

Morally we Roll Along: (Optimistic Reflections) on Moral Progress

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ABSTRACT Changes over time in many large scale human practices such as science and technology seem best understood in terms of progress. Further, regarding such practices as slavery, we seem to have moved on and for the better, that is, to have progressed morally. But moral progress seems something different from other forms of progress. If possible at all, in what can it consist? Progress is understood as falling into three distinguishable categories; namely, progress as mere change, as change culminating in some end-state, and as change involving improvement or betterment. While scientific or economic progress seem of the last sort, moral progress is best understood as a hybrid of culminative change and improvement, a variety of progress labelled millenarian. Though there is an end towards which moral progress must tend, we do not know what it is. Further, moral progress must occupy a special superordinate and regulatory role regarding other progressive practices; that is, for moral progress to be possible, other progressive practices must come under the aegis of increasingly stringent moral regulation. This paper elaborates a model of moral progress, speculates upon signs of its presence, considers various relativist objections, and makes an exhortative plea for the need to have such a notion as a condition of the very possibility of moral progress.

Jake and Elwood

In one of the many matchless scenes in John Landis's classic *The Blues Brothers* (1980), Jake and Elwood invade a swanky Chicago restaurant, seat themselves at a table next to a very proper, very patrician family, and proceed to conduct themselves in an exuberantly obnoxious manner. Predictably upset, the family members try helplessly to ignore their unmannerly neighbours. Taking full assault advantage, Jake leans over and greasily addresses the family patriarch in a gruff all-purpose foreign accent. Gesturing grandly at the man's wife and daughters, Jake puts it to him man-to-man: 'Your women. I want your women. How much for your women?'

The scene works as comedy by way of playing on a manifest absurdity. You just don't horse-trade in women. In fact, you just don't buy and sell humans, period. They are just not that sort of thing — and not just among civilised folk. Had Jake been out to horse-trade in horses, the absurdity would have been lost. Further, had the movie been screened at a time — not so long ago — when trading in humans was just another piece of common commerce, so too the intended absurdity would simply have flopped.

The *Blues Brothers* scene works now as black humour because the typical Western audience can reliably be counted upon as subscribing to an unquestioned, categorical, absolute, strictly *moral* conviction. Human beings are not marketable commodities. It

goes even deeper. We don't allow humans to sell themselves into slavery. I cannot buy another human as my property, nor can you, voluntarily and uncoerced, sell your person to me as an item of fair exchange. We can sell our skills, our time, our blood, our labour, but not ourselves. I cannot own you, and you cannot own me, period. Only yesterday, it was otherwise.

What accounts for this change? One serious explanation as to why we don't now trade in conspecifics must appeal in part to the presence and force of moral constraints. The move from the former commonplace of the slave trade to the present absurdity of Jake's offer to purchase signals a phenomenon we might as well call *moral progress*. We seem to have moved on morally, and for the better. That we will continue thus is at least a reasonable hope, if not desire.

Themes and Undercurrents

I have two main aims: (a) to sketch a working notion of moral progress, and (b) to see where it fits with other domains like science or the economy where progress is commonly identified. To anticipate, I suggest that, collectively, we progress morally by virtue of becoming ever more the kinds of beings for whom the acknowledged growing demands of an impersonal and informed morality both reflectively and spontaneously influence our personal and collective choices increasingly. More simply, we progress morally by becoming more moral about an increasing domain of significant matters. As for its place within the larger context of progressing practices, moral progress is not possible unless it stands to scientific or economic progress, say, as a superordinate practice stands to a subordinate enterprise. That is, we do not progress morally unless we increasingly acknowledge and subsequently demand the requirement that other domains of human progress must be constrained by the advancing limits claimed by our moral outlook. Very broadly, moral progress involves a kind of collective cultural growing up, driven in some measure by our catching up with and internalizing both our ongoing discoveries of what is valuable in ourselves and what we have come to understand about our place in the bigger picture.

To get clear about progress, I outline three general varieties of progress involving mere change, teleological directiveness, and improvement. Following on, I briefly consider two dominant cultural and historical undercurrents which continue to influence progress in the moral domain, and then some general features of moral progress itself. I close with some thoughts about the role and tendency of moral progress, and about the pessimism which plagues any such thoughts.

Species of Progress

Progress is a temporal notion and applies generally to event sequences. Common to any type of progress is some notable change of state, progress often being contrasted with stasis [1]. The types of progress differ primarily over the kinds of change involved. I identify three main types: (1) Raw Progress or Mere Change, (2) Teleological or Culminative Progress, and (3) Improvement or Ameliorative Progress.

Raw Progress — Progress as Mere Change

Raw Progress involves mere change. In using expressions such as ‘charting the progress of X’, we often identify nothing more than the course of change in the form of a narrative (e.g., monitoring the progress of a disease, a storm or a social revolution), and need mean nothing more than that we are tracking its sequential stages. There need be no implication that things are heading somewhere appropriately or getting better. Quite the contrary, things can get worse if we remind ourselves of Hogarth’s *A Harlot’s Progress*. Raw progress thus involves no normative assumptions.

