THE EVOLUTION OF MORAL PROGRESS

A BIOCULTURAL THEORY

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CHAPTER 1

A Typology of Moral Progress

The Introduction considered a number of reasons why the concept of moral progress has all but disappeared from liberal philosophical theorizing and showed that none of them, whether singly or taken together, offers a sound justification for neglecting this important concept. The task of Part I is analytical: it aims to achieve sufficient clarity about what moral progress is to allow for a fruitful inquiry in subsequent chapters as to whether, and if so how, moral progress can be theorized and how in practice it can be achieved.

It is tempting to approach this analytical task from the "top down"—that is, by identifying and arguing for substantive moral concepts or principles and then defining moral progress as improvement in their realization through the exercise of human moral capacities. Such an elegant foundationalist approach to morality and moral progress is deeply problematic, however, for reasons we will explain shortly. Our approach to the question of moral progress is from the "bottom up"—that is, it begins by identifying paradigmatic instances of moral progress and classifying them into types. This will then prepare the way for the next two chapters in which we evaluate several contemporary views about moral progress by determining how well they can accommodate the diversity of types that we have identified.

The first section lists a number of developments that are prima facie instances of moral progress and then explains why not every

change that is an improvement from a moral point of view is a case of moral progress strictly speaking. In our judgment, only changes that either involve improvements in moral capacities or come about through the exercise of those capacities are instances of moral progress in the most full-bodied sense. The second section uses this list of instances of moral progress to construct a provisional taxonomy of ten types of moral progress, which we then employ in the next chapter to evaluate recent contemporary accounts of moral progress.

Before we proceed further, it is important to stress that the subject matter of this book is moral progress writ large, moral progress on a social scale. In other words, we are concerned chiefly with morally progressive changes in social practices and institutions, and we are interested in moral improvements in individual human beings primarily insofar as they figure in these larger changes. This clarification is important because the term "moral progress" might be used to refer to instances of individual moral improvement considered in themselves, apart from any larger social changes in which they are embedded or to which they contribute.

Sometimes progress is understood to be *movement toward some desirable terminus*, and accordingly moral progress is understood as movement toward some morally desirable condition or state of affairs. It may be that most writers in the past who have pondered moral progress have thought of it, either implicitly or explicitly, in terms of movement with respect to some morally desirable endpoint, regardless of whether this endpoint can be known in advance. For reasons that will become clearer as we proceed, especially in Chapter 3 when we argue for an open-ended, dynamic conception of moral progress, we believe it is a mistake to think of moral progress in this way. Instead, it is better to think of it as moral *improvement*, as moral betterment relative to the status quo, where this does not entail that there is some endpoint against which improvement is to be gauged.

This book treats both morality and moral progress as inherently social phenomena. In particular, it focuses on the evolved social functions of morality and the institutional environments that make large-scale moral progress possible notwithstanding these evolutionary functional constraints. However, much of what we have to say will have interesting implications for individual moral progress. From now on, however, when we use the term "moral progress" the reference will usually be to moral progress as a social, and not merely individual, phenomenon. We will characterize changes in the beliefs and moral responses of individuals but only insofar as these occur in sufficiently large numbers of people to effect social change. In future work we intend to develop more explicitly the connections between individual moral progress and moral progress that involves changes in social institutions and practices.

Instances of Moral Progress

All of the following are prima facie instances of moral progress, many of them paradigmatic:

- the large reduction, beginning with British abolition, of the incidence of the most extreme forms of slavery among human populations
- reductions in the incidence of the most serious forms of racial and ethnic discrimination in many countries
- the extension, in an increasing number of countries, of political participation rights to all adult citizens, along with other institutional changes resulting in more effective recognition of interests that hitherto had been discounted or disregarded altogether
- the increasing recognition and institutionalization of the equal rights of women in most countries
- better treatment of some non-human animals
- the abolition of at least the cruellest punishments

- the spread of the rule of law
- the dramatic reduction of homicide rates since the Middle Ages in many countries
- the emergence of international norms prohibiting aggressive war, apartheid, and colonialism, norms which have been shown to affect the behavior of states
- increased freedom from religious persecution and greater freedom of expression

