THE EVOLUTION OF MORAL PROGRESS

A BIOCULTURAL THEORY

ALLEN BUCHANAN
&
RUSSELL POWELL

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PREFACE

Whether there has been moral progress and whether it can be achieved now or in the future are surely among the most important questions human beings can ask. Yet in spite of a recent bourgeoning of systematic philosophical inquiry in moral and political philosophy across a remarkably wide range of topics, these remain neglected questions. It was not always so. Until the twentieth century, liberal political thought—which today remains the most developed system of thinking about the morality of political institutions—was centrally preoccupied with the topic of moral progress. This volume is an attempt to begin the task of making moral progress a respectable topic once again, one worthy of the attention of philosophers and of thoughtful people generally.

This is an unusual book, and not just because it navigates the largely unfamiliar conceptual terrain of moral progress. It is also unusually interdisciplinary, drawing on diverse literatures in moral and political philosophy, evolutionary biology, evolutionary psychology, anthropology, sociology, and history. One of the authors, Allen Buchanan, was trained as an analytic philosopher—that is, as someone who was taught that tackling philosophical problems requires only the ability to construct hypothetical (and often outlandish) examples to prompt moral intuitions, to make fine distinctions, and to reason logically from premises designed to generalize from particular, firmly held, and stable intuitions. Put less charitably, Buchanan, like everyone else in his generation of analytic philosophers, was led to believe that to solve philosophical problems one need not know anything about the world and that indeed such knowledge is a dangerous distraction from the proper task of the philosopher. The other author, Russell Powell, is trained in law, biology, bioethics, and

the philosophy of science and is of a younger generation of philosophers who tend to appreciate the need for interdisciplinary work—and for attention to facts and scientific theory—more so than most philosophers of Buchanan's generation.

Both authors are thoroughly committed to interdisciplinary work and recognize that for those philosophical problems that require an interdisciplinary approach, co-authorship is almost always a necessity. One person, even if she is committed to learning from disciplines other than the one in which she was primarily trained, often cannot know enough to engage with these topics effectively. This is especially true for the philosophical problems tackled in this book, which require integrating work in moral and political philosophy with the conceptual and methodological resources of biological, cultural, and social sciences.

The authors of this book are unabashedly committed to "naturalism" in philosophy: they believe that fruitful engagement with at least some of the most significant philosophical problems requires recourse to scientific knowledge, including the best available theory and data. That is not to say, of course, that science can replace philosophy in these matters. Instead, the idea is that while traditional analytic philosophical skills of analysis and reasoning are necessary for addressing challenging philosophical problems, sometimes they are not sufficient. Whether naturalism is the correct way to do philosophy—or at least *a* correct way—can only be determined by ascertaining the quality of the best examples of that approach. We believe that this book is one of the most thoroughly developed, systematic attempts at naturalistic moral and political philosophy currently available. At the same time, it shows how contemporary work in ethics and political philosophy can inform our best scientific theories of morality, in part by drawing attention to theoretically important aspects of human moral thought and behavior that moral scientists and philosophers of science have tended to overlook. It also corrects for other flaws that commonly arise in the course of attempts to do naturalistic philosophy such as the tendency to go too lightly

on the analytic component of the enterprise, to overinterpret purported scientific findings (and in particular to overestimate their implications for traditional philosophical problems), and to cherry-pick scientific studies, attending only to those that support philosophical views one already holds.

We think this book may also do something to remedy what we take to be a serious deficiency of contemporary philosophy and more broadly of the culture of educated people today: namely, a failure to assimilate fully the Darwinian revolution in biology and to appreciate its profound implications for how humanity should think about itself. In our experience, educated people, including professional philosophers, may use the language of Darwinian theory and pay face time to its significance but nonetheless still cling, implicitly or explicitly, to pre-Darwinian, teleological views of nature (and human nature). That is one mistake to be assiduously avoided. The flip side is a tendency among some philosophers and scientists to fetishize Darwinian evolutionary theory and to assume that the possibilities for human morality are tightly constrained by the psychology that natural selection, working on the genetic components of thought and behavior, solidified in human beings many millennia ago. This mistaken evolutionary "determinist" view fosters an equally erroneous normative view that we characterize as "evoconservatism": an unduly pessimistic understanding of the possibilities for moral improvement based on a failure to appreciate how culture has not only liberated us from but, more importantly, transformed our evolved moral nature.

Every chapter of this book demonstrates both that an understanding of evolutionary processes is necessary for thinking fruitfully about moral progress (and regression) and that it is not sufficient because culture can stretch the evolutionary leash and produce results that could not be anticipated if one made the mistake of thinking that morality as it first originated is essentially the same as the morality we have, and struggle with, today. This book is not, therefore, an attempt to replace moral philosophy

with evolutionary science; rather, it draws on evolutionary science and the philosophy thereof to help make moral philosophy more fruitful and more practically relevant to the moral problems that confront humanity in the twenty-first century.

The theory of moral progress developed in these pages has a dual aspect: it provides guidance not only for how to achieve some especially important types of moral progress but also for how to avoid moral regression. So even if one thinks that human moral progress has approached its limit, one should still find this book of use since it illuminates the question of how to preserve the moral advances that humans have achieved thus far. In our less optimistic moments, we are inclined to think that the first order of business is to prevent regression. This feels especially true now, given the recent wave of nativism, hypernationalism, authoritarianism, and xenophobia that has swept the globe and is straining progressive political institutions—from human rights and climate change agreements to the basic principles of constitutional democracy and rule of law itself—to the breaking point.

In Chapter 7 of this volume, we develop an account of moral regression in which the exaggeration of "out-group threat cues" can trigger the development of tribal moral responses and hence the dismantling of inclusivist institutions. This response was likely adaptive in the prehistoric environments in which some of the basic features of human moral psychology were formed; but in the modern world, it is subject to deliberate demagogic manipulation. Out-group threat cues include anything that reliably provokes primal fears of physical violence by members of other groups, the danger of parasitic diseases spread by out-group members, the expropriation of the fruits of cooperation by "social parasites" in our midst (free-riders on intragroup cooperation) especially in the context of perceived resource scarcity, "alien" ideas or values or challenges to in-group identity that could undermine norms of cooperation in one's own group, and the prospect that "we" are in a no-holds-barred competition for vital resources with "them."