Teleological or Culminative Progress

Progress typically involves more than mere change. The name Teleological or Culminative Progress captures one special quality of change; namely, *change toward some specified end-state or goal*. Teleological progression involves something’s changing state *fittingly*. The orderly planned stages of operation of a space probe as it enters planetary range and settles into a stable orbit exemplifies the fittingness of a process going as to the aeronautics engineer’s intended plan; while the progress of normal embryonic development exemplifies the fittingness of a process going on ‘as Nature intended’, as the archaism has it.

All teleological progress involves a culminating or completion state. It may also involve strict or orderly succession where change passes through a set sequence of steps in a programme or progression. Where programmed succession is involved, progress can be made even if impeded. So, the completed stages of foetal development constitute teleological progress even if the pregnancy is not brought to full term. Teleological progress is also made by virtue of a thing’s changing so that it reaches an appropriate, reasonably stable end-state, whatever its course. Thus, having reached this end-state, it is fitting that it should cease changing further, at least as a result of the operation of its internal programme. The intermediate stages need not be fixed in order, duration, or type. We may, in our own progressive activities, discourage such orderly unfolding. Any chess game appropriately culminates in either a win or a draw, but no chess game is meant or expected to reach either end via a fixed sequence. Such sequential diversity or diffuseness attaches to many, if not most, complex larger-scale organic processes such as establishment of territory, mate selection, nest-building, rearing of offspring, and more [2].

Teleological progress presupposes the existence of norms in nature and cannot thus be demonstrated merely by appeal to the simple law-likeness of some progressions. Otherwise any law-like sequence becomes teleologically progressive just by virtue of its predictability. The eventual settling into stable orbit around the sun of the bodies that coalesced into the planets we now know is not teleologically progressive. Other purely physical processes, however, like certain chemical and crystallizing sequences bear a much closer resemblance to directed processes, and thus to being comprehended as teleologically progressive. This understanding rests upon a sense of natural propriety, and indirectly upon a commitment to natural kinds infused with powers and potentialities. At least, an appeal to teleological progress makes sense of what seem to be untoward hitches and impediments in certain natural processes.

Can we call a progressive change culminative only if we know what the end-state is? With well-documented, highly orderly sequences such as embryonic development or the smelting of iron from iron ore, we know where the processes are destined to lead, and can, accordingly, talk of setbacks in development when things ‘go wrong’. In many cases, however, we can at best only hypothesize that a sequence is culminative, perhaps only because it bears fruitful comparison with known teleological sequences, and we can thus only speculate as to what the end-state might be. This is not to say that such development is not teleological. However, we may not comfortably assert that a given sequence is teleologically progressive unless we already know how sequences of that type generally unfold. This makes attributions of teleological progress to unique, non-repeatable sequences like the direction of evolution or, in our case, human history and human enterprise largely speculative, if legitimate [3].

Best perhaps to distinguish between *strongly* and *weakly teleological* progressive sequences. Sequences are *strongly teleological* only when we *know* them to be culminative. Sequences are *weakly teleological* if, despite our ignorance, we have some warrant for modelling them as culminative. Sequences are *weakly teleological* by being treated by hypothesis as if they were culminative. Such a warrant might rest on some demonstrable explanatory and predictive advantage. The Climax hypothesis in ecology is an instance of big scale, weak teleological progressiveness in so far as it hypothesizes an inherent equilibrium-seeking progression. It may become explanatorily and predictively fruitful to regard the succession of life-forms as culminative; even with a stable culminating life-form — the insects, say — if that view allows us to unify general theories of life we may develop, and, further, provides us with the means to generate non-arbitrary, testable hypotheses about developing life-forms elsewhere in the universe [4].

Reservations about attributing teleological progress depend largely upon the scale we choose. Smaller is safer. Whereas we may refer to teleological progress in the decoding and phenotypic realisation of a gene, we prefer not to refer thus to the sequence of stages of life on earth from simple marine creatures to complex air-breathing mammals. However appealing the view that phyletic change towards greater complexity rests on the notion of cumulative advantage, we don’t generally believe in phyletic progress. For the big scale, we seem happier with Fortune than with any Invisible Hand. Whereas we may accept culminative progress in the development of a particular technology, we do not refer in this way to the overall unfolding of science and technology, Peircean convergence views notwithstanding. So we have cause to distinguish between *local* and *broad* teleological progress as well.

Regarding large scale human domains — science, politics, religion, commerce, technology, art, civilization itself — we are at best confined to weak teleological progress because we always come up short as to where the progression is meant to be heading, if anywhere. Such weak, though broad, teleology is highly problematic and we are advised to deal with no more than local considerations. Big scale strongly teleological hypotheses such as those favoured by Hegel, Marx and Spengler prove massively underdetermined by the evidence. That we want, need or prefer grand human practices to be heading somewhere is another story. Here the end is not so much a pre-ordained matter as it is a matter of will. Such implanted teleological progress may suit technology, for example, which unifies its scattered enterprises under grandly purposive themes such as Freedom from Drudgery, all of which address that utilitarian theme of themes, the betterment of the human estate. Betterment, presumably, is meant to converge in the end upon some

fixed condition of 'best-ment'. Later on, I suggest that only morality qualifies for an attribution of weak teleological progress, the other human practices deriving their own progress as whole practices under the aegis of moral progress. That is to say, if there is weak teleological progress in science, for example, it is only by virtue of its hitching its star to weak teleological progress in morality.