In each of these cases, a change has occurred that appears to be a transition to a state of affairs that is *an improvement from a moral point of view*, in this sense: the new state of affairs conforms better to valid moral norms or better realizes sound moral values. The claim that the item is an improvement from a moral point of view includes two elements: first, an assertion that the change in question has occurred (the descriptive element) and, second, an assertion that the change is progressive, a transition to a morally better state of affairs, other things being equal (the normative element). There is ample evidence that the changes listed above have occurred—not universally but quite widely—so the descriptive element is unproblematic. The normative element, in contrast, stands in need of elaboration. In particular, it is important to distinguish between changes that are improvements from a moral point of view and changes that are instances of moral progress strictly speaking.

Consider two changes that, according to a broad range of plausible moralities, are improvements from a moral point of view: the remarkable reduction in homicide rates in Europe from 1450 C.E. to the present and the great decline in the burden of deadly infectious diseases in many parts of the world over the last century. Both of these changes are improvements from a moral point of view in the sense that the new state of affairs, in both cases, would be regarded as an improvement from the perspective of widely held moral norms and values that there is good reason to believe are valid. For a third, much earlier example, consider the Roman Emperor Caracalla's edict of 212 C.E. extending Roman citizenship rights, with all the benefits this entailed, to all free

adult males living within territories controlled by Rome.[1] At least from the standpoint of any morality that affirms the basic equal status of all persons or that values increases in the welfare of large numbers of people, the emperor's edict was a clear improvement over the status quo (although it stopped short of extending citizenship to slaves, women, and foreigners).

Yet how such changes came about is arguably relevant to whether they are instances of moral progress properly described. Suppose that the great decline in the incidence of deadly infectious diseases had not come about, even in part, by deliberate efforts undertaken in the recognition that it is morally good or mandatory to reduce preventable human suffering and death. Suppose further, that this decline did not involve the exercise of any human motivational capacities, moral or otherwise. Suppose instead that the reduction occurred as a result of events utterly beyond human control—such as a naturally occurring environmental change that wiped out many infectious agents. Under these conditions, the reduction in the incidence of deadly infectious diseases would have undoubtedly been an improvement from a moral point of view, but it would be strange to call it an instance of moral progress.

Similarly, consider the approximately fiftyfold reduction in homicide rates in Europe over the last five and a half centuries. Suppose, as Norbert Elias, Stephen Pinker, and others have suggested, that the chief causes of this change were the rise of the modern state with its more or less successful attempt to achieve a monopoly on violence, along with the growth of market relations that gave people incentives to act peacefully and cooperatively toward strangers.[2] This was surely a change that is an improvement

[1] Richard Lim, "Late Antiquity," in Edward Bispham, Thomas Harrison, and Brian Sparkes (eds.), *The Edinburgh Companion to Ancient Greece and Rome: Late Antiquity* (Edinburgh University Press, 2010, p. 114).

[2] Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (Viking, 2011). Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations*, 2nd edition, revised, illustrated (Wiley, 2000).

from a moral point of view. But is it an instance of moral progress? That depends on whether to qualify as moral progress a change must come about through the exercise of human moral powers—their capacities for having moral concepts, making and appreciating moral arguments, being committed to moral consistency, and having moral motivations. If the rise of the state and the growth of market relations are sufficient to explain the reduction of homicide rates, at least in the initial periods of their decline, then it appears that this change, which is undoubtedly an improvement from a moral point of view, was not an instance of moral progress—assuming, of course, that morally progressive change must involve the exercise of human moral powers. For the great change that Elias and Pinker document appears to have occurred without improvements in or through the exercise of human moral capacities—that is, improvements in moral concepts, motivations, or virtues; in moral reasoning; in moral emotions; or in the ability to discern valid moral norms. Instead, it resulted from the introduction of institutionalized incentives that aligned self-interested action with valid moral norms—institutional changes that do not appear to have been morally motivated. This characterization would be true if, for example, the king's peace was imposed by the monarch strictly in pursuit of his self-interest or if it emerged non-intentionally out of aggregate self-interested interactions, rather than from the desire to create a more peaceful, stable, and just society. Similarly, refraining from murdering one's fellows solely out of fear of punishment or anticipation of economic reward does not implicate moral capacities properly understood.