While we were in the midst of writing this chapter on moral regression, a U.S. presidential candidate was employing all of the techniques for fostering moral regression that we discuss. As president of the United States, Trump has continued his assault on inclusivist norms and institutions and the social-epistemic foundations on which those institutions rest, expertly employing the very tactics that we discuss in this book. Trump's demagoguery is particularly effective because of the large number of out-group threat cues that it deploys and disseminates through social media and because of its systematic manipulation of the social moral information space resulting in massive shifts of popular perception. It is probably not hyperbolic to say that if all of Trump's publicly avowed commitments were realized, they would dismantle some of the more important inclusivist achievements in the United States of the last century and, indeed, since the founding of the Republic. Similar tactics can be seen in other countries, with proto-fascist and extreme nationalist sentiments on the rise globally, as we have seen in Turkey and eastern Europe.

Whether our most progressive cultural moral innovations can resist this pressure remains to be seen. A central aim of this book is to better understand the biocultural conditions that give rise to, and exacerbate, these troubling moral trends. One can always hope, nonetheless, that conditions will eventually become more favorable to progressive moralities, either spontaneously or by design, and that, when they do, our goal once again should be to strive for moral improvement.

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"The Limits of Evolutionary Explanations of Morality and Their Implications for Moral Progress," 2015, both in the journal *Ethics*; "De-Moralization as Emancipation," 2017, in *Social Philosophy and Policy*; and "The Evolution of Moral Enhancement" in *The Ethics of Human Enhancement: Understanding the Debate*, 2016, Oxford University Press.

THE EVOLUTION OF MORAL PROGRESS

INTRODUCTION

Why a Theory of Moral Progress Is Needed

Martin Luther King, Jr., paraphrasing the words of nineteenth-century abolitionist Theodore Parker, famously proclaimed that "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." Yet if you ask people, even very knowledgeable people, whether they think there is such a thing as moral progress, you often get either a blank look or a skeptical response: technological progress, obviously; scientific progress, of course; but *moral* progress? Some even respond with indignation, saying that, on the contrary, there has been moral regression—that from a moral point of view things have gotten worse, not better. Indeed, many people think that the last century is perhaps the most violent ever (given two world wars and the Holocaust), that people are more selfish and less virtuous now than they used to be, that public political debate is less civil, that government is more corrupt, that countries are less stable, that warfare has become more barbaric, that terrorism has increased, that inequality has grown, and so on.

This sort of "Golden Age thinking" has deep roots in the academy. Indeed, there is a feisty, iconoclastic philosophical tradition, running from Rousseau to Alastair MacIntyre, proclaiming that modern societies are morally degenerate, not progressive—that, morally speaking, things have deteriorated rather than gotten better. Similarly, many cultural anthropologists have insisted that aggressive warfare and genocide are not prehistoric components

of human nature but rather the result of pernicious cultural norms that arose more recently in human history and that have lured us away from our more cooperative, peaceful past.[1]

Yet with a little reflection, the denial of moral progress seems absurd and skepticism about moral progress deeply misplaced, puzzling, and, above all, ungrateful. For shining examples of moral progress are not hard to come by: consider, for example, the change from a world in which slavery was ubiquitous and accepted as natural to one in which it is universally condemned and no longer the lot of the majority of humankind, the increasing recognition of the equal rights of women in many societies, the growing recognition in belief and practice that there are moral limits on how we may treat (at least some) non-human animals, the abolition of cruel punishments in many countries and of the cruellest punishments virtually everywhere, the notion that war must be morally justified, and the acknowledgment and (admittedly imperfect) institutionalization of the idea that the people are ultimately sovereign or at least that government should serve the people rather than the other way around. And this list is far from exhaustive. It is hard to understand how these changes are so often overlooked, given how transformational many of them have been.

Consider British abolition. The outstanding historian of slavery and emancipation Seymour Drescher eloquently captures just how momentous this change was:

> Emancipation was . . . an act without precedent in history. On a single day in 1834, 800,000 slaves had been called from social death to life. Neither at the announcement of coming freedom nor at the

[1] This view is evident, for example, in the Seville Statement of 1986 on the biology of human aggression, adopted by UNESCO and endorsed by numerous social scientific associations. See D. Adams and J. Buchanan (1990), "The Seville Statement on Violence," *American Psychologist* 45(10): 1167–1168. As we discuss in Chapter 5, in recent years there has been a shift toward a much less rosy view of premodern societies.

> moment of implementation had it produced "a single insurrection," nor had it "cost the life of a *single* man."[2]

"Emancipation," Drescher continues, "was a peaceful reform generated from below and pursued for half a century. It was the act of a nation and not of its rulers. English governments struggled as long as they could against the adoption of every major step toward emancipation, from the abolition of the slave trade to the abolition of slavery."[3]

The case of British abolition illustrates an ironic fact about moral progress: once it occurs, we tend to take it for granted or at least to underestimate its significance. Slavery has been called "the peculiar institution." But, in fact, across the long sweep of human history, freedom is the peculiar institution.[4] When we think of freedom as the normal condition of most human beings and slavery as the abnormal condition, we ignore the fact that until very recently slavery in one form or another was ubiquitous, and thus we undervalue and underestimate the great innovation and dramatic reversal that was emancipation.

Similarly, if we think that democracy is the norm, we fail to appreciate how rare, recent, and (perhaps) fragile the achievement of democratic governance is. Or consider sorcery (witchcraft): most human beings until very recently did not have the concept of a fortuitous harm—that is, they assumed that any harm that befell

[2] Seymour Drescher, *Abolition—A History of Slavery and Antislavery* (Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 264).

[3] British abolition was all the more impressive as an instance of moral progress, then, because it was democratic and peaceful, rather than top-down and violent. In contrast, the abolition of American slavery was far from peaceful: about 700,000 human beings perished in the Civil War. It is a shameful fact that the United States was the only country that required a bloody civil war to abolish slavery. (This is not the sort of "American exceptionalism" that conservatives like to talk about.) Further, the beginning of American emancipation was an executive order, The Emancipation Proclamation, framed by President Lincoln not as a democratic legislative act but as a wartime emergency provision.

[4] Drescher, *Abolition*, supra note 2, pp. ix–x.

them was the result of an intentional act, either by a god or by a malicious human being who had put a spell on them. The ubiquitous belief in sorcery was immensely destructive, often resulting in what was widely regarded as proper retaliation to malevolent magic but was in fact unjustified, often lethal aggression against innocent people. The belief in sorcery also poisoned perfectly benign relationships, fed paranoia, and undermined social solidarity. Fortunately, human beings now take it for granted that there are nonintentional harms and that many harms are not the result of any kind of agency at all, whether benign or malicious. The belief in sorcery still persists in some quarters—and still does horrible damage—but, as with slavery, where it has been abandoned people tend to be unaware of how progressive its abandonment really was.