Ameliorative Progress or Improvement

Teleological progress emphasizes the *vectorial quality* of progress and captures a sense of *normal* and often *orderly* development. However, teleological progress conveys nothing about the *beneficial value* of that change which has so far appeared briefly as 'betterment'. Call this further value-laden sense Improvement, or Ameliorative progress, expressed in phrases like 'making progress' or 'a change for the better'. This is progress as *gainful change*, advancement, where some developmental stage approvingly supersedes another.

Teleological and ameliorative progress are not always coupled. Ameliorative progress takes the form of successful adaptations which confer some survival advantage upon their bearers and thereby give them some edge over their contemporary competitors. Much teleological progress, on the contrary, often confers no privileged benefit. The progress of foetal development says more about the conservatism of developmental traditions than about the special good conferred upon the bearer. We might have had six digits as a minor side-effect of other processes; but, whatever the number, their patterned development remains, in principle, a thing apart from their special differential benefit, if any exists.

Improvement is part of the nature of things. But whereas teleological progress is gauged against a fixed norm or archetype, improvement is not so fixed. What counts as betterment, supersession, or advancement is relative to certain operative pressures at a time — which themselves change. Improvement is fundamentally perspectival. So, it is only from the point of view of the present comparative good over existing options that a given phenotypic change counts as an improvement.

In summary, teleological progress is drawn toward an established norm. It captures a law-governed goal- or target-relative relation whereby things in their relevant changes more closely approximate or converge upon some end. Something progresses teleologically at a time only if it is closer to some stable and anticipated end-state than it is at some earlier time. This presupposes a constancy of end-state over past and future times. By contrast, improvement is backward-looking by requiring that things change for the better over time when compared with the past, relative to some interest. Thus, a thing improves only if it is better at something than it was earlier on, when gauged against standards of success common to both times. This presupposes a norm constancy over present and past times. Otherwise there is stasis or regress. Teleological progress does not guarantee improvement, nor does improvement rely upon culmination. This is so because (a) the interests are not fixed and in fact change over time, so at best one would have a kind of truncated convergence (no overarching long-term goals or direction); and (b) there may be no end-state upon which the changes converge, whatever the stated interests.

Backdrops to Moral Progress

In the human sphere, teleology and improvement are often conflated. Certain patterns of change, directed toward a fitting end, are deemed to constitute a positive advance. Such connotations I will call *millenarian* or *utopian*. Familiar variants have abounded with expectations of the coming of the Messiah, the realization of Absolute Spirit, the classless post-historical society, the one Unified Science, or the one fully free international trading zone. No doubt, there are always visionaries in science, religion, business, politics, technology, and art who posit some current in the core of things poised to carry us onward and upward to some final, proper, resting place [5].

Millenarian views are teleological-improvement hybrids in proposing an ongoing advancement towards or convergence upon a superior determinate end-state. Of course, there may be no final truth about things in science or ultimate fairness in law or ultimate control in technology. Still, to fathom what is at stake in talking about progress in large practice domains such as science or morality, we must link teleology and improvement. Moral progress involves improvement; but that further requires at least a weakly and global teleological conception of moral change. We have to think ourselves on the right track and also as getting it finally right. The catch is that there is no known millennial resting place unless knowledge too comes to a complete end.

Moral progress fittingly combines teleological and ameliorative aspects against a familiar backdrop of social and scientific change. The social change involves ever-inclusive notions of freedom, and the change in science ever-inclusive notions of our natural placement. Combined with certain familiar conceptions of moral experience, these accommodate a type of moral millenarianism. Of all practices, I suggest that morality is best situated to hold a millenarian status. The background, briefly, is as follows:

(1) *Freedom*

Socially, as heirs to a long-standing liberationist and liberalizing tradition, we have moved more inclusively to the realization of both personal liberty and autonomy as well as collective sovereignty and self-determination. Kant's work distils almost two centuries of the sanctification of human autonomy and self-determination. Upon this foundation, the liberal individualism of Bentham and Mill could be built, as well as could the liberationist utopian themes of the early socialists and Marx. What began in a privileged climate of intellectual inquiry has become generally entrenched and internalized — no longer a serious matter of opinion or controversy in many countries. In our current social atmosphere, many, perhaps most, take comfortably and intuitively for granted both the individual entitlement to live one's life as each one sees fit, and the collective entitlement to determine how we as a society are to be governed. How to resolve the tensions between these entitlements and to give each its due constitute the main social issues of our time. That the tension exists at all is testimony to the categorical authority we vest in such entitlements.

