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Moral Progress and Human Agency

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Abstract The idea of moral progress is a necessary presupposition of action for beings like us. We must believe that moral progress is possible and that it might have been realized in human experience, if we are to be confident that continued human action can have any morally constructive point. I discuss the implications of this truth for moral psychology. I also show that once we understand the complex nature and the complicated social sources of moral progress, we will appreciate why we cannot construct a plausible comprehensive action-guiding theory of moral progress. Yet while the nature and sources of moral progress consistently thwart many theoretical hopes, the idea of moral progress is a plausible, critically important and morally constructive principle of historical interpretation.

Keywords Moral progress · Moral agency · Moral psychology

1 Introduction[1]

The historian Christopher Lasch once asked how it happens "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" (Lasch 1991:13). That evidence, Lasch insisted, reveals that our capacity to improve the world is severely limited, and that continued belief in progress involves an unrealistic, often irresponsible habit of mind. Lasch's principal target was the American idea of progress. He argued that psychological and cultural limits would undermine the socially progressive agenda of America's left-leaning liberals and that environmental limits would thwart the efforts of America's right-leaning defenders of unbridled economic growth. It

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might thus be wondered why Lasch's argument should matter outside of debates about how the idea of progress shaped American history.

That argument has broader importance because philosophers such as Peter Singer, Martha Nussbaum and Richard Rorty, who celebrate an "expanding circle" of moral concern, echo the progressive social agenda that Lasch attacks (Singer 1981; Rorty 1991, 2005; Nussbaum 2007). If we agree with their judgments, we cannot reasonably ignore Lasch's charge that "the ideal of loyalty is stretched too thin when it tries to attach itself to the hypothetical solidarity of the whole human race" (Lasch 1991:36).[2] Moreover, sustaining the expanded circle of moral concern may require broader access to material well-being. If so, we must ask whether such access presumes the kind of economic growth that Lasch supposes to be environmentally unsustainable. In short, if we believe in moral progress, we must address Lasch's objection that this belief is an implicit denial that there are limits on our capacity to make the world better.

I aim to show that belief in moral progress can be fully consistent with the acknowledgment of limits. Indeed, once we have a defensible account of the nature and sources of moral progress, believing that such progress is possible and that we can learn from what we reasonably take to be instances of it, is the most constructive way of acknowledging our limitations—including limitations imposed by the psychological, cultural and environmental contexts in which we act. Belief in moral progress, properly understood, has a regulative function in the domain of human action. It is a condition of the possibility of morally constructive action for beings like us, with limited powers of understanding, memory and prediction, and who act in a world that frequently frustrates hopes for moral change.

Section one shows precisely how the belief in moral progress functions as a regulative concept by exploring what we can call the moral psychology of progress. Such an analysis is crucial because, as Michael Walzer insisted, insofar as we can recognize moral progress, it is "more a matter of (workmanlike) social criticism and political struggle than of (paradigm-shattering) philosophical speculation" (Walzer 1987: 27). There is certainly a place for philosophy, including normative theory, in helping to shape morally concerned social criticism and in encouraging morally engaged political struggle, but moral progress depends *primarily* on the efforts of morally engaged agents who recognize and understand how to respond to the interpretive nature of moral argument (Moody-Adams 1994, 1997, 1999). Until we appreciate the cognitive and affective conditions under which morally engaged social criticism and political struggle are possible, we cannot understand the sources of moral progress.

In section two, I consider a critical mechanism of moral progress: the process through which morally engaged agents can sometimes expand conceptual space for moral debate and create new possibilities for morally constructive social change. I will argue that this process is primarily the work of moral visionaries who constructively build on the insights of communities of moral concern to meet some of the epistemic challenges posed by the interpretive nature of moral argument and inquiry.

Section three shows that the interpretive complexity of moral inquiry, and the 'unruly' nature of the processes involved in social change, inevitably thwart attempts to produce a plausible comprehensive action-guiding theory of moral progress. Philosophy's limitations in this regard reflect a feature of experience identified in "The Idea of Moral Progress": the fact that moral progress always occurs *locally,* in relatively circumscribed domains of concern (Moody-Adams 1999). Moral progress in belief, for instance, is progress in grasping what Mark Platts called the

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[2] Lasch also contends insists that "the dream of universal brotherhood, because it rests on the sentimental fiction that men and women are all the same, cannot survive the discovery that they differ" (Lasch 1991: 36).

"semantic depth" of moral concepts, as when a deepened understanding of justice leads to socially widespread acknowledgement that sexual coercion of women in the workplace is unjust (Platts 1988: 287–299, 298–299). Moral progress in practices involves embodying such deepened moral understandings in actions and institutions. But as Platts argues, moral concepts pick out features of the world that are of "indefinite complexity in ways that transcend our practical understanding" (Platts 1988: 299). The semantic depth of moral concepts thus poses two interpretive challenges. We are challenged, first, by the fact that no single interpretation of a moral concept can adequately capture its semantic depth, and, second, by the fact that we cannot specify, in advance, a proper "destination" for our moral beliefs—not even for our beliefs about the content of a single moral concept (Moody-Adams 1999: 169–170). I will show how these challenges consistently thwart theoretical efforts to reduce the complexity of moral inquiry.