If the causal story told by Elias and Pinker is correct, then, it would be at the very least misleading, if not outright mistaken, to say that the initial reduction in homicide rates was the result of better *compliance* with a moral norm prohibiting killing, if the notion of compliance implies that people refrained from killing *because* they came to believe killing was morally wrong in a wider range of circumstances than they previously assumed.

If the reduction in homicide rates was progressive from a moral point of view, but not a case of moral progress, then it should be removed from the list of cases of moral progress. Similarly, if, as some historians surmise, Caracalla's extension of Roman citizenship was a purely strategic ploy to quell unrest, especially in the form of ethnonational independence movements, to increase taxes, or to make more men eligible to serve in the Roman army, it would be misleading to call it an instance of moral progress, without further qualification, as opposed to progress from a moral point of view. As we will see in Part II, however, even if improvements from a moral point of view are not proper instances of moral progress, they may be crucial for seeding the conditions in which genuine moral progress can occur.

At this point it is worth distinguishing three distinct understandings of moral progress. The first, most demanding sense is the one just suggested: moral progress in the most full-bodied sense is not simply change that is desirable from a moral point of view but also must involve the exercise of or improvements in the moral powers. The second and weaker understanding allows changes that are improvements from a moral point of view to count as moral progress even if they came about through self-interested, prudential, or other nonmoral motivations (i.e., without the exercise of the moral powers or improvements of them). On the second understanding, Emperor Caracalla's extension of rights to a larger class of individuals would count as moral progress, but the reduction of disease due to a naturally mediated decline in parasites would not. The third and weakest understanding of moral progress would equate it with changes that are desirable from a moral point of view, without requiring that any human motivational capacities be involved. On the third understanding, the reduction of disease due to factors completely independent of human motivation and action would count as moral progress.

We think that the third, weakest understanding of moral progress ought to be rejected because we believe it is important to

distinguish between changes that are merely desirable from a moral point of view and changes that are morally progressive in some stronger sense (or senses). Choosing between the first and second understandings is more difficult. It will turn out, however, that opting for the first, strongest understanding, as opposed to the second, weaker one, matters very little for most of what we have to say in this volume. So, to avoid the arbitrary stipulation that one or the other of them is uniquely correct, let us say that both the first and second understandings of moral progress are quite appropriate and that for clarity we will call the former "moral progress" and the latter "moral progress in the robust sense."

Are any or all of the changes in the list above plausible candidates for moral progress or for moral progress in the robust sense? It is plausible to say that they are all improvements from a moral point of view—but did they come about, at least in significant part, through the exercise of or improvement in human moral capacities? The qualifier "in significant part" is important, for presumably each of the changes listed was the result of multiple causes, not all of which implicated human moral capacities. For example, some have argued that economic factors, and hence self-interest, played a role in motivating British and American abolition movements. It seems reasonable to conclude, however, that in each case identified above, at some point in the process of change, moral capacities played a significant (if not sufficient) role. For example, abolitionists, advocates for ending cruel punishments, and those who agitated for better treatment of non-human animals all typically made moral appeals in the face of great self-interested opposition; and there is reason to believe that their success was due in part to engaging moral capacities (i.e., moral reasoning, moral emotions, and what Jonathan Glover calls "moral identities"—individuals' conceptions of the sorts of persons they ought morally to be).[3] In other words, it

[3] Jonathan Glover, *Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century* (Yale University Press, 2001).

would be dubious to say that they all involved *only* nonmoral motivations.