The ongoing liberalising tendency can be analyzed as working in its own favour. Consider that, by analogy with species, the ongoing adaptiveness of any society is partially a function of the number and variety of novel — i.e., mutant — ideas and conceptions that society can afford to harbour and keep in reserve for those occasions when their

adoption becomes necessary for social survival. As with their genetic counterparts, many if not most of these variants will be destructive, i.e., ill-suited to social survival if generally implemented, and will accordingly be forced out of influence through the usual mechanisms of social conformity and conservatism. However, some of these notions will, given the right occasions for their expression, provide just the added advantage needed to cope effectively with fortuitous pressures, either internal or external, which any society experiences. This gives rise to a prudential Insurance Principle: that society is best able to deal with future contingency which keeps in reserve, through toleration, the greatest number and variety of mutant (novel, nonconformist) notions which arise within it as a simple expression of random variation. Creatures vary not only phenotypically but ‘psychotypically’, so to speak. Psychotypic mutations arise, let us suppose, at random — built, naturally, upon the psychotypic base of the population at a time — and, some represent the promise of adaptive change. One can either tolerate novelty or repress it. Between these extremes lie a vast range of hybrid options involving policies of selection and priority. Since we select on the basis of conformity with existing structure and also on the basis of highly speculative inference as to the ultimate effects of new notions becoming widespread and the relative stability or instability of the future, we are probably playing it safest in insurance terms by tolerating the greatest range of mutant ideas consistent with our most pessimistic assumptions about ongoing stability. Without that recessive reserve, we are thereby far less able to adapt when change occurs. And if anything is reliably certain, things will change. One characteristic of a morally progressive society is its adoption of an adaptive insurance principle. Any such society will verge increasingly toward liberal individualism until such a point that the social cost of tolerating nonconformist outlooks exceeds the beneficial contingency reserves such outlooks contribute to.

(2) Knowledge

As a result of the dazzling progress in the natural sciences, we have moved ever closer to a more detached and objective understanding of our place in the larger historical and physical scheme of things. We are just beginning to absorb the full implications of the story Darwin and Wallace first told about our very humble origins. Our beginnings have been rendered humbler still by palaeontological revelations of the mind-chilling length of tenure life has had on earth — at least 3.5 billion years so far — and the equally numbing discovery of life’s past and present variety. For this story to take root as part of our most fundamental outlook may well take another century or two. Only just yesterday did we begin to get an inkling as to how life itself works. To internalize the tale requires not only that we acknowledge the common ancestry of all life on earth — something we pretty well do already — but also to imbibe it full strength, to identify our everyday actions and social orders as flowing in part from it. If conceptions of a core human nature gave rise to a sense of our common human identity and thereby our common human worth, so conceptions of a core living nature should, when fully mature, transform our very sense of the worth of living beings.

Primitive signs of our trying to amalgamate our sovereigntist convictions with a realization of our place in the Big Picture are manifest. Not only are we avidly exploring the ‘naturalization’ of theories concerning ourselves; we are also speculating about what sorts of moral, social, and political principles and obligations might flow from naturaliz-

ing our nature. Some early glimpses emerge in the embryonic animal rights and green movements and the efforts towards shaping an ecologically grounded social compact. Movements, of course, are pointedly self-conscious and only a first step towards internalized animal faith. However these ventures fare in the short term, we have reached a stage where we can no more comfortably revert to an internalized acceptance of the divine right of kings or the inherent superiority of an hereditary aristocracy than we can re-adopt pre- or anti-Darwinian conceptions of life on earth. We have gone beyond all that.

For those drawn to evolutionary perspectives, we might just say that we have undergone a kind of evolutionary growth in the spheres of autonomy and knowledge such that our present starting points need no longer revisit the stages already passed through. Indeed, the opportunities for progress rest precisely on progress already made. Moving on is moving up. Given that there's no looking back, we are in store for further transfigurations of our moral comfort zone which will re-fashion our practices affecting the rest of the living world.

What Moral Progress Might Look Like

Our background of increasing liberty and knowledge of the big picture, themselves at least tokens of social and scientific ameliorative progress, underwrite a millenarian notion of moral progress. The sovereigntist side affirms the relevance of the autonomous status of ever-increasing numbers of groups, the value of the autonomy of each of which converges morally towards identity. The evolutionary-geological side discloses the ever-dwindling historical significance of our species, and the increasingly common story we share with an increasing number of other life-forms, thus interposing as morally noteworthy a convergence of common interests. Together, these feed an increasingly inclusive outlook.

Vest this inclusiveness with a measure of standing, and we, individually and collectively, make moral progress to the extent that we become ever increasingly the kinds of beings for whom the increasing scope (or extent) and pervasiveness (or relevance) of the moral domain becomes ever more authoritative. This constitutes not just moral advancement or improvement, but moral *growth*, an irreversible ratcheting-up of outlook. To the extent to which we are capable of moral growth, we are capable of becoming morally fully mature or grown up. In what that culminative state actually consists, we do not as yet know. Further, we may never know it. But hypothesizing that such a state exists is necessary for moral progress. Thomas Nagel expresses our present position thus:

It is evident that we are at a primitive stage of moral development. Even the most civilized human beings have only a haphazard understanding of how to live, how to treat others, how to organize their societies. The idea that the basic principles of morality are *known*, and that the problems all come in their interpretation and application, is one of the most fantastic conceits to which our conceited species has been drawn . . . Not all of our ignorance in these areas is ethical, but a lot of it is. And the idea of the possibility of moral progress is an essential condition of moral progress. None of it is inevitable [6].

Why need we hypothesize any as yet unknown moral culmination? Besides the fact that the very idea of the possibility of moral culmination may be the very engine of moral improvement, a culminating state makes sense of moral change towards increasing inclusiveness which seems to mark our cultural and species history. As an inference to the best explanation, moral change has had a direction towards what looks like a convergence upon inclusiveness and which has been completely consonant with what we have increasingly come to know about the world and our history within it. The more we know, the bigger the big picture becomes. The bigger the big picture becomes, the lesser we are. The lesser we are, the more like the rest we become, the more our story interweaves with the larger story. The more like the rest we become, the greater our reason to minimize the barriers between our regard and respect for ourselves and our regard and respect for the rest.