Section three also argues that the interpretive complexity of moral inquiry is intensified by limitations on our ability to predict when moral progress in one domain will generate moral regress in another, or when the effects of such regress may undermine progress in the original domain. I have argued elsewhere that moral progress is inescapably local (Moody-Adams 1999). This paper extends the point to show that moral progress is unlikely ever to be a continuously "forward" or "upward" process, and that we cannot be assured which, if any, of the changes it involves are permanent. Drawing on a view defended by Hilary Putnam, I argue that it is thus a mistake to treat moral problems as though they might ever be definitively "solved" (Putnam 1990: 181).

Section four focuses on situations in which moral progress depends on expanding *perceptual* space: on getting people to see the world, their place in it, and their relationships to other beings, in fundamentally new ways. I argue that, in such situations, deepening moral understanding requires the successful exercise of creative imagination. I will urge, along with John Dewey, that philosophy must thus acknowledge the importance of art in eliminating barriers to moral progress (Dewey 1980). Moreover, like Rorty I will argue that a critical task of moral and political philosophy is to stimulate moral imagination with thought-experiments that constructively explore political possibility (Rorty 2005).

I conclude, in section five, by showing that, properly circumscribed, the idea of moral progress yields a defensible and important principle of historical interpretation. To be sure, we will not discover any unbroken "upward" path of permanent moral improvement. But we can identify several kinds of change that are reasonably understood as moral progress; I will discuss three of them. I will conclude with the claim that some of the most important instances of moral progress appear when we emerge from periods of moral regress with deeper understandings of justice and compassion, a richer appreciation of the need for human solidarity, and the will to apply these lessons in the world.

1.1 Moral Progress as a Regulative Concept

The social movements that have successfully deepened our understanding of justice and compassion, and enlarged our sense of the possibilities of human solidarity, have been driven by agents who were hopeful about the possibility of producing moral change, confident in the worth of acting on their moral convictions, and willing to take risks and endure sacrifice in the process. In other words, morally progressive social movements rely on the efforts of agents who possess hope, faith, and courage. Yet with very few exceptions, these notions have received little attention in contemporary moral and political thought. I will try to remedy that deficit though a brief exploration of the importance of hope, faith and courage in helping agents pursue moral progress.

I begin with the idea of hope, understood as "expectant desire"—a stance that combines wanting something to happen or be true with thinking that it could really happen or could really be true.[3] It may seem a truism that socially engaged moral agents must possess a generally hopeful outlook. Yet as the global humanitarian and physician Paul Farmer contends, contemporary thinkers rarely say enough about the motivating power of hope (Farmer 2013). Moreover, the relative silence of contemporary philosophy on the topic stands in contrast to much traditional thought.[4] In Book III of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, for instance, Aristotle suggests that a hopeful disposition can produce confidence in the worth of actions involving risk and personal sacrifice, and thus create the conditions for a person to act courageously.[5] Drawing on Christian theology, both Augustine and Aquinas believed that, along with faith and charity, hope is a fundamental virtue.[6] And, of course, Kant thought that we cannot properly address the interests of reason—especially practical reason—unless we take seriously the question "What may I hope?"[7] Some will object that asserting the motivational importance of hope demands either a theological orientation towards moral experience, or a teleological understanding of history, or both. But it has been understood, at least since the utilitarianism of Bentham and Mill, that the idea of moral progress can be detached from theological commitments and teleological assumptions and remain a source of hope.

As expectant desire, hope must be distinguished from wishing, since one can wish for things that one fully believes can *never* happen. Hope must also be distinguished from optimism, which involves generally expecting the best to happen. Hope may come more easily to those who are generally optimistic, but there is an important kind of hope—Jonathan Lear calls it "radical hope"—that is possible only when we are willing to contemplate the worst that might happen and not be daunted by it (Lear 2006). Lasch believed that the idea of progress involves an incautious optimism that effectively denies limitations on human power and thus produces unreasonable hope (Lasch 1991). But the idea of progress, as I defend it, involves a fundamentally *cautious* optimism that can ground reasonable hopes for approximating moral ideals in specific domains of concern. A similar stance underwrites the extraordinary work of the global organization "Partners in Health," founded in 1987 by Paul Farmer and his associates as a concrete "antidote to despair."[8] The success of "Partners in Health" in improving the delivery of health care to some of the world's poorest communities, and in inspiring generations of young practitioners interested in global health, yields an important lesson. If we want to understand and strengthen the sources of moral progress, we must take seriously Farmer's claim that "it is not intellectually shallow to have hope."[9] One of philosophy's tasks is to expose illusions and inconsistencies, and to lift the veil of self-

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[3] This definition draws on the Oxford English Dictionary definition of hope as "desire combined with expectation."

[4] Much of Gabriel Marcel's contribution to existentialism concerned the importance of hope in human existence. See Marcel (1951 and 1965). I am indebted to A. W. Musschenga for this critical reminder. Important contemporary treatments of hope include Chignell (2013); Lear (2006); Martin *(2014);and* van Hooft (2014).

[5] For helpful discussion of this passage see Gravlee (2000: 466) and Duff (1987 : 10).

[6] Augustine, *The Enchiridion on Faith, Hope and Love*, secs. 7,8, 114–116; Aquinas *Summa Theologica* I-II.62.1). These accounts build primarily on 1 Corinthians 13: 13 and 15:19.

