes from a letter written by an aristocratic woman in pre-revolutionary France.⁷ The letter is to the woman's daughter. The initial passages reveal that the writer is a caring, thoughtful grandmother. But then there is a sudden transition: she casually notes that there was recently a protest against taxes in the village attached to her family's estate, that the leader was broken on the wheel (an especially horrific form of death by torture), and that thirteen of the protesters were summarily hanged. She then writes approvingly that this drastic punishment is "... a fine example . . . especially to [encourage people to] respect the governors and their wives, and not to throw stones in their garden." Tocqueville speculates that such callous cruelty is no longer possible where the extreme inequality of position that produces it no longer exists. The example is especially sobering because the

and Miranda Fricker (eds.), *The Epistemic Life of Groups* (Oxford University Press, 2016, pp. 75–94).

⁷ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. Sanford Kessler, trans. Stephen Grant (Hackett, 2000, p. 250).

people whom the caring grandmother could not even recognize as suffering human beings were not denizens of some distant country; they were her neighbors.

There is another way in which inequality can result in an epistemic environment that distorts understandings of what morality requires and hence of what constitutes moral progress. In a society with pervasive racial or gender discrimination, the victims of discrimination will be unable to exhibit or in some cases even develop important capacities, including capacities that are thought to be relevant to determining their rights and statuses. Social experience in such environments will seem to confirm false beliefs about the limited capacities of such individuals—the very false beliefs that are invoked to justify the discriminatory practices that create the distorted experience.⁸

For instance, where women or people of color are barred from anything but the most rudimentary education and are confined to menial tasks, they will have little opportunity to exhibit higher mental abilities. Under such conditions, false beliefs about the supposedly inferior rationality of these groups will seem to be confirmed by the dominant form of social experience. It will also be difficult in such environments for people to understand that the status quo is morally defective and hence difficult to mobilize support for an important form of moral progress, namely the overcoming of discrimination. Indeed, their understanding of the scope of potential moral progress will be truncated, and this defect may not be remedied unless and until discrimination is sufficiently mitigated to allow women or people of color to exhibit their true capacities.

Chapters 9 and 10, which examine the modern human rights movement as an instance of moral progress in the form of inclusivity, expand on this point by arguing that the social moral epistemology of human rights is reflexive: the best social-epistemic

⁸ Allen Buchanan, "The Reflexive Epistemology of Human Rights," unpublished paper.

conditions for determining whether the increasing implementation of human rights is morally progressive are those under which those rights are already sufficiently realized to allow for a social experience that is conducive to reliable judgments about natural abilities of human beings that are relevant to recognizing the moral equality of persons.

Some success in overcoming injustice and reducing inequality, therefore, may be a necessary condition for improving the moral-epistemic environment in ways that are conducive to developing an adequate understanding of what moral progress encompasses. Given that understandings of morality and moral progress can and in some cases should change, it is important to try to ensure that whatever changes in our understandings occur are likely to be truly progressive by optimizing the epistemic conditions under which we engage in moral reasoning and in which our moral responses are shaped. Doing this would require a number of reforms, from combatting normal cognitive biases and errors and remedying defective social-epistemic practices (including adherence to flawed norms of epistemic deference) to eliminating unjust social practices which produce distorted social experiences that foster the false beliefs that motivate and reinforce these injustices.

Moral Progress as Reaching or Approaching a Moral Ideal

Some might complain that the provisional, dynamic understanding of progress we have endorsed is unsatisfying because it purchases humility at the price of vacuity. It is true, the complaint would continue, that the understanding of progress endorsed so far in this book is informative so far as it includes a list of types of moral progress. But the list lacks a unifying, overarching conception of what moral improvement is and, in the name of epistemic humility, is presented neither as being complete nor as the final word. Surely (the complaint would continue) it is possible

to provide a more substantive understanding of what moral progress is—one that avoids the errors of the various contemporary views examined in the previous two chapters. More specifically, moral progress can be informatively characterized as progress toward the full or at least fuller realization of some ideal state of affairs—and, in particular, of an ideal human society.