Moral progress, then, is like oxygen: when it exists, we don't tend to notice it, even though our well-being depends on it. Yet since all of the changes listed above are undeniable—and undeniably good from a moral point of view—why are many people skeptical, uncertain, or silent about moral progress? The puzzlement only deepens if we consider the fact that the idea of moral progress took center stage in liberal political thought from the Enlightenment through the nineteenth century but is now largely absent from philosophical discourse or is addressed only indirectly, cursorily, or ambiguously. What explains the veritable disappearance of systematic thinking about moral progress from liberal thought?

Explaining the Disappearance of the Concept of Moral Progress

One must not overstate the case—neglect of the concept of moral progress has not been total. Very recently, several analytic philosophers have had something valuable to say about moral progress, and we shall engage with their views in the next chapter. However, their discussions of moral progress fall well short of a full-fledged theory. What can account for the lack of systematic theorizing about moral progress, as well as the

common skepticism about the existence of moral progress? We can imagine several plausible, mutually non-exclusive explanations. Each of these explanations is credible as an *explanation* but not as a justification—that is to say, none is a good *reason* for abandoning the idea of moral progress or forgoing attempts to theorize it without further ado.

First, as we have already suggested, some think that the horrors of the two world wars and the Holocaust, and perhaps the more recent rise of Islamic State and its unprecedented genocidal brutality in attempting to establish a caliphate in the Middle East, show that belief in moral progress is a delusion. However, the bloodbaths of the twentieth and early twenty-first century do not rule out the possibility of moral progress, past or future; acknowledging them only requires that one abandon *linear* conceptions of moral progress—conceptions that require continuous progress or at least rule out major regressions. Some theories of moral progress have postulated laws governing predictable stages of development through which societies or civilizations were supposed to pass, and these nomological assumptions have prevented them from taking the possibility of regression seriously. But the notion of an inexorable, continuous march of moral advance is certainly not an essential feature of the idea of moral progress, let alone one that is empirically supported given the staggered historical trajectory of moral progress. Further, as historians of large-scale armed conflict have shown, even if the first half of the twentieth century featured extraordinarily violent mass conflicts, war in the second half has declined significantly. More importantly, periods of moral regression—such as the cataclysmic events of the first half of the twentieth century—are compatible with moral progress in the long run. The long-term trend (at least since ~1450 C.E.) is one of remarkable reductions in homicide rates in many regions of the world, even if war deaths are included.[5]

[5] See Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature* (Viking, 2011).

Theodore Parker conceded that he was not in a position to directly observe or calculate the long-term arc of the moral universe; instead, he had to "divine it by conscience." Thanks to rigorous empirical work on large-scale trends in violence, slavery, and other features of our evolving moral world, we are now in a much better position to calculate some important dimensions of the moral arc—and we can now say with reasonable credence that, at least in respect of these dimensions, Parker and King's optimism was justified.

A second source of skepticism about the possibility of a theory of moral progress may be doubts about the possibility of making global (all-things-considered) assessments of progress, as when one society is said to be more morally progressive than another or when the same society is said to be more morally progressive at one time than at another. Local moral progress assessments, in contrast, do not venture to make all-things-considered evaluations. Instead, they assert, for example, that there has been progress in reducing racial or gender discrimination or in abolishing slavery, without assuming that there is moral progress overall—a judgment that would necessarily take into account all other dimensions of morality. If global moral progress assessments are problematic, Parker and King would only be justified in rendering specific moral progress judgments about abolition or racial discrimination and not about the arc of the moral universe itself.

It might turn out—and it is too early in our investigation to tell—that global (all-things-considered) assessments of moral progress cannot be justified for either of two reasons. First, it might be that in any given case there are moral gains and moral losses and that some of these are incommensurable, that it is impossible to measure them on a common scale and determine whether there has been net moral progress by subtracting the losses from the gains. For example, the rise and dominance of market economies have no doubt produced much good—raising standards of living for most people and, according to Norbert Elias, Stephen Pinker, and others, contributing to a dramatic

reduction in homicide rates. But market economies also arguably encouraged the growth of slavery and colonial domination and produced considerable misery for the first generation of workers in the Industrial Revolution. How are we to sum up, balance, or compare these gains and losses? Even if all moral gains and losses were commensurable and global (as opposed to merely local) moral progress assessments were justified in principle, the complexity of the calculation might be so great that reliable assessments of net gain or loss are beyond our powers, at least at present. Thus, if one assumes that any theory of moral progress that warrants the title must include global progress assessments, then one will have good reason to doubt the feasibility of the project. Note, however, that these same difficulties afflict attempts to make global moral regression judgments, such as those of Rousseau and MacIntyre alluded to above.

While it is true that many previous attempts to theorize moral progress have assumed, without good reason, that global assessments could be made, one should not presume that any worthwhile theory of moral progress must include global, as opposed to local, moral progress assessments. This book will focus on identifying and understanding various types of moral improvements, without venturing all-things-considered judgments about moral progress. The Conclusion, however, will return to the question of global moral progress assessments and argue that whether they are justifiable will depend upon whether our best normative moral theories allow us to strongly rank moral values or principles. We will conclude that on any plausible ranking of moral values and principles, the global degeneration thesis must be rejected.

A third possible motivation for the neglect of or skepticism about a theory of moral progress is the notion that a proper acknowledgment of moral pluralism—the view that there is a plurality of valid or reasonable moralities—renders the notion of moral progress uninteresting by ruling out the possibility of moral progress for humanity as a whole, as opposed to moral

progress for particular moral traditions or cultures. However, acknowledging some degree of moral pluralism does not rule out the possibility of meaningful moral progress. Suppose that there is a plurality of reasonable moralities, each matched, as it were, to different ecological conditions in which human beings may find themselves; but in addition, suppose that they all share some fundamental moral norms because every viable morality must address certain universal features of the human predicament. Increased commitment or conformity to these fundamental norms could count as moral progress even if there remained great diversity in other norms due to the peculiarities of history and local ecology. So, even if it is highly unlikely that there will be *complete* agreement on any one particular morality—and even if there is no reason to think that there should be—this is compatible with increasing convergence on some important moral norms (such as basic human rights) and with moral progress being gauged in terms of compliance with those norms.[6]

A fourth and related source of skepticism about attempts to theorize moral progress stems from the perceived perils of *using* the concept of moral progress, even if this is done with good intentions. Reflecting on atrocities committed in the name of moral progress by agents of colonialism and imperialism, some people may conclude that the idea is simply too dangerous to