[7] The question appears near the end of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (A 804–5/B833, and again in the *Logic* (9:25).

[8] For the statement of the "Partners in Health" mission, see http://www.pih.org/pages/our-mission.

[9] Farmer makes this observation in an online interview at http://www.pih.org/media/video-dr.-paul-farmer-on-hope.

deceptive ideologies that hinder clear-eyed assessments of social phenomena. Yet we must also ask what role practical philosophy might play in the effort to inspire hope.

But the absence of hope on the part of potentially engaged moral agents is not the only obstacle to moral progress in the social world. Equally challenging to the engaged moral agent is the weakening of moral convictions that may follow the frustration of hope. Because we act in a world that frequently frustrates even reasonable hope, finding ways to sustain the moral conviction of engaged agents is critical for moral progress. For some agents, it is primarily religious faith that sustains moral conviction. Morally progressive religious convictions helped to shape nineteenth century abolitionism, the civil rights movement in mid-twentieth century America, and some late twentieth century Latin American movements aimed at eradicating poverty. But religious faith is not essential to sustaining the moral convictions that drive social movements: an agent might attribute the weight that she attaches to her moral convictions to her secular moral beliefs, or her commitment to the political morality of a particular society, or to her acceptance of an international ideal of human rights. What is essential is simply that agents take their moral convictions to matter more than their contingent, mostly personal and self-interested desires and concerns; that is, that they must take their moral convictions to have an importance that transcends that of any of their individual or local concerns. This usually means that they will attribute objective value to the convictions driving their commitment to moral progress.

Rorty once criticized the feminist legal theorist Catherine Mackinnon for not rejecting the "realist rhetoric" of moral universalism (Rorty 1991: 236–7). But when Mackinnon identified the core idea of late twentieth century feminism as the "tacit belief that women are human beings in truth but not in social reality," she confirmed an inescapable fact about the moral psychology that makes moral progress possible (MacKinnon 1987: 219). Moral progress depends on moral faith: on the commitment of engaged moral agents who presume the transcendent and objective value of the convictions that drive their engagement. Moreover, the belief that moral progress is possible, and has really occurred, plays an important role in strengthening moral faith.

Yet the combination of reasonable hope with faith in the objective value of relevant moral convictions is not sufficient, alone, to create the conditions for the individual actions and social movements that produce moral progress. This is because those who engage in social criticism and political struggle must also be prepared to act courageously. Of course, in the most effective social movements, as social theory reminds us, agents carefully assess the likelihood of success before they act (Morris 2000). But even under the best of circumstances, courage is critical. The "workmanlike" struggles upon which moral progress depends tend to involve serious risks of harm, and almost always demand some kind of personal sacrifice. As one observer noted in commenting on the development of American sexual harassment law, "[t]he nature of social change is that we make martyrs out of pioneers. We have yet to figure out how to make social change without sacrificing people along the way."[10] Courage is a critical component of the moral psychology of agents who take part in social movements that drive moral progress, and the belief in moral progress is an important member of the set of beliefs that sustain courage.

The courage necessary for moral engagement must take different forms in different social contexts. In the American civil rights movement, courage was often best displayed in non-

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[10] This observation is attributed to Laura Cooper a labor law professor, in reference to Jenson v. Eveleth, the first successful class action sexual harassment lawsuit in America . See Bingham (2003:388).

violent self-discipline: in a commitment to refraining from violence, even in response to violence. In other contexts, as in the anti-slavery cause in the American Civil War or in the Allied struggle against the Axis powers in WWII, courage is best displayed as a commitment to forcefully defend relevant moral ideals even if, regrettably, that defense requires a resort to coercion and violence. Yet, as Aristotle would have insisted, even when aggressively defending the ideals of a plausible political morality, courage is incompatible with moral recklessness. In such contexts, courage demands that we reject reckless disregard for the well-being of others (especially non-combatants) and that we treat violence and coercion as morally regrettable, even if sometimes morally necessary, last resorts (Moody-Adams 1999: 181).

In a skeptical treatment of these topics, Richard Posner once argued that *any* committed advocacy of social change can be characterized as "moral advocacy"—regardless of the way in which it relies on violence and coercion. According to Posner, the main difference between figures such as Jeremy Bentham or Jesus, on one hand, and Hitler or Stalin, on the other, is simply the difference between seeking to expand the "bounds of altruism" and seeking to narrow them (Posner 1998: 1667). But Posner ignores the deeper, morally fundamental difference between social movements which involve the deliberate and calculated exposure of others to grave harm and death and those social movements for which violence and coercion constitute a last resort. A crucial index of moral progress is the extent to which beliefs and institutions expand the scope of justice (and often the scope of compassion) to create broadly inclusive communities which minimize, and ideally eliminate, extreme coercion and violence. As I have argued elsewhere, a commitment to the examined life is a morally necessary condition of the life worth living, and *that c*ommitment demands that we acknowledge our human fallibility, including the possibility that any human practice could always be wrong (even if one could convincingly claim to have sought to shape that practice by reference to self-evident truths) (Moody-Adams 1999). We thus have morally compelling reasons to be cautious about how others are affected by practices and institutions that we support (Moody-Adams 1999:181). Most importantly, social changes produced by using violence and coercion either as a first resort, or as a sustained practice, cannot constitute moral progress because they patently fail to satisfy the morally necessary conditions of a life worth living.