Why shouldn't this dissolve all regard, all respect? Why shouldn't we collapse into nihilism? An optimist might claim that we just can't do it, regard and respect, as ineradicable as custom, being primordially stamped into us by our psycho-biology. In a more sanguine mood, the more we know, the more awkward it becomes to deny, the greater the strain of pretence required. There are temporary setbacks and hitches, to be sure, but there's no looking back. Slavery and geocentrism are just not open renewable options.

Moral Domains, Moral Authority and the Morally Banal

Making moral progress involves changes in both moral scope, with the expansion of the moral domain, and moral authority, with the expansion of moral dominance, supremacy, or stringency.

Concerning *domain* we re-visit the questions: Who counts morally? Who are the proper beneficiaries of morally sanctioned conduct? If moral progress consists in the tendency towards a strengthening acknowledgment of the autonomy of ever-increasing groups, then what is permissible becomes proportionately more limited and what is obligatory increasingly more varied and demanding. As permissibility is limited and obligation broadened, the greater the risk of conflict with other dimensions of conduct, particularly those concerning our tendency to serve ourselves both individually and collectively in the name of rational self-interest.

As the risk of conflict rises, the greater the call to increase the relative *authority* and *stringency* of the moral domain. To what degree are we bound by the dictates of our morality? To what extent do our moral considerations limit, if not outrightly trump, our non-moral interests? How much more moralistic force is required? Authority applies both personally and collectively. To the extent that we collectively internalize a given injunction — e.g., 'Thou shalt not buy and sell human beings' — such that it applies categorically, thereby do we vest in such an injunction as close to an absolute moral authority as we might recognize.

Growth in either domain or authority constitutes a basis for moral progress all on its own, though domain growth without authority growth is limp, while authority growth without domain growth arbitrarily plays favourites. Both magnify moral relevance by limiting choice and action. Domain growth makes more choices and actions morally wrong by increasing the number of obligations we must accept. Authority growth makes

existing moral obligations more stringent and leaves less room open for excusable, unreflective, self-serving customs and preferences. Moral progress requires that the sphere of uncontestedly permissible conduct increasingly shrinks by making an ever-greater proportion of our actions to be ‘matters of principle.’

A third feature marks moral progress; namely, a ratcheting-up shift in what becomes simple *moral obviousness* or banality. This ‘thoughtless’ aspect represents, oddly, an advance upon the preparatory phases of moral reflectiveness which emerge first in isolated and often eccentric movements. The philosophical tradition dwells principally upon the reflective and deliberative aspect of the moral awareness individuals must cultivate as its fully mature stage. This shares much in spirit with psychological views of moral ontogeny such as Kohlberg’s. As individuals in a morally progressing culture, however, we have no more to revisit and fight through earlier cultural stages of moral awareness than we have, as individuals in a scientifically progressing culture, to fight through and overcome our culturally earlier stages of pre-Copernican, pre-Darwinian, or pre-Einsteinian science. Just as we are not only allowed to take all that well-meant falsehood for granted as past error, and just as we are fully expected now from the earliest stages to navigate through Einstein’s and Darwin’s world as very much our given world; so, morally, we just don’t have to give any serious consideration to the outmoded propriety of slavery, child labour, racial superiority, and the like.

We don’t have to re-investigate first principles and continually ask ourselves whether, for example, human life as such has worth. To revive many past practices as live options is to engage in a kind of regressive make-believe akin to what Peirce impatiently dismissed as ‘paper doubts’:

. . . [I]n truth, there is but one state of mind from which you can ‘set out’, namely, the very state of mind in which you actually find yourself at the time you do ‘set out’ — a state in which you are laden with an immense mass of cognition already formed, of which you cannot divest yourself if you would . . . [D]o not make believe; if pedantry has not eaten all the reality out of you, recognize, as you must, that there is much that you do not doubt in the least [7].

Whatever advice applies to our present, silently tutored, but unreflective basic understanding of things applies equally to our present, culturally nurtured but unreflective basic convictions about what is right. Whence we now morally ‘set out’ was once undiscovered territory. It may have taken isolated social critics and moral saints centuries of fighting, but what they struggled with and fought for was precisely to have us now take utterly for granted, as if as natural as childbirth, their discoveries, hard-won through the nuisance of doubt and reason.

What is it to be at the cutting edge of moral discovery? Same question: What is it to be at the cutting edge of scientific discovery? We set out firmly atop centuries of experiment, yet the use of reason and reflection alone will not get anyone very far. So, we must, as ever, await those with new (that is, mutant) ideas and the right currents to carry us with them in the hope that we will at least come undyingly to believe — if never ourselves to have discovered — the right things to believe. Thank heavens for Darwin and Wallace for having saved you and me the trouble of having to set out, seriously thinking human beings to come endowed with divine favour. Thank heavens for William Wilberforce (1759–1833) for having spared you and me the nuisance of wondering seriously whether humans can own one another, and incidentally, for having planted the current doubt as to whether

humans can properly own any other conscious living creature [8]. ‘None of it is inevitable’, as Nagel says, but progress starts with something’s having become blandly *obvious*, and our setting out from there.