As Gerald Gaus has argued, such a proposal quickly encounters a painful dilemma. If the ideal state of affairs is similar enough to the actual status quo for us to be able to make reliable judgments about what the ideal state would be like, whether it is attainable, whether it would be stable if attained, and whether we could seriously approach its realization by morally acceptable means, then a proper regard for epistemic humility should make us wary. The very proximity to what we know that is needed to be confident that the supposedly ideal state of affairs is in fact ideal means that it is likely to be a parochial and to that extent inadequate yardstick for gauging moral progress.

To use Gaus's felicitous phrase, if the ideal is "in the neighborhood" of the status quo, we may think we are in a reasonably good epistemic position, precisely because of this proximity, to know what we need to know in order to ascertain that movement toward it would be moral progress.⁹ But an ideal that is in our neighborhood may be seriously incomplete, or even wrong-headed in some important respects, given the fallibility of judgments about morality, and hence about moral progress, and given new opportunities that may arise in the future but which we cannot predict now. Our conception of what an ideal state of affairs in our "neighborhood" would be like may be shaped by moral understandings that are themselves distorted by the unjust social arrangements of our present environment. Or our belief that some new state of affairs in our "neighborhood" is ideal may simply reflect the limits of our moral imagination.

⁹ Gaus, *The Tyranny of the Ideal*, supra note 4, p. 4.

Alternatively, if we opt for an ideal that is not in our neighborhood—one that is morally and factually distant from the social arrangements of which we have anything that could honestly be called knowledge—then the reliability of our judgment that it really is ideal, or even that it is something that we ought to strive for, will be accordingly compromised. Consider, for example, a supposedly ideal society in which people are fully impartial in their attachments and commitments, where altruism and even love are literally universal, and in which the economy is somehow fueled not by self-interest but by a desire to contribute to the general welfare. Such an ideal may seem morally desirable, but it is so very different from our world that there is little reason to believe either that it is feasible or, were it to be obtained, that it would be optimally valuable.

If one asks whether some radically different state of affairs would be morally optimal, one must be sure to ask “for whom?” If the beings inhabiting the supposedly ideal state of affairs are sufficiently like us, then the judgment that the ideal state of affairs would be optimal for them will be dubious because we are unlikely to be in a position to determine whether there would be the right sort of fit between the radically different conditions in the ideal state, on the one hand, and the capacities for flourishing possessed by beings like us, on the other. Suppose the proponent defining moral progress in terms of such a radically different ideal condition replies as follows: “The ideal state will be optimal for those who inhabit it because they will be shaped by it in such a way as to ensure a good fit; they will be quite different from us.” The difficulty with this reply is that, as we are now, we have little reason to believe that this prediction of a good fit is valid, primarily because we will not know enough about what such “improved” beings would be like. To summarize: “close” ideals are likely to be tainted by parochialism and for that reason are unsuitable candidates for an understanding of moral progress that is both comprehensive and durable, while “distant” ideals are likely to evidence perilous epistemic arrogance because our

knowledge of what it would be like to occupy the ideal condition diminishes with factual and moral “distance.”

It might be thought that there is a third alternative: characterize an ideal state of affairs with sufficient abstractness that it is not likely to be tainted by parochialism but not so abstract as to be epistemically problematic. The difficulty here is that abstractness sufficient to avoid the parochialism problem would be compatible with a plurality of alternative characterizations for filling out the description of the ideal state sufficiently to make it action-guiding, to allow it to guide efforts to achieve moral progress. Thus, the abstract version of the “approaching the ideal” characterization of moral progress does not avoid the charge that motivated it in the first place, namely the criticism that it is uninformative. On the other hand, when we choose among alternative concrete specifications of the ideal, as we must do if it is to be informative, then the original dilemma resurfaces. Specifications that are “close” enough to the status quo to allow a confident judgment that the posited state of affairs would be so comprehensively morally desirable as to define the ultimate goal of morally progressive change are likely to be parochial. Specifications that are “distant” enough to avoid parochialism are likely to presuppose evaluations of what the supposedly ideal state would be like and about the permissibility of the necessary means for achieving and sustaining it that we are not, given our present epistemic standpoint, warranted in making.