1.2 Expanding Conceptual Space for Moral Progress

But if social criticism is to deepen understandings of justice and compassion, it will often be necessary to expand the conceptual space available for constructive debate about those concepts. In some contexts, this is mainly a matter of articulating conventional rational arguments that expose inconsistencies, reveal falsehoods and delusions, and address various forms of ignorance. This is the sort of project that Peter Singer, for instance, has undertaken in several of his writings (Singer 1979, 1987). Yet conceptual space for moral debate is not always limited by rational inconsistency, false belief, or any ordinary kind of ignorance, but instead, by the poverty of language—in particular, the poverty of some of the language we use to describe the world in determining whether and when moral concepts apply. The linguistic, and ultimately conceptual, deficiencies at stake generally take three main forms. First, widely accepted ways of describing a phenomenon may fail to make it clear what the moral relevance of that phenomenon really is. Second, commonly accepted descriptions may mask or fundamentally mischaracterize the morally relevant features of the phenomenon under consideration. In a third kind of case, familiar ways of describing the world simply provide no socially effective means of even acknowledging that a morally urgent phenomenon exists.

To understand the first kind of deficiency, consider what the social world looked like before the concept of workplace sexual harassment began to shape social movements for gender equality. Even in societies where the concept has now begun to reshape institutions and influence conduct, there was a time when a woman could not have been taken seriously were she to argue that unwanted sexual advances and intimidation in the workplace constituted unfair discrimination and hence injustice. She might have been told that unwanted sexual advances at work are actually a form of flattery, or a way of responding to what women "really" want, or even just a necessary cost of seeking employment in realms that ought to be reserved for males—rather than a serious harm that might merit a legal remedy. Indeed, before the emergence of the concept of sexual harassment, many women mistrusted their own conclusions that sexual intimidation and unwanted advances amounted to unfair discrimination. The conceptual deficiency in question thus involved two varieties of the phenomenon that Miranda Fricke calls epistemic injustice (Fricker 2007). It produced *testimonial* injustice, by effectively undermining women's credibility when they objected to sexual intimidation. It created *hermeneutical* injustice by limiting women's capacities to make their reactions to the intimidation fully intelligible—sometimes even to themselves.

The remedy for this deficiency emerged in 1974, when the concept of sexual harassment was first articulated during a consciousness-raising session associated with a Cornell University course on women and work (Bingham and Gansler 2003). As the concept came to the attention of influential journalists and government agencies, it became a tool to assist women who were willing to press complaints, and it gradually shaped broader debate about how to effectively stigmatize and discourage the conduct in question. The legal and institutional reforms that followed (in the U.S. and elsewhere) depended upon the combined efforts of women who pursued sexual harassment complaints, members of the legal profession who supported their cause in court, and feminist academics and social critics who articulated the theoretical underpinnings of their claims. Some philosophers have argued that the movement for gender equality demanded "new moral ideas;" others have held that feminist theorizing invariably generates "abnormal moral contexts" that can prove especially resistant, in Kuhnian terminology, to "normalization" (Slote 1982: 76; Calhoun 1989:396–9). Yet, as I have argued, the progress of anti-sexual harassment efforts cannot be traced to the articulation of new *moral* ideas, but to innovations in non-moral language for describing the world to which familiar moral concepts like justice apply.

Any effort to understand how such innovations work will reveal what Fricker calls the first-order "ethical aspects" of our ordinary collective epistemic resources (Fricker 2007). It will become clear that people can be morally harmed simply in virtue of how their identities are partly shaped by institutions that structure social life, and by deficiencies in socially available categories for describing and interpreting their experience. Other kinds of moral harm—such as the injustice of discriminatory exclusion, or the cruelty and indignities of undeserved brutality and violence—are also often intertwined with the moral harms that flow from deficiencies in epistemic practices. To be sure, the fact that there are such links between collective epistemic practices and moral harms suggests that there isn't always a sharp boundary between "fact" and "value," or between description and moral evaluation. But as Amartya Sen has observed, even though the boundary between description and evaluation isn't always clear, we can still find "vast regions without ambiguity" within each practice (Sen 1980: 353). Second-wave feminism helped to create a broader social movement that eventually deepened understanding of the demands of equality, as a central element of political morality. But it did this by successfully enriching the descriptive language available to characterize

women's experiences, and also by asserting women's epistemic authority in determining its interpretive application.

We find a different kind of deficiency in characterizations of racial segregation and oppression that were dominant in post-Reconstruction America. For far too long, descriptive language adopted and accepted by the white-American majority radically mischaracterized the morally relevant features of American apartheid. The most infamous such mischaracterization was articulated in the 1896 case of *Plessy v. Ferguson,* when the U.S. Supreme Court made two problematic declarations: first, that racial segregation would not violate the constitutional guarantee of equal protection of the law so long as facilities and accommodations were equal, and second that racial segregation was *in no way* a barrier to making accommodations equal. As a result of this decision, the phrase "separate but equal" became an officially sanctioned tool for legitimizing racial oppression and perpetuating the fiction that racial segregation is a way of realizing genuine equality.