[6] For example, the idea of human rights apparently originated in the West but now has become incorporated into the moral outlooks of people from many different cultures. See Allen Buchanan, "Moral Progress and Human Rights," in Cindy Holder and David Reidy (eds.), *Human Rights: The Hard Questions* (Cambridge University Press, 2013, pp. 399–417). Likewise, more widespread acknowledgment of the fact of reasonable pluralism, if it results in greater tolerance of reasonable differences in moral belief, could also count as moral progress. Even if there are no shared fundamental moral norms among reasonable moralities, the question of whether there has been or can be moral progress from the standpoint of some particular reasonable morality may still be worth addressing. For example, it should matter for those whose moral outlook is liberal whether there has been or is likely to be moral progress as judged from that perspective.

be employed. Now it is undeniable that the concept of moral progress is subject to abuse, but this is true of many other moral concepts that are indispensable. Consider the concepts of the right of self-defense and of just war: these concepts have been used to rationalize morally unjustified aggression, and yet this lamentable sociological fact does not warrant their abandonment. Rather than leading us to jettison the idea of moral progress, the fact that the concept has been misused should compel us to reflect critically on our confidence in making judgments about moral progress and to carefully scrutinize the political roles that the idea of moral progress should or should not play.

Reluctance to acknowledge the existence of moral progress may also reflect a concern that in doing so we run the risk of obscuring the great moral failures of our time. Recognizing major moral victories may be seen as objectionably self-congratulatory in ways that could impede further moral progress by enervating current efforts at reform or by distracting us from what remains to be done. Yet clearly there is no logical tension between our willingness to recognize moral gains and our ability to identify further areas for improvement; nor is it evident that there is a psychological tension. Indeed, recognizing our moral achievements and that our progressive social movements can succeed even in the face of overwhelming opposition can energize, rather than enervate, further efforts at moral reform, as it arguably has done in the case of the ever-expanding civil rights movement.

However, even if the perils of employing the concept of moral progress can be adequately mitigated, skepticism of the project may remain due to the idea that a notion of moral progress that is free of cultural bias is impossible to achieve. Given the fact that virtually all earlier attempts to think seriously and systematically about moral progress have been marred by racial, gender, class, or ethnonational bias, people who are acutely aware that all human beings, now as before, are afflicted by prejudice may simply conclude that constructing an unbiased theory is beyond our capacities. While it is true that previous efforts to theorize

moral progress have been compromised by prejudices of one sort or another (often more than one), so too have attempts to theorize morality itself. Yet in both cases, there is good reason to try to think in ways that avoid or mitigate such biases, rather than to abandon the projects themselves. Further, for the first time, human beings are developing scientific knowledge of how biases work and how "de-biasing" might in practice be achieved. The proper conclusion to draw, then, is not that the problem of bias is so hopeless as to make the development of a sound theory of moral progress futile. The take-home point, rather, is that no theory of moral progress will be plausible unless it takes the problem of bias seriously. The theory developed in this book satisfies that requirement.

A final reason for the dearth of hard thinking about moral progress in recent philosophical scholarship might be the general lack of attention to "nonideal theory."[7] There are different understandings of the distinction between ideal theory and nonideal theory in moral and political philosophy, but on most accounts nonideal theory includes systematic thinking about how to move toward a better moral condition—in particular, the fuller realization of valid principles of justice.[8] It may also include a theory of how institutions should be, given the assumption that they will not (for the foreseeable future)

[7] We are grateful to Aaron Ancell for this suggestion.

[8] Laura Valentini discusses several ways of drawing the nonideal/ideal theory distinction: (1) full compliance versus partial compliance theory: ideal theory assumes full compliance with the moral principles it identifies, whereas nonideal theory provides an account of how to respond to noncompliance; (2) realistic versus utopian theorizing: theories are more or less ideal depending upon the extent to which they assume away various psychological (including motivational), economic, or political limitations on achieving full compliance with moral principles; and (3) end-state versus transitional theory: ideal theory specifies morally ideal end-states, whereas nonideal theory provides an account of the transition to or toward the end-state. Laura Valentini (2012), "Ideal and Nonideal Theory: A Conceptual Map," *Philosophy Compass* 7(9): 654–664.

be fully just and that there will be imperfect compliance with valid moral principles.[9] Nonideal *theory*, so far as it includes an empirically informed and principled account of the transition toward a morally better condition, must include a theory of moral progress.

Some contemporary philosophers do think in nonideal terms, attempting to apply philosophical analysis to problems in our far from perfect world. But it would be a stretch to say that they have developed nonideal *theories*; instead, they have offered useful but undeniably ad hoc proposals, rather than a systematic account. So, because anything meriting the title of nonideal theory is currently lacking, it is perhaps not surprising that there has been little explicit attention to the topic of moral progress. Yet to the extent that philosophers acknowledge that working out a nonideal theory includes a systematic, principled account of how to make the transition from less to more just conditions, they ought to be thinking about moral progress, at least with regard to justice. And if they have a wider understanding of nonideal theory, one that encompasses other dimensions of morality in addition to justice, then they ought to be developing a general theory of moral progress.

Moral Skepticism and the Assumption of Equal Basic Moral Status

None of the above reservations is a good reason for not trying to think deeply and systematically about moral progress. Doing so is not merely an "academic" exercise for moral and political theorists. Whether there has been moral progress, and whether we can reasonably hope there will be more, matters. As Stephen

[9] Although there is a good deal of nonideal thinking of both these sorts in contemporary political philosophy, we think it is fair to say that it hasn't yet risen to the level of nonideal *theorizing*: instead, there are more or less ad hoc suggestions for how to make some progress here or there, along with piecemeal reflections on how to proceed in light of the fact that ideal principles will not be fully realized in institutions and practice.

Pinker eloquently writes, "What could be more fundamental to our sense of meaning and purpose than a conception of whether the strivings of the human race over long stretches of time have made us better or worse off."[10] Put simply, if morality matters, then so does moral progress: if it matters whether we act morally and whether our social practices and institutions conform to morality's demands, then it matters whether we are doing better in this regard. If it is important to understand what morality is and what it requires of us, it is also important to know how to make ourselves and our world morally better. Moral philosophers proceed on the reasonable assumption that, because morality matters and matters a great deal, some people ought to think seriously and systematically about it—in other words, that some people ought to try to construct a moral theory and to attempt to understand how existing moral frameworks hang together. Similarly, there are powerful reasons to think seriously and systematically about moral progress; that is, to develop a *theory* of moral progress. This book aims to take some of the first significant steps in this direction.