Reflective Moralism

There is no under-estimating the significance of the internalization of outlook, of our reaching irreversible convictions about, e.g., the special worth of human life, and eventually the special worth of life, period. Such conviction becomes so unassailable as to lead us unhesitatingly to revise any of our other beliefs and practices which may run foul of them.

Growth in the unreflective and spontaneous acceptance of growing moral scope and authority contributes to the effective pervasiveness of new moral outlooks by relieving us of all doubt, but is not itself progressive unless accompanied by another aspect of moral progress, one we might call the ascendancy of *reflective* moralism. This involves the warranted conviction that one’s moral outlook is respectful of and maximally consistent with everything we can reasonably claim to know about human beings from the smallest to the biggest pictures we have available. Mill asked rhetorically who would choose ignorance over knowledge. Once we know, however, that choice is no longer ours to make.

In a nutshell, then, we progress morally by virtue of becoming ever more the kinds of beings for whom an ever-widening moral scope and ever-encroaching moral stringency both spontaneously and reflectively influence our personal and collective choices.

Progress Hierarchically Conceived

The Relativity of Progress: Progress & Regress

Is all this just a celebration of the marriage between Dr Pangloss and Pollyanna? Apart from appealing to contestable aspects of our collective cultural potential and ambition, and to some elusive common human nature and glaring value realism, I flagrantly ignore the obvious. Surely, what counts as progress is in the eye of the beholder and is relative to any number of independent domains. Progress reflects nothing more than the realization of dominant interests tied to certain practices. Human progress is thus relative to the objectives of those in charge for the time being. Further, even if moral progress were marked by some convergent ratcheting-up effect, nothing said so far settles any claim to priority or privilege of the moral domain. Once variably dominant goals and conceptions of gainfulness are acknowledged, doesn’t anything that can be counted impersonally as moral progress just dissolve?

The relativity of progress is manifest. Progress in one domain may constitute regress in another. Consider the development of Cyclone B gas by the chemical giant I. G. Farben for use in the German death camps, a stunningly successful R&D project. Technological progress in the development and deployment of deadly weapons or the most cost-effective means of disposing of minorities may reasonably be seen as regressive with regard to moral, if not political progress. Moral progress reckoned in terms of wilderness protection or the emancipation of the oppressed may constitute regress in the economic

domain. Political progress in the form of expanded democratic participation may scuttle scientific progress where that depends upon complete independence of inquiry. And on it goes.

All this relativity is, however, symptomatic of a single-minded conception of independent local progressive streams oriented toward improvement or supersession without any overarching culminative conception of the direction of human enterprise. Conceived as local practices, progressive streams in science, business, and technology have no global point of culmination, nor can we justifiably believe that all independently achieved improvements will constitute any sort of aggregate improvement. What could be the end of weapons research? Surely, not to develop weapons which could kill everyone. Though science and technology at present are better than in the past, in what is this improvement meant to culminate [9]? The whole truth, perhaps, or complete control? But the claim 'This is the whole truth' lies outside that to which it points; and what controls that whose control is complete? Economic progress is dominated by retrospective comparisons of relative improvement over the past gauged in terms of indicators like aggregate output. Upon what is economic activity meant finally to converge? Infinite universal material wealth, perhaps, in a zero-inflation free market? Who would bother to buy and sell?

Suppose we order our practices hierarchically and identify overarching quasi-teleological end-states which take the form, not of definitive, final end-states, but of definitive, growing, ratcheted-up *constraints* upon our collective pursuits. In a hierarchical notion of progress, the improvements at any one level are subject to the constraints placed upon them by the ends of the next-higher level. If we can talk meaningfully about progress in science, technology, law, commerce, and so forth, we should be able to talk about progress in all these practices converging upon a common end. This is especially so if such areas of progressive change are themselves meant collectively to converge upon something like collective benefit. We make moral progress only to the extent that other progressive domains are increasingly constrained morally.

Taking progress as mere improvement, a relativity arises which allows us to speak equally about progress in the development of weapons of mass destruction and progress in the development of life-saving medication. To avoid this, we either can (a) deny that there can be progress in such things as weapons design, or (b) identify at least two distinct levels of progress. Given the improvement view, option (a) is implausible. Our nastiest weapons really are better than their predecessors. Option (b) looks to hierarchical layering and invokes a distinction between progress *internal* to a practice and the progressiveness of a practice itself or *external* progress for short [10]. This division subordinates improvement to some higher-order culminative view. So, even though some practice has its own internal developments and the prospect of improvement with respect to these, making such internal progress may not contribute to progress from a superordinate teleological perspective. Internal progress which either contributes directly to the blatant destruction of life or which leaves in its wake a number of destructive, however unintended, side-effects is attenuated progress only because there is another test which must be met if some change is *fully* progressive. This involves the progressiveness of whole practices (for example, locally, weapons development, animal husbandry, guitar-making, advertising, etc., and, more broadly, science, technology, government, business, art perhaps) as opposed to progress within a practice.

A practice is *fully progressive* only if it makes *external* progress. So long as certain

practices may be judged both internally and externally for progress, there must be first- and second-order practices, or subordinate and superordinate practices. For a first-order practice to be fully progressive, it must be progressive with respect to some second-order teleological practice.