Ironically, a concept that might have been the remedy for this fiction, had it been adopted without delay—the concept of the "color-blind Constitution"—received one of its most compelling formulations by the anti-segregationist lawyer Albion Tourgée, whose client (Homer Plessy) lost his case. Tourgeé's formulation was further refined in comments delivered by the only dissenting justice in the case (Moody-Adams 2003). But it was not until the 1954 decision in *Brown v. Bd. Of Education* that the idea of the color- blind Constitution gained *any* legal traction, and it was several decades more before it started to gain any real influence in American society at large. Once again, moral progress did not depend upon formulating new moral ideas. In this instance, moral progress demanded a conceptual innovation that allowed rejection of the fiction that racial segregation is consistent with equal protection of the law. Regrettably, despite this innovation, institutional movement towards *substantive* racial equality in America has been incomplete. This has led some critics to wonder (reasonably, in my view) whether the structure of rights and duties thought to express the "color blind" ideal might *now* function as an even more deceptive and intractable means of legitimizing racial inequality than the doctrine of "separate but equal" ever was (Moody-Adams 2003). Yet we can still recognize the progressive social changes that have taken American society closer to formal racial equality, and when we do, we must acknowledge that this progress would have been impossible without the courage and sacrifice of the men and women who took part in the American civil rights movement.

The third kind of conceptual deficiency is quite different from the other two. Here generally accepted descriptive language provides no concise way to characterize and acknowledge the existence of a phenomenon that it is morally urgent to combat. The dangers of such a deficiency were evident when, in a 1941 radio address referring to Nazi atrocities committed during the invasion of the Soviet Union, Winston Churchill insisted that "We are in the presence of a crime without a name."[11] Three years later, with a deeper understanding of the scope of Nazi atrocities, a scholar named Raphael Lemkin coined the word "genocide" to describe any deliberate and systematic effort to destroy entire groups of people solely because of their racial, national or religious affiliation (Lemkin 1944; Vrdoljak 2010). The concept of a "crime of barbarity" had been introduced by critics hoping to make sense of the 1915 Armenian genocide carried by out Ottoman Turks and the 1933 Iranian massacre of Assyrians, but Lemkin thought that the notion of barbarity failed to illuminate the systematic aims of the evils in question. He also rejected the concept of "mass murder" as inadequate to capture the idea of targeting a particular group of people for elimination and urged that

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[11] The speech is archived at http://www.ibiblio.org/pha/policy/1941/410824a.html.

genocide is not a war crime but an attack on the very *humanity* of any people targeted for destruction (Vrdoljak 2010). This conceptual innovation marked an extraordinary moment in international law as well as in moral debate. It influenced formulation of the concept of a "crime against humanity," which figured crucially in the Nuremberg Trials. Equally important, it shaped the UN's 1948 Convention for the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide and now informs contemporary debates about the nature and scope of international criminal justice, as well as the broader international movement for human rights.

Taken together, these examples show that effective social movements often rely on moral pioneers to be linguistic visionaries who can recognize when some way of describing the world is an obstacle to revealing, and eventually correcting, deficiencies in our moral beliefs and practices. Robert Merton held that pioneers in science nearly always build on the accumulated insights and efforts of communities of scientific inquiry (Merton 1973). I contend that, analogously, moral pioneers build on the insights and work of communities of moral inquiry and shared moral concern. But just as we can identify especially insightful pioneers in the complex communities of natural science, we can also identify moral pioneers whose articulation of a collective insight proves particularly effective.[12] In a remarkably hopeful example, Paul Farmer and his associates have recently urged that the dominant understanding of the needs of people in developing countries masks the truth about what moral progress requires in these contexts. Refining this insight, Farmer argues calls for us to relinquish "the hubris of traditional foreign assistance," and replace the idea of being "providers of aid" with the very different notion of offering "accompaniment" to people who seek to improve their situation (Farmer 2013: xxiv-xxvi). Adopted from the Haitian Creole word '*accompagnateurs*', the concept of accompaniment rejects the idea of temporally limited, one-way efforts to meet immediate needs. Instead, it envisions "an open ended commitment" to also furthering recipients' independence by helping to create and strengthen local practices that can institutionalize change. Projects that have emerged from these ideas have allowed Farmer's group, Partners in Health, to contribute to remarkable progress in the health care system of post-genocidal Rwanda. It was reported in 2013, for instance, that Rwanda is the only country in sub-Saharan Africa that is on track to meet the UN's Millennium Development Goals.[13] This outcome, alone, provides reason to believe that the idea of accompaniment involves a much needed innovation: combining robust respect for the recipients' agency with genuine appreciation of their shared humanity. It is also a powerful reminder that the vision and courage that make moral progress possible are products of hard-won expertise and experience of morally engaged agents—not applications of abstract moral principle, or appeals to theories of moral progress.

1.3 Semantic Depth and Moral Complexity

But while we best understand the *sources* of moral progress by reflecting on social movements and their morally engaged participants, understanding the *nature* of moral progress demands

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[12] Though I cannot argue this point here, I believe that moral pioneers are often—perhaps always—people to whom we can (and should) look as moral exemplars and moral experts. This is one important source of my disagreement with the view of moral progress defended by Philip Kitcher in *The Ethical Project*. See, for instance, Kitcher (2011: 285–287). For a fuller account of the nature of their expertise, see Moody-Adams (1999).