Of course, if you do not think there is such a thing as genuine morality or normativity—if you believe there is no such thing as a non-instrumental "ought"—then you may reject the very possibility of moral progress out of hand. This book does not speak to the moral nihilist. It assumes that one can sometimes make true or justified moral judgments and have true or justified moral beliefs. One of the book's aims is to characterize the biosocial environments in which especially important true or justified moral beliefs are likely (and unlikely) to occur and become widespread. Among the most important moral beliefs, from the standpoint of moral inclusivity, are those concerning moral standing and equal basic moral status.

Further, although we do not offer a normative ethical theory, we are committed to the truth of certain normative ethical claims.

[10] Pinker, *Better Angels*, supra note 5, p. 1.

For example, we assume that slavery and other forms of bondage, as well as discrimination on grounds of gender, ethnicity, or religion, are morally wrong. More generally, we assume that social arrangements are morally wrong if they relegate some persons to an inferior moral status—where this means they are excluded from highly valued social activities and roles—simply by virtue of their perceived or self-identified membership in some social group such as an ethnicity, race, religion, or gender. It might be thought that in doing so we are reposing on an undefended assumption that all persons are entitled to recognition and protection of an equal basic status—that we are assuming that moral status-egalitarianism is a moral truth. That is incorrect. Instead, we think the shoe is on the other foot: those who endorse inequality of basic status must provide a cogent justification for such inequality—and they have uniformly failed to do so.

Those who deny that members of certain groups are entitled to equal basic status typically assert that everyone in their own group is so entitled. But in that case the burden is on them to show what it is about some individuals that qualifies them for equal basic status and what it is about other individuals that makes them unqualified. Invariably, when pressed to do so, the advocates of inequality of basic status invoke false generalizations about the supposedly natural characteristics of members of various groups—for example, that women are less rational than men, that blacks are intellectually and morally inferior, that low-caste people are essentially unclean, that non-human animals do not experience pain. Or they make implausible assumptions about which supposedly natural characteristics qualify an individual for having equal basic status. For example, Nazis and American eugenicists assumed that if one wasn't a net contributor to society—if one was a "useless eater"—then one lacked even the most fundamental rights that constitute equal basic status. At least in environments that are not so harsh that extinction of the group is likely if "nonproductive" members are not abandoned, it is implausible to think that simply by becoming disabled to the

point of not being able to make a net contribution to the social product, one suddenly is no longer worthy of equal respect and lacks fundamental rights. After all, the features of human beings that are plausibly invoked to explain their high moral status—the fact that they are agents with a life of their own to live, that they are capable of being responsive to reasons in a practice of reason-giving with others, that they endow the world with meaning through their recognition of value, etc.—have nothing to do with whether or not an individual happens to be capable of making a net contribution to social production. Similarly, it would be implausible to hold that what qualifies one for high equal basic status is the possession of some trait like intelligence to a greater degree than other persons possess it. Someone who held such a view would almost certainly be guilty of inconsistency because he would not admit that the discovery that some other individual was more intelligent than he is would automatically deprive him of equal status. In addition, a conception of equal basic status that required a multitude of statuses tracking all the differences in intelligence in the human population, and which therefore required revisions in an individual's status every time new information emerged about someone being more intelligent, could not perform the functions that a conception of equal status is reasonably expected to perform.

The same burden of proof applies—and in our opinion has not been successfully borne—in the case of views that assert that all non-human animals not only lack the same basic moral status as humans but also have no moral standing at all. Given the importance of avoiding the infliction of suffering in any reasonable morality, it is simply not cogent to admit, as one must in the light of scientific knowledge of comparative anatomy and functional neuroscience, that many non-human animals experience pain much as we do, while at the same time denying that they have no moral standing whatsoever—that there are no moral constraints at all on how we may treat them. The key point is that assertions of unequal basic status ought not to go unchallenged: if someone

asserts that only some human beings have a high moral status or that no non-human animals have any moral standing at all, she owes a justification for these supposed differences. Justifications that rely on false claims about natural differences or implausible assumptions about which natural differences are relevant to moral status fail. So do justifications that make sentience irrelevant to moral standing or that pick out morally arbitrary biological categories as the basis for moral standing (such as being a member of the designated species *Homo sapiens*). In our judgment, no cogent justifications have ever been given for the denials of equal basic status that undergird systems of racial or gender discrimination, caste systems, or any other practices that relegate some human beings to a lesser moral status, nor for practices that treat all non-human animals as if were mere things with not even the most basic moral standing. That is why we think it is appropriate to begin our inquiry into moral progress with a presumption that developments in inclusivity—changes that involve extending equal basic status or some kind of moral standing to classes of individuals that had previously been excluded—are relatively uncontroversial instances of progress.

We do not pretend to refute or even address the moral nihilist who, qua nihilist, would presumably deny that anyone has moral standing of any sort (whether equal or unequal). Having moral standing of any sort implies that there are moral constraints on how an individual who has moral standing ought to be treated, but the moral nihilist denies that there are any moral constraints whatsoever. Our foil, rather, is someone who says that some particular group of individuals has the high moral status that many people now believe that all human persons have, while denying that other people have that status. Our foil might hold that only men have that high status or that only believers in a particular religion have it or that it only attaches to a particular racial group. But if that is his or her view, then it is perfectly appropriate to demand an explanation—to ask why it is that some human individuals have this high moral status while others lack it. The answer

to this question typically, if not uniformly, is that those to whom high status is accorded are said to have some natural property or set of properties that those who are denied this high moral status supposedly lack.

Consider, for example, moral belief systems that deny equal status to women—that exclude women from valued social practices and institutional roles simply because they are women. Those who endorse these inequalities have tended to argue that women lack the rationality and self-control of men or that women are subordinate to men in the *scala naturae*. There are two replies to such equal status–denying thinking. First, one can appeal to empirical findings about the natural capacities of men and women to show that if differences of the sort that the equal status–denier postulates exist at all, they are not essential features of the world but rather artifacts of systematic discrimination. In later chapters we elaborate this argument in detail, explaining how discriminatory practices foster false beliefs about natural differences, which in turn produce a distorted experience of what different groups of human beings are like. Likewise, one could appeal to modern scientific understandings of life and its evolution to reject anthropocentric, racist, and sexist "scale of nature"–type thinking about evolution in general and human origins in particular. Second, one can challenge the normative assumption that the supposed differences—in the magnitudes that actually exist—are good grounds for conferring equal basic status. For example, one can point out that even if it were true that women or some "racial" group were on average less rational or intelligent than some other group, it is implausible to think that this would disqualify them from equal basic status. In other words, even if some capacity for rationality is a necessary condition for equal basic status, any account of why that is so will make it clear that the required threshold of rationality is one that all cognitively normal human beings reach. One can also argue that even if there are measurable differences in average rationality or intelligence between groups, there are differences of equal or greater magnitude within the

supposedly superior group, which undermines the proffered rationale for group-based discrimination.