Without claiming to have conclusively settled the question, let us assume, for now, that the rest of the changes listed above are all instances of moral progress either in the first or second sense (not merely changes that are progressive from a moral point of view). To say that the changes listed above are plausible instances of moral progress, other things being equal, is to make *local* moral progress judgments, not global judgments about the moral condition of the world as a whole. The judgments are local because, taken individually or together, they do not imply that the world today at time T is morally better than the world as it was before these developments occurred at T minus 1, given the possibility of moral regressions elsewhere in the world or even in the societies in which the putatively progressive changes occurred. Further, some forms of moral change may be incommensurable with one another. An improvement in one area may come at the price of regression in another, and there may be no way of determining whether the former outweighed the latter or vice versa. In such cases, it may be impossible to make a well-grounded all-things-considered judgment concerning moral progress. The Introduction began to explore some of the difficulties with making well-grounded global moral progress assessments. We return to this topic again in the Conclusion, where we elaborate on the complications that the distinction between local and global moral progress judgments entails for the epistemology of moral progress.

Types of Moral Progress

Our list of candidate instances of moral progress suggests that there are several distinct *types* of moral progress, listed below. If a theory of moral progress cannot accommodate some types of moral progress on the list, that is a strike against it; by the

same token, it counts in favor of a theory if it can accommodate all types.

(1) *Better compliance with valid moral norms*, where this means either increases in the number of people who comply to some extent (or in some circumstances) or a higher degree of compliance among those who are already complying, or both. As we have seen, "compliance" is not to be understood in a purely behavioral sense—that is to say, conformity to the norms in question cannot result solely from external forces that incentivize behavior. It must, rather, involve some exercise of or improvement in the moral capacities if it is to count as moral progress in the robust sense. Consider again, the case of great reductions in homicide rates. This seems to be a case of moral progress, not merely progress from a moral point of view, because many people apparently have now internalized a moral norm against killing innocent human beings—they do not refrain from doing so simply out of fear of punishment. Further, they seem to have internalized a more encompassing norm, one that extends the prohibition more broadly than was initially the case to cover strangers or members of other groups.

(2) *Better moral concepts*, as when concepts of moral or legal responsibility that assign responsibility on the basis of mere causality are replaced by those that emphasize voluntariness and the epistemic state (mens rea) of the wrongdoer. This type also encompasses people coming to have entirely *new moral concepts*, rather than simply refinements of existing ones: an example is the concept of sexual harassment, which allows victims to articulate the nature of the wrong done to them and thus enhances the capacity to mobilize forces for combatting the wrong.[4] Another example of a

[4] This is Miranda Fricker's example of what she calls "hermeneutical injustice." Amanda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice* (Oxford University Press, 2007).

momentous new concept, whose complex development will be addressed in Chapter 8, is that of "natural rights"—moral entitlements whose existence does not depend upon legal or other institutionalized recognition.

(3) *Better understandings of the virtues*, as when an understanding of honor that is largely limited to chastity and submissiveness in the case of women and the readiness to respond with violence to perceived insults in the case of men, gives way to a more complex notion that emphasizes autonomy, integrity, and dignity, where dignity is understood to include a reluctance to resort to violence.[5]

(4) *Better moral motivation*, where this includes both (a) more discerning expressions of various moral emotions, as when sympathy is felt not just toward members of one's own family or group but toward suffering beings generally, and (b) a greater contribution of moral motivation to the determination of behavior.

(5) *Better moral reasoning*, including making relevant distinctions and achieving greater consistency among moral judgments.[6] Included here are cases of "expanding the circle" of moral regard that amount to eliminating inconsistencies in reasoning or removing arbitrary restrictions on the scope of moral concepts and norms. Examples include extending the prohibition on the gratuitous infliction of suffering to encompass non-human animals and extending the ascription of basic rights to women and people of color. Another

[5] Kwame Anthony Appiah provides a valuable discussion of how concerns about honor have contributed to several "moral revolutions" that are important instances of moral progress. Although he does not offer a general characterization of moral progress or explore the question of the standards by which moral progress is to be gauged, he nonetheless supplies an important element of a more comprehensive theory. Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Honor Code: How Moral Revolutions Occur* (W.W. Norton & Company, 2010).