[13] Rwanda's progress is discussed in http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/05/science/rwandas-health-care-success-story.html?_r=0.

that we take a broader view. As I claimed at the start, the nature of moral progress is a function of two important phenomena: (1) the character of moral inquiry, as shaped by interpretive challenges associated with the semantic depth of moral concepts, and (2) the profound and inescapable limitations on our ability to predict or control the trajectory or the spread of any change we bring about. The complex intertwining of semantic depth with unavoidable limitations on our ability to predict and control events means that moral progress will always be local, that change in human institutions is unlikely to be continuously morally "upward" or forward, and that we can never be sure when any morally constructive change is permanent.

The intertwining of these phenomena also means that we can never be sure when moral progress in one domain will produce moral regress in another. American sociologist William Julius Wilson has provided an instructive example of how the consequences of this uncertainty sometimes unfold. A central case-study in his now classic book, *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass and Public Policy*, shows that in the first years after America legally mandated integration in housing, a once thriving inner-city Chicago neighborhood was gradually transformed into one of the most dangerous and impoverished neighborhoods in the country (Wilson 1987). Wilson argued that a principal cause of this transformation was that integration allowed most of the neighborhood's highly motivated residents to move out and "up," leaving behind primarily the most disadvantaged. Controversy continues to surround some of Wilson's claims, but many readers would accept that Wilson has accurately described a situation in which the inability to predict and control the consequences of (admittedly limited) progress in one domain (fair housing opportunities) helped lead to moral regress in another (the socio-economic well-being of the least well-off).

Wilson's case-study also confirms a more general point about moral progress, because it shows that when moral progress produces hoped-for changes in social, political and economic institutions, those changes almost inevitably alter the data of moral experience in ways that we cannot predict. In claiming that some change alters "the data of moral experience," I mean that it alters both the conceptual space *and* the social world in which moral reflection must take place. As a result, those policies and institutions that we initially settle on in the hope of resolving a serious moral problem will most likely need to be revisited with the passage of time. Developments in American criminal law during the 1980's and 1990's exemplified this process. Harsh mandatory sentencing rules, in particular the so-called "three strikes and you're out" laws, sometimes required handing down a sentence of life in prison to a petty thief, or to someone who refused to pay for a sandwich in a delicatessen. Such gross miscarriages of justice—in the sense, now, of *moral f*airness—finally helped to produce broad recognition that a fundamental revision of anti-crime policies is in order. Such examples should also remind us that moral problems reappear in unpredictably new guises over time, and that it is almost inevitable that we will need to revisit social responses to serious moral issues again and again. The features of experience that produce such examples support my claim that any hope of producing a rationally compelling theory of moral progress, or principles to reliably guide attempts to produce progress, is *intrinsically* a hope that cannot be realized. But as Hilary Putnam has argued, the most rational response is simply to relinquish the idea that serious moral problems have definitive solutions, and to deny that this renders moral inquiry and argument deficient (Putnam 1990)..[14]

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[14] The plausibility of Putnam's stance rejecting the idea that moral 'problems' have solutions is the principal reason that I fundamentally reject Amanda Roth's idea that Ethical Progress can be understood as "problem-resolving." Roth's view is developed in Roth (2012).

This way of thinking requires us to reject an assumption deeply embedded in contemporary intellectual life—the notion, as Quine expressed it, that ethics is "methodologically infirm in comparison with science" (Quine 1980). I have argued against this stance in other contexts, affirming Aristotle's view that we ought rationally to expect only the kind of precision appropriate to a given domain of inquiry (Moody-Adams 1997, 1999). When we appropriately tailor our expectations to the moral domain, we will stop expecting progress in moral inquiry to involve convergence on permanent resolutions of moral problems. But it will then become clear why it is still reasonable, and desirable, to retain the notion of moral progress as a means of characterizing what happens engaged moral agents successfully produce even a "*local*" extension of a familiar moral concept. It will also become easier to understand that moral thought and inquiry are not rationally deficient just because we cannot provide a comprehensive theory of moral progress or produce an algorithm for reliably producing it.

This stance is not a denial of the value of moral inquiry. In particular, I do not deny the importance to moral progress of philosophical reflection about morality. Yet my defense of philosophy's value in these contexts involves two caveats. First, as C.D. Broad once urged, we should not expect that even the most compelling moral theory can contain "the whole truth, and nothing but the truth" about morality. Not even the most sophisticated philosophical view can overcome the interpretive challenges posed by the semantic depth of moral concepts. Second, we must accept that important dimensions of moral truth will sometimes emerge from non-philosophical sources. Many contemporary philosophers will concede that the natural sciences and the social sciences can yield valuable insights about morality. But it is less widely acknowledged that moral understanding may also come from religious views, as well as from the products of creative imagination. Taking such contributions seriously requires that we resist the temptation to privilege discursive reason-giving and argument over other sorts of communication and expression.[15] In the next section of this paper, I focus on one of the most important reasons for doing so, by exploring the connection between moral progress and forms of expression that involve the exercise of creative imagination.