So, if one contends that some persons have a high basic status while others do not, then one owes a justification for the claim that not only establishes that there are differences among groups but also that these differences are of the sort and magnitude that are relevant to making moral status judgments. As our investigation unfolds, it will become clearer why we think that—moral nihilists aside—it is the defender of basic status inequality, not the proponent of it, who owes (and fails to bear) the burden of argument. In any case, the point is that it would be a mistake to say that in our investigation of moral inclusivity we are simply assuming, with no good reason, a status-egalitarian view. Nonetheless, if the reader remains unconvinced, our investigation of moral progress in the form of inclusivity can be read in a more modest fashion—namely, as being addressed to those who are already committed to the proposition that all persons have an equal (and equally high) basic moral status.

In our judgment, the belief that all persons have an equal basic status is unproblematic, given the failure of equal status–deniers to provide a plausible defense of their view. The real problems are specifying exactly what equal basic status amounts to in practice and in determining the status of human beings who are relevantly different from the paradigmatic cases of equal basic status—for example, individuals who from birth or due to injury or the ravages of mind- and personality-destroying disorders may lack the properties ordinarily associated with equal basic status. Nonetheless, we think that the social practices we examine in this volume—in particular, slavery and race- and gender-based forms of discrimination—are clearly denials of equal basic status, even if the full contours of the concept of equal basic status and the boundaries of the class of beings to whom it is properly accorded are unclear and disputed.

To begin our inquiry, we first need to have a clear initial, if admittedly provisional, idea of what moral progress is (or, more

cautiously, would be, were it to exist). For example, is everything that earlier generations included under the rubric "civilization" a matter of moral progress, or is some of it simply a matter of more refined manners or aesthetic sensibilities? (Earlier writers often didn't make these distinctions, lumping all these putative improvements together under the heading of "progress" or "the advance of civilization.") More importantly, are there distinct types of moral progress and, if so, are some more basic than others (and in what sense of "basic")?

The focus of this book is on one especially important type of moral progress: gains in what we will refer to as "moral inclusivity" ("inclusivity" for short), what the Victorian historian of morals William Lecky called "the expanding circle" of moral concern.[11] In a future book, we will offer a more comprehensive theory, one that covers other types of moral progress as well—though much of what we will have to say about the origins of moral inclusivity will apply to the origins of other types of moral progress as well.

Ideal Theory and Moral Progress

One reader of a draft of this book stated that once you have a theory of the just society, what counts as improvement or regress should "just drop out as a simple corollary"; and thus, it isn't clear why a theory of moral progress is needed. That statement is wrong. First, even if one limits moral assessment to societies (rather than individuals or groups), morality cannot be reduced to principles of justice, for even if justice is the first virtue of institutions (as Rawls thought), it is not the only one. Further, there is no reason to assume that all the other virtues of societies can be reduced to justice—that there is at bottom only one virtue of institutions. The only way to make that claim at all plausible would be to change the meaning of "the just society" to mean "the comprehensively morally good society." Second, society is not the only

[11] William Edward Harpole Lecky, *History of European Morals from Augustus to Charlemagne*, v. 1, 3rd edition (D. Appleton, 1921).

subject matter of morality. There are some moral principles or concepts that apply directly to individuals, families, friendships, etc. and that do not reduce to those that apply to society.

Nor will it do to acknowledge that morality is about more than justice but then to assert that one doesn't need a theory of moral progress because what counts as progress or regress simply follows as a corollary of one's theory of the morally good or morally optimal society comprehensively characterized. There are two problems with that claim. First, it is hubristic to think that anyone now possesses a valid comprehensive theory of morality—an adequate theory of morality in all its dimensions—so it would not be very illuminating to define moral progress as progress toward a society that satisfies all the demands of a valid comprehensive morality. Later, we argue that a theory of morality ought to allow for the possibility of improvements in our understanding of morality and hence of moral progress. Second, suppose (rather fantastically) that we could now confidently say that we are in possession of a characterization of the society that satisfies all the demands of morality. To say that what counts as moral progress and regress would "drop out as a simple corollary" from that would be wrong. One needs an empirically well-founded account of how progress toward or regression away from the realization of the principles of the supposedly valid comprehensive morality is likely to occur. Such an account does not "drop out" as a "simple corollary" of one's characterization of the comprehensively moral society or, more broadly, of the comprehensively moral state of affairs. Our approach in this volume is to show that there is much of interest to be said about moral progress in the absence of the assumption that anyone possesses a valid comprehensive theory of morality (or even of justice), by focusing on one especially important and relatively uncontroversial kind of moral progress: improvements in the dimension of inclusivity. Instead of resting content with the rather unhelpful idea that moral progress in inclusivity is whatever moves us toward greater inclusivity (of the right kind), we offer a theory of the conditions under which that kind of moral progress is likely to occur, based

on an analysis of the conditions under which it has occurred, in the light of the best available evolutionary thinking about the origins of human morality.

Now it might be that there is very little that can be said informatively about what counts as moral progress in general or in every case. There may be no specific moral or social theoretical framework that unifies and explains all instances of moral progress. If one thinks that anything short of that cannot count as a theory of moral progress, then we freely admit that in this book we do not offer a theory of moral progress in that ambitious sense. As will soon become apparent, we think that there are several kinds of moral progress, and we are skeptical that they can all be reduced to one kind. Our chief aim is to offer the beginnings of a theory of moral progress for one especially important kind of moral progress (namely progress in inclusivity), and we withhold judgment about how far this framework can extend to cover other cases.