[6] Richmond Campbell and Victor Kumar (2012), "Moral Reasoning on the Ground," *Ethics* 122(2): 273–312.

example is the recent development of more rigorous and nuanced reasoning about the justification of war in contemporary just war theory, including the distinction between preemptive and preventive war and the development of arguments to show that the justification of the latter is much more problematic. Yet another is better reasoning in the discourse of medical ethics, especially in relation to the morality of physician-patient relations. A striking example of the latter improvement is the transition from a crude medical paternalism to a more nuanced view of the professional obligations of physicians that recognizes the importance not only of avoiding harm and bestowing benefits on patients but also of respecting their autonomy. In each of these cases, better reasoning produces more consistent application of moral concepts and norms; in some cases, it might also lead to improvements in the moral concepts and norms themselves, as well as in moral motivations, by encouraging the appropriate expression of moral emotions.

(6) *Proper demoralization*, including cases in which people rightly come to regard behaviors they previously thought were morally wrong as morally permissible.[7] Examples include profit-seeking, lending money at interest, masturbation, premarital sex, same-sex sexual relations, interracial marriage, and (some instances of) civil disobedience. This kind of moral progress was emphasized by Enlightenment thinkers who sought to liberate human beings from irrational and in some cases highly destructive norms.

(7) *Proper moralization*, including cases in which people rightly come to regard as morally impermissible behaviors they previously thought were permissible. Examples include footbinding, dueling, female genital cutting, unwanted sexual advances in the workplace, nonconsensual sex with one's spouse, extremely cruel punishments, torture, deliberate infliction of pain on non-human animals (e.g., cat burning as public entertainment in sixteenth-century Paris), and animal blood "sports" (such as bear-baiting, cockfighting, and head-butting to death immobilized cats in parts of thirteenth-century Europe).

(8) *Better understandings of moral standing and moral statuses.*[8] Examples include the increasing recognition of the basic equal moral status of Africans during the abolitionist movement and of the interests of non-human animals (including acknowledgment of the higher moral statuses of great apes, cetaceans, etc., relative to other animals). This type might be characterized as an instance of improved moral concepts, but the notions of moral standing and statuses are so basic and so wide-ranging in their implications for the deployment of other moral concepts and moral motivations that we think they deserve a place of their own in the typology.

(9) *Improvements in understandings of the nature of morality.* An example is the transition from a "strategic" conception of morality to a "subject-centered" one. A strategic conception of morality is one according to which morality is in effect a rational bargain among those who can either harm or benefit one another: morality simply as a matter of self-interested reciprocal restraints. This conception of morality as a strategic bargain implies that moral

[7] For an analysis of the phenomenon of de-moralization and the difficulty of distinguishing proper from improper de-moralization in some cases, see Allen Buchanan and Russell Powell, "De-Moralization as Emancipation: Liberty, Progress, and the Evolution of Invalid Moral Norms" (2017), *Social Philosophy & Policy*, 34(2): 108–135.

[8] A being has moral standing if it is a proper object of moral regard in its own right. Various beings that all have moral standing may have different moral statuses, some "higher" and some "lower," where this means that the interests of the former are morally weightier or that those of higher status have rights that those of lower status do not have. See Allen Buchanan (2009), "Moral Status and Human Enhancement," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 37(4): 346–381.

standing depends on an individual's strategic capacities and relativizes moral standing to particular actual or potential mutually beneficial cooperative schemes. This strategic conception of morality finds expression at various points in the history of western philosophy: in the surviving writings of Epicurus, in the voice of Glaucon in a Platonic dialogue, in Hobbes's Leviathan, in a famous assertion by Hume, and most recently in the work of the contemporary analytic philosopher David Gauthier.[9] The strategic conception of morality has been rejected by many people in favor of a subject-centered conception according to which moral status does not depend on the capacity to harm or benefit others or on potential participation in any cooperative scheme.[10]

One might think that theoretical conceptions of morality are so cerebral that changes in these conceptions have no practical effect on human well-being—but this is not so. Indeed, the popularity of the idea of human rights and its instantiation in domestic and international law can be seen as evidence of the widespread rejection of strategic conceptions of morality and its attendant notion of the basis of moral status. Human rights are conceived of as rights an individual has simply by virtue of her humanity, independently of whether she has the capacity to harm or benefit others and independently of her potential contribution to any cooperative scheme. Similarly, Kantian conceptions that ground moral status in the capacity for practical rationality and utilitarian conceptions that ground it in sentience both implicitly reject the idea that morality is a rational bargain among those who can harm or benefit each other—and both have had a significant impact on public policy, law, and behavior.