1.4 Creating Perceptual Space for Moral Progress

In section two, I argued that social movements must sometimes rely on innovative language to expand *conceptual* space for constructive debate about moral progress. In this section, I show that moral progress often depends on expanding *perceptual* space—dislodging prejudices and habits of belief that limit our ability to take a novel view of the world, our place in it, and our relationships to others, as might be required by new moral interpretations. I contend that discursive reason-giving and argument are often ineffective in these contexts, and that sometimes we must rely instead on the arresting, disarming, and perceptually disruptive power of creative expression to produce morally necessary transformations in how human beings perceive the world, and their place in it. For reasons of space, I focus on failures to fully appreciate the humanity of particular human "others," or to recognize new grounds for human solidarity. But a complete account of the barriers to moral progress that are resistant to discursive reason would need to also address failures to appreciate the moral value of the

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[15] I cannot, here, provide the argument for this claim. That argument is central to some of my (as yet) unpublished work on "Civic Art of Remembrance and the and the Democratic Imagination," that is part of a larger contribution to democratic theory.

"non-human" realm: including the value of non-human species and of the natural environment more generally.

In the case of failures to fully appreciate another's humanity, or to recognize grounds for solidarity with the other, it is often necessary to represent the other in a manner that creates empathy and depicts common humanity through symbolic expression. Storytelling, especially through fiction, is a particularly effective vehicle for this kind of expression. As Dewey claimed in *Art and Experience,* art can "break through barriers that divide human beings" and "this force of art…is most fully manifested in literature" (Dewey 1980: 254). This is what Harriet Beecher Stowe understood in crafting her anti-slavery novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), a work that many believe helped to galvanize the American abolition movement. In 1855, abolitionist and former slave Frederick Douglass described the novel as a "flash…to light a million campfires in front of the embattled hosts of slavery which not all the waters of the Mississippi … could extinguish."[16] The dehumanizing effects of poverty and social exclusion have also been effectively represented in fiction, as in Upton Sinclair's muckraking book, *The Jungle (1905)*, depicting inhumane conditions in America's early twentieth century meat-packing industry. Still further, from Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929), to Tim O'Brien's *The Things they Carried* (1990) fiction is an especially powerful vehicle for displaying the moral challenges of war.

But sometimes visual culture—including photography—is the most compelling means for creating empathy. The power of photography in this regard was particularly well-understood by those who oversaw efforts to address rural poverty in Depression-era America. The economist Roy Stryker, who headed the "Historical Section" of the U.S. Farm Security Administration, oversaw an ambitious project to photographically document the hardships that the agency's programs were meant to address, and then to publicly disseminate examples of that photographic record in order to generate public support for the programs (Musher 2015:130–145).[17] The photographers who carried out the project (from 1935 to 1944) gave substance to Franklin Delano Roosevelt's promise, during his second inaugural address, to paint a picture of the one-third of the nation that was "ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished," in the hope that "the nation, seeing and understanding the injustice in it, proposes to paint it out" (Roosevelt 1937).[18] FDR wanted to "paint out" injustice on the way to the more constructive project of showing that "under democratic methods of government, national wealth can be translated into a spreading volume of human comforts hitherto unknown" (Roosevelt 1937). The Photography project offered a selective picture of Depression- era poverty. For instance, the selection of pictures for public viewings seems to have deliberately masked the fact that, during the Depression, nearly one-quarter of the population of the American south was African-American. (Musher 2015: 138–139). The photography project thus worked to dislodge certain prejudices against the poor, without addressing the persistence of racial prejudice. Yet the project helped build public support for New Deal programs that *generally* alleviated poverty and generated public confidence that at least a part of Roosevelt's hope for a "spreading volume of human comforts" could be realized.

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[16] See Douglass (1994)

[17] The project produced between 164,000 and 175,000 photographic negatives, only some of which were developed and displayed for public viewing.

[18] See Franklin D. Roosevelt (1937), "One Third of a Nation" FDR's 2nd inaugural address, http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5105/.

Critics may object that to acknowledge the socially transformative power of creative expression—even in support of values that constitute moral progress— is to raise the question of how to distinguish art from propaganda. But that distinction may not always be possible to draw, and yet we need not lament this fact. The important question is not how to distinguish art from propaganda, but how to recognize the difference between morally constructive and morally dangerous propaganda. I accept the account of propaganda offered by Garth Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell, who define propaganda as "the deliberate systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior" in accordance with the creator's aims (Jowett and O'Donnell 2014: 7). As I see it, the morally important issue is the character of the aims that inform any creative act meant to "shape perceptions and manipulate cognition" and, in particular, whether (like Nazi propaganda) it aims to encourage exclusion, coercion and violence or (like New Deal propaganda) to create a more inclusive society by lessening material inequality.