If moral progress is possible, so far as one cares about morality, one needs to know how to achieve it and how to avoid moral regression. "Knowing how" includes knowing not just which actions or policies will bring some morally beneficial change about but also which means of achieving progress are morally permissible. That is why history, not fanciful philosophical thought experiments, matters: understanding how actual instances of moral progress have occurred may be valuable both for getting clearer about what moral progress is and for knowing how to bring it about in the right way. Finally, if it turns out that more moral progress can be achieved, this is both consoling and motivating: consoling because it can help us, especially in dark times, to nurture reasonable hope for a brighter future; motivating, because it can help us avoid acceptance of or complicity in injustice or other wrongs. In his speech dedicating the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, DC, U.S. President Barack Obama put the point this way:

> [W]hat this museum . . . shows us is that in even the face of oppression, even in the face of unimaginable difficulty, America has moved forward. And so this museum provides context for the debates of our times. It illuminates them and gives us some sense of how they evolved, and perhaps keeps them in proportion. . . . It reminds us that routine discrimination and Jim Crow aren't ancient history, it's just a blink in the eye of history. It was just yesterday. And so we should not be surprised that not all the healing is done. We shouldn't despair that it's not all solved. And knowing the larger story should instead remind us of just how remarkable the changes that have taken place truly are—just in my lifetime—and thereby inspire us to further progress.[12]

Confronting the Moral Degeneration Thesis

The case we have begun to make for theorizing moral progress can be strengthened by pointing out some of the most basic defects of the most prominent degeneration views. First, as Stephen Holmes among others has shown, degeneration theorists, such as Rousseau, Montaigne, and MacIntyre, typically find deterioration in modern societies by comparing them with a highly idealized, historically inaccurate vision of the virtues of premodern societies and people—such as the myth of the harmonious genuine community which, though hierarchical, was still somehow nonexploitive and free or the fiction that premodern societies were egalitarian *tout court* rather than egalitarian so far as relationships among males were concerned.[13] Second, some degeneration theorists, and MacIntyre in particular, exaggerate the moral coherence of premodern societies, portraying them as having less disagreement about values than they actually

[12] The transcript of Obama's dedication speech can be found at https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/09/24/remarks-president-dedication-national-museum-african-american-history.

[13] Stephen Holmes, *The Anatomy of Anti-Liberalism* (Harvard University Press, 1994).

exhibited.[14] Third, they equally exaggerate the incoherence of modern moral cultures. MacIntyre, for instance, believes that the modern moral culture that succeeded the supposedly coherent and admirable pre-Enlightenment European Christian moral culture is like a shattered vase—a scattered collection of fragments. He somehow overlooks the fact that there seems to be rather widespread consensus in modern moral culture on, for example, the idea that democracy is the best form of government, that the power of the state should be limited by a constitution, that government is to be a servant of the people and not its master, and so on. MacIntyre also ignores the fact that the modern human rights system, which encompasses elaborate bodies of regional and international human rights laws and norms, is itself evidence of a very broad moral consensus, especially among societies that are the heirs of the very premodern Christian moral culture that he extolls. Chapter 9 of this volume shows that the modern human rights system exemplifies some of the most important advances in moral progress in the form of increased inclusiveness.

Fourth, and more importantly, degeneration theorists overlook a simple fact that is hard to reconcile with their views: most of the paradigmatic examples of moral progress occurred precisely during the period in which they say the formerly supposedly healthy, coherent traditional moral culture was disintegrating under the onslaught of the forces of modernity. Abolitionism, the struggle for equal rights for women, the movement to end aggressive war, the campaign to end cruel punishments, and the recognition that at least some non-human animals ought to be treated more humanely all began in the latter half of the eighteenth century, contemporaneously with the Enlightenment, the spread of market relations, and the Industrial Revolution. So, either these forces of modernity did not produce the disintegration of traditional moral culture, or they allowed for its replacement by a

[14] Ibid., chapter 4.

new coherent moral culture, or moral progress does not require a coherent moral culture. None of these three alternatives is compatible with degeneration theses from Rousseau to MacIntyre. Indeed, this book will argue that these forces of modernity not only did not result in moral degeneration but in fact played a crucial causal role in making paradigmatic cases of moral progress possible.

Rousseau cannot be faulted for failing to see that what he regarded as the period of degeneration was in fact the beginning of some of the greatest moral advances that have ever occurred. He lived late enough to see some of the negative effects of modernity but not long enough to witness the monumental moral advances that began in the late eighteenth century. That excuse is not available to contemporary degeneration theorists like MacIntyre: there is no justification for blithely ignoring the fact that momentous moral advances have occurred in post-traditional society—and that the traditional moral culture of Europe that authors such as MacIntyre admire so much was remarkably unprogressive, indeed stagnant from the standpoint of some of the most important dimensions of moral improvement. The traditional European Christian moral culture that MacIntyre extols accepted slavery, accepted the subordination of women, accepted horridly cruel punishments, and accepted the infliction of gratuitous suffering on animals. Indeed, the very same moral culture supplied religious justifications for these shameful behaviors. MacIntyre seems to be so preoccupied with the supposed virtues of coherence in a moral culture—and it is important to understand that for him coherence includes unreflective moral agreement—that he overlooks the plausible possibility that some incoherence, or some fragmentation, as well as a good deal of disagreement, may be necessary for moral advancement.

Despite these profound flaws, degeneration theorists advance three extremely valuable points. First, they make vividly clear a fact that hugely complicates the task of theorizing moral progress—namely, that moral advances often come with high

costs, some of which may count as instances of moral deterioration or regression. To return to an example used in our discussion of global moral progress assessments, even though the growth of market relations eventually lifted many people out of poverty, reduced toilsome labor for many, and (if Elias and Pinker are right) contributed to the development of a less violent human moral psychology, it also fostered the growth of the transatlantic slave trade and colonialism, resulted in ruthless and demeaning exploitation of workers by capitalists, and may even have produced a (short-term) decline in the health of the average worker. Similarly, the Neolithic revolution—the invention and spread of agriculture and the domestication of animals that began in the Fertile Crescent around ten thousand years ago—apparently worsened the health of most people relative to their hunter–gatherer ancestors and may also have damaged some of the valuable social relations they enjoyed in their previous, smaller groups. Second, and echoing our earlier discussion by emphasizing that moral progress has a darker side, degeneration theorists help bring to light the issue of commensurability and thereby raise the question of whether it is possible to make reliable global (as opposed to local) moral progress assessments. They fail to realize, however, that the conceptual and empirical difficulties confronting global moral progress judgments apply equally to judgments of moral degeneration. To say that things are worse nowadays than before is to make a global assessment.