[9] David Gauthier, *Morals by Agreement* (Oxford University Press, 1986).
[10] See Allen Buchanan (1990), "Justice as Reciprocity versus Subject-Centered Justice," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 19(3): 227–252.

It is crucial to understand that justice as reciprocity is a thesis about who has standing to be an object of justice, that is, to whom obligations of justice are owed; it is compatible with the recognition that reciprocity is also often an important consideration in determining what obligations of justice there are. Similarly, the rival "subject-centered" conception of justice is also compatible with the recognition that considerations of reciprocity loom large in the moral life—but it rejects the notion that strategic relations determine who is a proper object of justice in the most basic sense, the sort of being to whom justice can be owed.

The recognition that morality involves giving reasons is another striking instance of an improvement in understanding what morality is. A person who recognizes that morality involves offering and responding to reasons understands that it is insufficient to say that X is wrong simply because God commands that X is wrong or because we have always refrained from doing X.[11] To say that morality involves reason-giving does not imply, of course, that actual moral responses are always rationally grounded, nor does it deny the crucial role of emotions in moral judgment and behavior. The point is that many people now acknowledge that moral norms require justifications and that adequate justifications must be accessible to people from a diverse range of cultural backgrounds. Such human beings reject the notion that moral norms are simply the commands of some powerful being, whether divine or human.

(10) *Better understandings of justice*. Included here are expansions in the domain of justice, the class of beings who are

[11] Alternatively, the recognition that judgments regarding right and wrong typically require reasons (and are subject to universalizability, and so on) might be understood as the first emergence of the concept of morality itself, rather than as a shift to a new conception of morality. In other words, one might hold that those who do not understand that making moral judgments entails engaging with a practice of reason-giving are not operating with a concept of morality at all. Either way, this change is arguably a type of moral progress.

considered proper subjects of justice and the territory of justice, the set of actions and states of affairs that can be just or unjust. An example of the former is the growing recognition that the concept of justice applies intergenerationally—that is to say current people can have obligations of justice regarding the sort of world they leave for those who come after. An example of the latter is the realization that some features of social life are human creations and hence potentially subject to modification by human efforts, rather than fixed features of the natural world. This change can sometimes lead to the recognition and eradication or amelioration of the unjust structural disadvantaging of individuals or groups. Structural injustice occurs when important institutions operate in such a way as to unfairly disregard or discount the interests of some groups. It can occur even if the disadvantaged are not explicitly relegated to an inferior moral status, and remedying it may require more fundamental changes than the legal recognition of equal status. Although improvements in our understanding of the domain and the territory of justice may involve improvements in various moral concepts and may lead to increased compliance with valid moral norms, they are sufficiently momentous as to merit being distinguished as a separate type of moral improvement (see further discussion in Chapter 9).

It should be obvious that for many, if not all, of these types of moral progress, the change has not been universal. Nonetheless, the scope of the changes in all cases is sufficiently large to view them as morally progressive developments—as changes that came about through the exercise of moral capacities or as involving improvements in moral capacities. It would be overly demanding to insist, for example, that the trend toward better compliance with norms against murder, as evidenced by dramatic historical declines in homicides, is not moral progress because murders still occur.

The few accounts of moral progress in the contemporary philosophical literature on the topic have typically focused on only

one type of moral progress.[12] For instance, Michele Moody-Adams holds that moral progress is mainly or exclusively a matter of type (2): developing better moral concepts.[13] Although we agree that improvement in moral concepts is one important kind of moral progress, there are others as well, as our list indicates. To say that all the other types listed are simply improvements in moral concepts would be to stretch the notion of moral concepts unacceptably.