To the extent that morality is increasingly acknowledged to occupy a solo role as the legitimate superordinate practice, there is moral progress. Again, 'none of it is inevitable,' but it does hark back to the growing stringency condition which places morality at a higher regulative station than other practices. This is not arbitrary. Morality casts its light upon what we do generally. Nothing is officially exempt, whatever hats some prefer to hide under. This becomes more acceptable if morality is conceived as converging upon some common end, or, at least, as subjecting all subordinate practices to some common convergent constraints. Arguably, the premier source of such weakly teleological constraints derives from morality. Why? Because of all the large domains in which we believe progress to be possible, morality offers not only an opportunity to measure improvement by retrospection, but offers as well reasonably clear, global, weakly teleological ends in the form of determinate and absolute constraints.

The ends morality works to discover are human-driven ideals. In their 'ideality', they are much more comprehensible to us, more palpable, determinable and fashionable than any conception we might have of, say, what the whole truth about nature might be like. Though there may be a whole truth about nature, there may not; but even if there were, we cannot begin to imagine what it might be like. And so for ultimate control over nature, the aim of technology, which, of course, rests on the whole truth. If there is any credible comprehensive teleological-improvement hybrid at all, any millenarian pursuit, it is morality. To appreciate why morality should be privileged in this regard, one must have a sense that there cannot be any point in our scientific, commercial, and technological practices unless there is some over-arching point to all our practices as such. If there is an ultimate superordinate focus, it had better have a point and a direction, be taking us collectively somewhere. If millenarian talk is reminiscent of religion, the connotation is deliberate. Perhaps one respect in which we have moved on is to have displaced religion from its former millenarian prominence to a more fittingly subordinate location. Religion can be as nasty as anything else. If there is a message here, it's that we seem to want some practice to occupy a millenarian position, we seem to want some vantage-point on the outside from which to assess where exactly we are, how far along and how much further to go. The clergy hasn't helped much, nor technocrats, nor stock gurus, nor poets, painters, particle physicists or gene splicers. We're left in the end with just ourselves, trying collectively to figure out how to live. Moralists, at least, haven't done a worse job than anyone else, and, if nothing more, disappoint the least. If, as Macintyre has it, the good life is the life spent seeking for the good life [11], moral progress is made to the extent that we let the progressive moralists have their say, and listen.

Taking Stock

I have tried to offer a sketch of moral progress which is variously descriptive, explanatory, justificatory, and exhortative.

Descriptively, I have tried to answer the question: 'How might moral progress be characterized?' My answer is that moral progress is millenarian in that it appeals not only

to globally ameliorative aspects of moral change, but invests this change globally with culminative direction. Such teleological movement is weak, however. Moral progress will, we must suppose, come to a fitting end, but what that end is we do not know. Further, I suggested that moral progress is made to the extent that the moral perspective becomes increasingly superordinate to and supervisory of an increasing number of other human practices. Finally, I attributed irreversibility to moral progress of a sort that ratchets us up, and thereby closes off certain past options by creating ever-new and newly obvious moral points of departure.

To *explain* how this might be possible, I asked: 'Upon what may moral progress be grounded?' I may perhaps have conflated what looks like *evidence* for actual moral progress and supposedly *reasons* to think such evidence to be good evidence. In this regard, I gestured toward long-term cumulative changes in our growing social expectations of personal autonomy and collective sovereignty, as well as our irreversibly big and bigger-scale understanding of our place in the big picture. Both have created a new obviousness which has made possible new moral inquiry at its edge, inquiry which cannot but take in more of time, more of space, more of life. These inquiries have led us to the numerous *diversity-respecting initiatives* — both cultural and biological — a signature of our time. I admit this trend-spotting is speculative; but if there is any warrant for appeal to these trends, that would at least explain how the conception of moral progress as described might get a toe-hold in history. Should it get this toe-hold, it will subsequently generate the conditions for its own continuation, so long as we accept that it is progressing somewhere.

On the *justificatory* front, I have asked how we might rationalize a conception of moral progress. Here I may well have resorted to exhortation where great gaps yawned. Basically, my appeal has been to the seemingly entrenched attractiveness and drive towards some millenarian perspective, to the benefits conferred by such perspectives, which seem to bundle together and render collectively intelligible our many scattered enterprises; and, finally, to the special fittingness morality has to fill these shoes. The question is this: 'What sort of overarching conception of progress would we need to tell us clearly what we spend our time doing is finally for?' and it has a transcendental ring about it. It may be that we're just not inclined to ask the question. That said, we have a strongly ameliorative sense at work and decidedly count progress in terms such as these: we are now less prone to die from childhood disease than we once were; we now can produce more food per hectare than we once could; we now understand more about the history and mechanism of life than we once did; we now enjoy a greater per capita income than we once did; and so on. In each case we can talk sensibly about amelioration in the practice, and yet we cannot talk comfortably about amelioration generally. For such progress has been completely indiscriminate. How so? Because: we are now better able to kill and maim than we were in the past, better able to reduce the number of species than ever before, better able to indoctrinate, better able to contaminate and destroy, and so on. 'Better able' gets us nowhere in particular without our thinking there's somewhere we might want to go or, at least, somewhere we've determined we don't want to go. A sense of moral progress at least promises to fill that gap. If nothing else, pragmatically it earns its keep.