As Gaus emphasizes, at least as a generalization, the morally responsible course of action is to characterize as moral progress relatively incremental improvements from the status quo because the very feature that makes such modest aims unsatisfying to radical reformers—their “closeness” to the undoubtedly defective status quo—also makes it more likely that we will know what we are talking about when we say they would be improvements. The key point is that if the ideal is “distant” from where we are, then to know that some counterfactual state of affairs is the ultimate standard by which moral progress is to be gauged would require

that we currently know much more than we are likely to know. Specifically, for a characterization of a nonexistent state of affairs to answer the question "What is moral progress?" we would have to know (1) that all the aspects of the supposedly ideal state of affairs can coexist, (2) that living in that state would be morally optimal for those who occupy it (not for us or at least for us as we are now, assuming that attaining it will take a long time), (3) that the morally relevant consequences of the attainment of the ideal state would also be optimal, (4) that the ideal state can be realized or at least seriously approximated by means that are morally acceptable, and (5) that falling short of the ideal would not mean failing to realize the values that make the ideal desirable (the problem of the second best). The more "distant" the ideal is, the less likely it is that we—as we are and where we are—will be able to answer any of these questions. Yet we must be able to answer all of them if we are to define moral progress by reference to some ideal state of affairs and do so in an informative way.

It is worth pointing out that although Gaus's conservative, incrementalist recommendation may seem prudent, adopting it could come with a steep price: sticking to the pursuit of incremental improvements relative to the status quo runs the risk that efforts to make moral progress will reflect a seriously inadequate conception of morality and hence of moral progress and may do little to remedy the deepest moral failings of the existing social world. In other words, incrementalism may achieve only superficial reform, perpetuating serious injustices to which we are now blind. This risk can be mitigated if two conditions are satisfied: first, the marginalized and disadvantaged are able to voice their concerns and their voice is taken seriously in public deliberations and, second, society is tolerant toward bold "experiments of living" within the existing institutional structure that offer models of social organization that are significantly different from the status quo. At least where these two conditions are satisfied, it appears that it is generally better to run the risk of superficial reform than an incremental approach inevitably entails than

to indulge in the epistemic arrogance and moral irresponsibility entailed by trying to steer society as a whole toward a distant supposed ideal.

Interim Conclusions

We can recapitulate the main results of Part I's inquiry into the nature of moral progress as follows:

- (1) Not all change that is progressive from a moral point of view constitutes moral progress. A change is not a case of moral progress in any significant sense if it comes about fortuitously, as a result of causes beyond human control, without any contribution from human action or motivation. A change that is progressive from a moral point of view is moral progress in the strong sense only if it involves improvements in moral capacities or the exercise thereof.
- (2) Determinate fixed content accounts that reduce moral progress to better compliance with norms whose contents are thought to be presently ascertainable ought to be rejected because (a) human beings are not warranted in believing that they currently grasp all valid moral norms or that the norms they believe are valid will remain so under different institutional contexts and (b) there are some types of moral progress that are not reducible to better compliance with moral norms.
- (3) Indeterminate fixed content accounts are consistent with (a) being true, but they fail because (b) is true.
- (4) Functionalist accounts should likewise be rejected because there are important types of moral progress that are not explicable in functionalist terms.
- (5) These shortcomings suggest that a sound account of moral progress should be (a) pluralistic (nonreductionist), (b) provisional (that is, presented with an acknowledgment that it is subject to revision), and (c) dynamic in that it recognizes

the possibility that what initially was regarded as meta-moral progress—the achievement of moral improvement by “clean” means—might become a requirement for what counts as moral progress *tout court*. Note that (b) does *not* imply that the facts about what constitutes moral progress are themselves changeable. A provisional stance is an epistemic, not a metaphysical, position, and thus it is compatible with both realist and nonrealist meta-ethical theories.