Moody-Adams's paradigm case of moral progress is one where people subject the arbitrary restriction of the scope of a concept, such as equality, to critical scrutiny and thereby come to understand that the concept is actually of broader application (for example, that the concept of equality applies to relations between men and women, not just among men). Some improvements in our moral concepts fit this model, but many do not, including improved understandings of virtues and of moral responsibility. These changes in understanding are not simply a matter of extending the domain in which the concept applies. Finally, Moody-Adams does not distinguish between improvements in moral concepts and improvements in the concept of morality. Arguably, as noted above, the shift from a divine commandment

[12] In her illuminating reflections on abolitionism, for example, Elizabeth Anderson appears to define moral progress as moral learning, where this means the acquisition of true (or at least justified) moral beliefs. Elizabeth Anderson (2015), "Moral Bias and Corrective Practices: A Pragmatist Perspective," Presidential address delivered at the one hundred twelfth Central Division meeting of the American Philosophical Association in St. Louis Missouri, on February 20, 2015, *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 89: 21–47.

[13] See Michele Moody-Adams (1999), "The Idea of Moral Progress," *Metaphilosophy* 30(3): 168–185. Moody-Adams also advances the bold thesis that moral progress never involves developing new moral concepts but instead consists of gaining a deeper understanding of ones we already possess. To begin to support the bold claim, one would have to do something that she does not attempt: supply an account of the criteria of identity of moral concepts at some adequate level of specificity, in order to distinguish between achieving a deeper understanding of an existing concept and the emergence of a new concept.

conception of morality to one in which valid moral norms are understood as subject to a practice of reason-giving and conceived in relation to human well-being (rather than the will of God) is an improvement in how morality itself is conceived.

Inclusivist Morality as an Important Type of Moral Progress

We have argued there are many types of putative moral progress, ranging from better compliance with valid moral norms to improvements in moral concepts (including understandings of the virtues), moral motivations, moral reasoning, and even conceptions of morality itself. This book focuses mainly on one important type of moral progress: namely what Peter Singer, borrowing from William Lecky, calls the "expanding circle" of moral concern,[14] or what we have referred to as the emergence of "inclusivist moralities." These are moralities that extend moral standing to all human beings and even to some non-human animals regardless of their group membership or strategic capacities (i.e., their ability to contribute to or disrupt cooperation).

Moral progress in the form of increasingly inclusive moralities consists in two distinct expansions of the moral community beyond tribal boundaries and mutually self-serving cooperative relationships between groups: an expansion in our understanding of the class of beings who have moral standing and an expansion in the class of beings who are thought to have the highest moral status. Fully inclusivist moralities reject restrictions on membership in the class of beings who have the highest moral status that are based on gender, race, and ethnicity and deny that only members of the human species have moral standing. Expansions

[14] Peter Singer, *The Expanding Circle: Ethics, Evolution, and Moral Progress* (Princeton University Press, 2011); William Edward Harpole Lecky, *History of European Morals from Augustus to Charlemagne*, v. 1, 3rd edition (D. Appleton, 1921).

of the moral circle may implicate other types of moral progress, including improved moral concepts, improved moral reasoning (such as the extension of valid moral norms to cover individuals who had been arbitrarily excluded from their application), and improved compliance with valid moral norms (such as behavior that is in compliance with norms regarding the equal basic moral worth of persons).

There are two reasons for this book's focus on the movement toward increasingly inclusive moralities. First, inclusivist moral progress is a strong candidate for an important type of moral progress—possibly the most important type. Second, the prospect of progress in the form of greater inclusiveness appears to be in tension with prevailing evolutionary understandings of human moral psychology (as discussed in Chapter 5). Since our goal is to provide a naturalistic theory of moral progress, it is incumbent on us to take the idea that human evolution may limit inclusivist progress seriously. Part II aims to relax the tension between what is known about the evolutionary origins of morality and the reality and possibility of moral progress.