Third, degeneration theorists rightly urge us to appreciate the virtues of some degree of coherence and moral agreement in a moral culture and to take seriously the possibility that conditions in modern societies may undermine adequate levels of both. And this is true even if, as we have just suggested, some lack of coherence actually facilitates moral progress, at least if full coherence tends to require suppression of disagreement. For instance, citizens of contemporary European democracies, such as France and Germany, are right to be concerned about how the growing influx

of refugees from war-torn countries and failed states, harboring very different social, political, and religious values, might undermine the secular liberal foundations of their social democracies. More specifically, the worry is that recent, hard-won, and still incomplete progress regarding the proper treatment of women and the marginalization of anti-Semitism could be eroded if there are large numbers of immigrants from regions in which honor killings, gender discrimination, and anti-Semitism are widespread. How serious this risk is may be hard to judge, and there is reason to believe that some reactions to the risk have been excessive and inhumane. Yet it is clear that, under certain circumstances, implementing a policy of "open borders" endorsed by the more liberal strands of modern moral culture might lead to moral regression. The magnitude of the risk depends chiefly on how resilient liberal culture and institutions are—that is, on their capacity to persist in spite of the presence of illiberal groups within society.

In spite of these valuable insights, what degeneration theorists ought to take seriously, but seem not to consider at all, is the possibility that considerable moral disagreement and even some degree of incoherence in a moral culture may be necessary conditions for moral progress. Degeneration theorists may be right that modern society is characterized by moral disagreement and even by a degree of incoherence (at least relative to traditional moral cultures). Yet it may nonetheless still be true that modern moral culture is more morally progressive than traditional moral cultures. Further, it may well be that modern society is more morally progressive than traditional society precisely *because* it includes more moral disagreement and less coherence. Here it is important to remember that the coherence and agreement that characterized traditional European culture, prior to the onset of the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution, was largely due to oppression wielded by church and government elites. Degeneration theorists tend to overlook the tremendous human costs of this forced coherence and agreement, as well as the fact that it seemed to produce not just stability but moral stagnation.

Our aim in this volume is not to provide a detailed refutation of degeneration views. Instead, we hope to have said enough about the problems such views face to show that they are not a conversation-stopper regarding the topic of moral progress. The case against degeneration views will be considerably strengthened in later chapters, when we explore the biological, social, and political conditions that either encourage or inhibit moral progress. In so doing, we will show exactly why it is that modern liberal societies, not traditional ones, offer the best prospects for moral progress.

Naturalizing Moral Progress

The theory of moral progress begun in this book is naturalistic in several senses. The first is that it is secular, rather than theological: it appeals to natural rather than supernatural factors in determining what counts as moral progress and how it can be achieved—unlike earlier accounts that viewed moral progress as being defined and guided by divine providence. As a secular theory, our account avoids the temptation to which theological theorists of moral progress have often succumbed, namely, theodicy: the attempt to reconcile the bad in history with the assumption that there is an all-powerful and all-beneficent being.

Secular approaches to moral progress are of course not new. One of the distinctive features of mainstream liberal thought from the Enlightenment through the nineteenth century was that it secularized the idea of moral progress.[15] That is, it characterized moral progress without reference to religious tenets, insisted that moral progress could be achieved solely by human effort and without divine assistance, and promised to ground its

[15] Spadafora shows that some British Enlightenment thinkers included a limited role for providence in their accounts of progress but that others held purely secular views. David Spadafora, *The Idea of Progress in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Yale University Press, 1990, pp. 88, 90, 91, 96, 97, 363–365, 375, 390).

theories of progress in a "science of man." Nevertheless, early secular theories were insufficiently naturalistic because, like their conservative detractors, liberal political theorists in that era tended to rely upon under-evidenced assumptions about human psychology and society. Their factual assumptions were based on folk psychology, flawed attempts to develop empirically based psychological theories, a priori speculation, and reflections on history hampered both by a lack of information and by inadequate methodology.[16] Another defect of some secular conceptions of moral progress was that they claimed, without evidence, that moral progress was inevitable, not merely feasible. Given a near total lack of solid empirical grounding, the claim that moral progress was inevitable was even shakier than the claim that it was feasible.

At a minimum, a theory of moral progress ought to be compatible with the relevant psychological and social facts about human beings. A more demanding desideratum is that it must provide an account of how the path of moral progress can be traversed that is compatible with those facts. In particular, the theory must support the conclusion that moral progress is more than logically possible, given an accurate view of the relevant facts. It must show that moral progress is both *feasible* and *permissible*, and it should also supply some specific guidance as to *how* moral progress can be achieved. Feasibility has two components: can

[16] Theorists of progress in the English and Scottish Enlightenment, including Hartley, Hume, Smith, and Kames, based their views on psychological assumptions (e.g., that "the association of ideas" was a fundamental feature of the human mind); but their psychological views, like their views about society, lacked rigorous empirical support. In addition, their psychological theories were seriously incomplete because they lacked an understanding of the full range of what are now called "normal cognitive biases" and how these biases interact with culture to construct morally relevant beliefs—which we later show to be of crucial relevance for any empirically grounded theory of moral progress. For a valuable discussion of the psychological assumptions of these theorists and their bearing on the idea of progress, see Ibid., pp. 138–148, 163–166, 343–346, 151–152.

we really get there from here, and will the destination be sustainable?[17] Permissibility concerns whether we get there by using morally acceptable means. Secular theories of moral progress that are premised on false presuppositions about human nature and society will be misguided or utopian; those that are mistaken about the permissibility of traversing moral valleys in order to reach a higher peak in a "morality landscape" will be morally regressive, perhaps disastrously so.

The theory proposed here is thus "naturalistic" in the contemporary philosophical sense that it proceeds on the assumption that empirical knowledge, and especially scientific knowledge of human nature and society, can be crucial for tackling important philosophical topics—in this case, that of moral progress. More specifically, in developing a theory of moral progress, we exploit the resources of evolutionary biology, moral psychology, cultural evolutionary theory, and the psychology of normal cognitive biases and errors, as well as our best current understandings in economics, sociology, and history regarding the nature of social practices and institutions and how and why they have changed over time. We also draw on the developing resources of social moral epistemology, the comparative study of how different institutions and social practices affect the beliefs normally needed for the functioning of human beings' moral capacities—their abilities to make moral judgments, engage in moral reasoning, employ moral concepts, and experience moral emotions such as sympathy and indignation at injustice.

The fact that earlier liberal thinkers failed to achieve fully naturalistic theories of moral progress is not surprising, of course, given how meager genuine scientific knowledge about human psychology and society was in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Our situation today is more hopeful. For the first time,

[17] To say that some type of moral improvement is "feasible" is not to say that it can be perfectly realized. It is too much to ask that a theory of moral progress specify a fully attainable ideal. See Chapter 1 for further discussion.