- (6) Even if the metaphysical question is left unanswered, it is still possible to develop a theory of moral progress that includes a provisional identification of types of moral progress and explores, in the light of the best empirical information, the conditions under which progress has occurred and the obstacles to achieving it.
- (7) It is possible to improve the epistemic environment in which judgments about moral progress are made by drawing on the insights of social epistemology.
- (8) Characterizing moral progress in terms of the full or increasing realization of some ideal state of affairs (either of society or of individuals, for example, in terms of their virtues) entails an uncomfortable dilemma. Either the ideal state is characterized as not being very distant from the status quo, in which case it may be afflicted by parochialism, not taking seriously enough the possibility that moral progress may turn out to be significantly different from what we now take it to be, or the ideal state will be characterized as very different from the status quo, in which case our grounds for thinking that it really is ideal will be shaky because it will be so different from states of affairs about which we have sufficient knowledge to evaluate. Even if the supposedly ideal state would be most desirable were it attained and attained through morally acceptable means, the greater the differences between it and the status quo, the less reliable our judgments about whether it is attainable and attainable by permissible means are likely to be.

Both horns of the dilemma can be avoided by adopting a vague or formal characterization of the ideal state in terms of which progress is to be understood, but this is not likely to be informative.

Is Moral Progress Unified?

This chapter has not provided an informative, unifying explanation of why all the cases and types of moral progress provisionally identified in Chapter 1 are in fact instances of moral progress. The analysis so far has left us with a disunified, and to that extent inelegant, conception of moral progress. But perhaps it is a mistake to assume that an informative unifying account can be provided. After all, there is no good reason, at present, to think that *morality* is unified—that is, to assume that there is some grand, unifying fundamental moral norm, concept, or value from which all aspects of morality can be informatively derived.¹⁰ In fact, it is far from clear that all valid moral norms can be derived from one basic moral norm or even a small set of basic norms. If the assumption that morality is unified is unwarranted, then so is the assumption that moral progress is unified.

The apparent disunity of the moral may be an artifact of temporary or permanent human epistemic limitations, or it may be an intrinsic feature of the subject matter itself; at this point, one cannot say which. What can be said with some confidence is that accounts that equate moral progress with adherence to contentful norms that are presently ascertainable, with the performance of certain functions, or for that matter with any single type of moral progress, or with the asymptotic realization of some ideal state of affairs (whether near to or distant from the status quo), are inadequate from our current moral-epistemic vantage point.

¹⁰ Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, “The Disunity of Moral Judgment,” unpublished paper.

It might be objected that on some moral theories morality is unified and that such theories can ground a unified theory of moral progress—one that explains, in an informative way, what all the types of moral progress listed earlier have in common. For example, some utilitarians hold that every aspect of morality, from valid moral norms and moral motivations to the virtues and understandings of moral status, can be grounded in the principle of utility; and some Kantians would say that the whole of morality consists, at bottom, in the conformity of the will of imperfectly rational beings to the fully rational will. The well-known difficulty with both of these views is that no one has yet succeeded in producing the needed derivation—in showing that all aspects of morality can be derived from either of the two master principles. The sounder judgment, we believe, is that no one possesses a unified account of morality that could serve as the basis for an informative unifying explanation of the various types of moral progress that, for now, any plausible theory of moral progress ought to recognize.

A more hopeful and positive answer to the question “What is moral progress?” is that to the extent that our current understandings of various aspects of morality are formed in reliable epistemic conditions, we can confidently identify various types of moral progress that have already occurred and draw conclusions about the need for more progress with respect to those types, while recognizing that new types that we cannot now even imagine may in the future come into view. Whether or not the reader finds our analysis fully convincing, we hope it will do something to restore the question of moral progress to a prominent place in the research agenda of moral and political philosophy.

This book will now leave questions of moral unity behind and turn its focus to one type of moral progress. As we emphasized in the Introduction, the strategy of this book is based on the conviction that the development of increasingly inclusive moralities is a particularly important form of moral progress. The next chapter explores a powerful challenge to the

liberal cosmopolitan assumption that significant moral progress in the dimension of inclusiveness is likely or even possible. This “evoconservative” challenge, as we will call it, appeals to work in contemporary evolutionary moral psychology to argue that human nature poses formidable constraints on inclusivist moral responses. In brief, evoconservatives accept a familiar evolutionary story about the origins of human morality and then conclude that, given these origins, the potential for genuinely inclusive moralities is severely limited. Part II will show, however, that evoconservatives overestimate the explanatory reach of evolutionary accounts of morality: such explanations may capture much of what morality was, but they do not tell the whole story about what morality now is or what it may become.