As the above typology shows, inclusivist shifts are only one type of moral progress. Yet some moral theorists, such as Peter Singer, can be read as holding that moral progress *consists in* such expansions of the moral circle.[15] This equation is mistaken, however, for several reasons. First, in certain circumstances moral progress can take the form of exclusion, or contractions of the moral circle. This is true, for example, in relation to the moral reclassification of objects or entities that have no morally considerable interests of their own, such as sacred artifacts, non-sentient organisms, or abiotic features of the environment like rivers or mountains—at least when according such entities moral standing

[15] A more charitable interpretation is that Singer remains agnostic as to whether there are other forms of moral progress. At any rate, he focuses only on the "expanding circle," or what we call inclusivist morality, and he does not discuss other forms of moral progress.

imposes unacceptable costs on beings that warrant moral regard. Fetishism, understood as the mistaken attribution of human or superhuman powers to nonconscious material objects, is an instance of "expanding the circle," but it is not moral progress; in some cases, it is a costly moral error.

It may be true that the moral risk of faulty exclusions, which result in "truncated" moralities, will often be greater than the moral risk of faulty inclusions, which result in "promiscuous" moralities—since false negatives in relation to moral standing (treating individuals as if they do not have moral standing when in fact they do) will often be more harmful than false positives (treating entities as if they have moral standing when in fact they do not). Our point, however, is that both inclusions and exclusions can amount to moral progress or moral regression, depending on the circumstances. Thus, expansion of the moral circle per se is not constitutive of moral progress.

Furthermore, greater inclusiveness is not always good, even when it does not involve fetishism. Increases in the strength of inclusivist moral commitments could under some circumstances dilute commitments to fellow group members to the point that the latter commitments were unacceptably weak from a moral point of view. Indeed, the contemporary debate in political philosophy between liberal cosmopolitans and liberal nationalists is not about whether all people are of equal moral worth but about what proper inclusiveness is—in particular, about what equal moral worth entails and what it does not.

In what follows we focus on examples of inclusiveness that are morally uncontroversial within a broadly liberal perspective and which therefore will be regarded as progressive by cosmopolitans and liberal nationalists alike. Throughout this volume, "inclusivist morality" will be used first and foremost to refer to attitudes and behaviors that extend moral regard or equal basic moral status beyond the narrowest confines of the group, without prejudice to the question that divides cosmopolitans and liberal nationalists.

Even if we were to read Singer as holding that moral progress consists in the development of *valid* inclusivist moralities, this view is still mistaken—for as noted above there are several other types of changes in human morality, quite apart from expansions of the moral circle, that constitute prima facie cases of moral progress. Consider, for example, "proper de-moralization," the topic of Chapter 8—which occurs when behavior that has wrongly been regarded as immoral comes to be seen as inherently morally neutral. There are many examples of proper de-moralization, including premarital sex, masturbation, interracial marriage, homosexuality, profit-seeking, and lending money at interest.[16] Conversely, "proper moralization" occurs when some types of acts, such as torture and other forms of physical cruelty, are no longer viewed as generally permissible forms of punishment or coercion—or when behaviors once regarded as morally neutral, such as sexual harassment in the workplace, come to be regarded as morally impermissible. Such instances of moral progress need not implicate expansions of the moral circle. Neither do some improvements in how moral virtues are understood, as when a conception of honor that focuses almost exclusively on taking violent action against supposed slights gives way to one that stresses integrity and honesty and a reluctance to resort to violence. Likewise, there are many important moral concepts apart from our notions of moral standing and moral statuses—including progressive understandings of justice—and improvements in these concepts are also putative examples of moral progress. Chapter 9 explores in depth some remarkable improvements in understandings of justice, most of which cannot be characterized as expanding the circle.

[16] For an in-depth discussion of de-moralization as a type of moral progress, see Allen Buchanan and Russell Powell (2017), "De-Moralization as Emancipation: Liberty, Progress and the Evolution of Invalid Moral Norms," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 34(2): 108–135.

Given the heterogeneity in the above typology of moral progress, one may legitimately wonder whether there is any substantive concept of moral progress that can encompass them all. Yet some contemporary theorists have offered rather simple, reductionistic characterizations of moral progress without noticing that such accounts are not capable of covering some important types of moral progress. The next chapter examines several contemporary accounts of moral progress that differ significantly from each other but all of which are committed to a reductionist thesis of one sort or another. Appreciating the strengths and the weaknesses of these accounts will pave the way for a better approach developed in Chapter 3.