Yet art is not the only vehicle for constructively disarming our preconceptions and disrupting conventional ways of seeing the world and conceiving the other. Writing about global challenges of conciliation and "conflict transformation," John Paul Lederach observes that in national settings as diverse as Colombia, Northern Ghana, and the Philippines, an unexpected gesture of respect or generosity towards a presumed enemy can be the start of an extraordinary transformation in social relations, despite years of bitter conflict and violence (Lederach 2005). Lederach is a scholar of conflict resolution and mediation, seeking to understand how people might transcend historical patterns of violence that have nearly destroyed their communities, even as they continue to *live* in those communities. Thinkers such as Archbishop Tutu (in South Africa) and Bishop Rucyahana (in Rwanda) have convincingly emphasized the value of trying to institutionalize mechanisms for forgiveness in such societies (Tutu 1999; Rucyahana 2007). But Lederach believes that sometimes it is more important that people become able to imagine themselves in a "web of relationships" that *peacefully* includes those they have always seen as their enemies (Lederach 2005: 3). To be sure, as with any effort to transform the way in which another sees the world, there is no means of predicting which actions or practices might have the desired transformative effects. Nor is there any easy way of knowing, in advance, how to institutionalize the changes they might generate.

Of course, the failure of transformative projects in the real world can have dire consequences. But this is why it is important to sustain the tradition of the imaginative, comprehensive thought experiment in political philosophy. As Rorty has argued, sometimes the most constructive task that philosophers can undertake is to stimulate moral imagination by discussing "new ways of living an individual human life, and new social utopias in which human beings might better flourish" (Rorty 2005). It is thus that Plato allows us to consider gender equality as part of the ideal polity; that Kant allows us to consider the possibility of a federation of sovereign states to secure 'perpetual peace;' that Mill allows us to consider how robust respect for individual liberty might promote human progress. More recently, in *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement,* Rawls finally made explicit an assumption that had shaped his entire philosophical project: the conviction that political philosophy must be "realistically utopian…, probing the limits of practicable political possibility" (Rawls 2001: 4).

At this point, I must acknowledge that I agree with critics who challenge Rawls' understanding of "political possibility," and who charge that his political liberalism involves unwarranted optimism that overlapping consensus on rational principles might, alone, generate democratic stability (Scheffler 2003). In my view, like many contemporary thinkers, Rawls

unwisely accepts a conception of the public sphere that privileges discursive reason-giving and argument over other sorts of communication and expression that can be critical to moral progress. Moreover, though Rawls consistently defended civil disobedience as a means to remedy injustice and promote democratic stability, he failed to recognize that the effectiveness of social criticism and political struggle often requires expanding conceptual space for public debate and enlarging the perceptual space in which to appreciate new ways of ordering the social world. Yet, taken as a whole, Rawls's work remains a powerful reminder that the tasks of practical philosophy are not exhausted by analysis of concepts and justification of principles, and that moral and political thought should also seek to stir the imagination.

1.5 Moral Progress and the Interpretation of History

I conclude with some reflections on the reasons for which "serious people" continue to reject Christopher Lasch's skepticism and believe in moral progress. First, it is undeniable that social movements have sometimes changed institutions in ways that embody more inclusive application of moral concepts such as justice and compassion. Moreover, there is nothing trivial in the claim to find moral progress in the demise of various systems of chattel slavery, in the rise of global movements for gender equality, or in the emergence of an international culture of human rights. Of course, as Nussbaum urged, even as we find evidence of greater inclusiveness, we must acknowledge that people "still erect hierarchies"—especially of race, ethnicity, class and gender—and that these hierarchies continue to have morally regressive and humanly destructive consequences (Nussbaum 2007). Second, like Nussbaum, I believe that we can identify another kind of moral progress in the fact that emancipatory social movements have helped disseminate conceptual tools for morally criticizing and effectively stigmatizing those who try to undermine inclusive institutions and practices. Such progress, as Nussbaum contends, could be reversed only by a global "political cataclysm" that ended free speech as we know it; new communication technologies, and the global spread of ideas, make this unlikely (Nussbaum 2007: 940).

But, third, and perhaps most important, it constitutes progress that no matter how severe an era or domain of moral regress might be—even when it is driven by the worst human tendencies towards exclusion, unrestrained violence, and even genocide—it is possible for human beings to "come back" from the brink of destruction. The moral visionaries and moral agents who make this kind of moral progress possible are often those people who are most capable of the radical hope that Lear describes—who are capable, even in the worst of times, of remaining committed "to the bare idea that something good will emerge" and to the thought that the goodness of the world always "transcends one's limited and vulnerable attempts to understand it" (Lear 2006: 94). It is because of radical hope that such examples as the New Deal in America, the global human rights movement in the aftermath of WW II, and more recently the health-care successes of post-genocidal Rwanda, can provide evidence of moral progress in the sense that may matter most. These examples show that human beings have an effective capacity to emerge from periods of moral regress with deeper understandings of justice, compassion, and the possibilities of human solidarity, and to apply these deepened concepts in service of morally constructive social hope.

There is a terrible irony in the fact that some of the most important instances of moral progress have emerged in response to the worst examples of moral regress. But this is no reason to deny that "serious people" are justified in finding moral progress in our capacity to learn from the circumstances and especially from the human choices that produced the moral

regress. In *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770–1823,* the historian David Brion Davis argued that.

> Whatever one believes about historical progress—or the lack of it—we are the beneficiaries of past struggles, of the new and often temporary sensitivities of a collective conscience, and of brave men who thought that the time was right not only for appealing to unfulfilled promises of the past, but for breaking the proprieties of the present…. " (Davis 1975: 18–19)

In my view, vigorous debate about the historical sources of these "past struggles" and "new … sensitivities" is as crucial to morally constructive agency as the belief in moral progress itself.

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