Speaking *exhortatively*, we're in trouble without a notion of moral progress. Nagel claims that we are 'at a primitive stage of moral development.' Either this is true, or, worse, we blunder on in a state of unremitting and presumably unintentional moral

incompetence. That is, either we don't yet know where the track leads; or, we really do have all the right and final answers, but are too dumb and hopeless to implement them. Better to plead ignorance than incompetence. Experience shows the latter to be vastly less remediable than the former [12].

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NOTES

- [1] For present purposes, I ignore the question as to whether stasis can be a form of progress. This arises in the context of considerations of sustainability, which is basically a form of holding things constant, the achievement of which may be regarded as progress in its own right. The achievement of sustainability, however, must itself involve a change of state. I also ignore cases where progress can be considered a (mere) return to a previous state after a period of decline or regress. This too, at any rate, involves a change of state. Whether true conservatism — keeping things constant — can be progressive I reserve judgment on, notwithstanding the moniker *Progressive Conservative* of one of Canada's major political parties — however much in hiding these days.
- [2] Concerning the culmination of a progression, all living things not only progress towards physical maturity, but, since it is fitting that they die, strictly, progress toward death. More broadly, physical systems fittingly progress toward ever-increasing entropy.
- [3] There may be a parallel here with attributions of causation which run into problems in singular unique cases. As Hume argued, that we claim a given X to have caused Y may need to rest upon our already knowing that things of type X regularly cause things of type Y.
- [4] Consider, for example, the ingenious speculations of A. G. Cairns-Smith on clay-based replicators as recounted in RICHARD DAWKINS (1989) *The Selfish Gene* (New York, Oxford University Press).
- [5] On the other side, there have been warnings of ultimate *regress* — a replacement for stasis as the contrast with progress — as changes are all for the worse.
- [6] THOMAS NAGEL (1986) *The View from Nowhere* (New York, Oxford University Press), 186.
- [7] C. S. PEIRCE (1966) What pragmatism is in Philip Wiener (ed.) *Charles S. Peirce: Selected writings* (New York, Dover Editions), 188.
- [8] For the record, the British abolished the slave trade in 1807 but not until 1832 did they abolish slavery as such. Portugal hung on until 1836. The first European country formally to be rid of slavery was Denmark (1803), though the Jacobins outlawed it as early as 1793. Clearly, this was part of the spirit of the times.
- [9] That said, the belief that science has an ultimate and inevitable point of convergence is a theme running through the scientific realism of Charles Sanders Peirce and others. As Peirce puts it:

[A]s each [investigator] perfects his method and his processes, the results will move steadily toward a destined center. So with scientific research. Different minds may set out with the most antagonistic views, but the progress of investigation carries them by a force outside of themselves to one and the same conclusion . . . The opinion which is *fated* to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate is what we mean by *the truth*, and the object represented in this opinion is the real.

CHARLES SANDERS PEIRCE (1966) How to make our ideas clear in Philip Wiener (ed.) *Charles S. Peirce: Selected writings* (New York, Dover Editions), 133 (my italics). See also W. F. SELLARS (1963) *Science, Perception and Reality* (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul), 96–7. Relatedly, an historically sensitive treatment of science as a practice structured to reach, regulate, and sustain community consensus practice is explored by PHILIP KITCHER (1993) *The Advancement of Science* (New York, Oxford University Press). Further treatments of convergence are found in RICHARD BOYD (1973) Realism, underdetermination, and a causal theory of evidence, *Nous*, 7, 1–12; RICHARD BOYD (1983) On the current status of scientific realism, *Erkenntnis*, 19, 45–90; and HILARY PUTNAM (1978) *Meaning and the Moral Sciences* (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul). Similar in spirit if not in mood is the non-ending effort humans exercise in trying to rise to the next level of objectivity, the one yet preparatory for the ever-receding horizon of objectivities before us. See THOMAS NAGEL, *op. cit.* Convergencism does not lack its critics. Besides the relentless assaults from THOMAS KUHN (1970) *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago, University of

Chicago Press); PAUL FEVERABEND (1988) *Against Method* (London, Verso Books); and defenders of 'the strong programme' e.g., BARRY BARNES, DAVID BLOOR and JOHN HENRY (1996) *Scientific Knowledge: A sociological analysis* (London, Athlone Press); see LARRY LAUDAN (1981) A confutation of convergent realism, *Philosophy of Science*, 48, 19–48.

[10] I am using the term 'practice' rather broadly here in the sense not unlike that introduced by ALASDAIR MACINTYRE (1981) *After Virtue* (University of Notre Dame Press). Under practices are included not only those specific organized rule-bound goal-directed enterprises called 'techné' which has loosely been translated as 'craft' (examples of which include the skills of the doctor, cook, lawyer, navigator, engineer, and, for Plato, politician), but also broader, superordinate, social institutional categories such as law, government, morality, science and technology, trade and business, religion, art and the like, within which many of the various crafts may be identified.

[11] Macintyre, op. cit.

[12] An ancestor of this piece first arose as a discussion document for the International Trade Policy Research Centre, Lincoln University. Thanks to Ralph Lattimore for suggesting that I speculate out loud.