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Lester Pollock Room, FH, 9th Floor

# Colloquium in Legal, Political, and Social Philosophy

Conducted by

**Jeremy Waldron and Samuel Scheffler**

Speaker: **Philip Kitcher, Columbia University**

Paper: **Progressive Valuation**



Colloquium Website: <http://www.law.nyu.edu/node/22315>

## Note to Readers

First, my apologies for the length of this manuscript. It's a draft of a chapter for a book on which I've been engaged (prefigured in the Descartes Lectures I gave via Zoom in the Fall of 2020). That book considers progress and method in inquiry across a number of domains. Earlier chapters concentrate on factual knowledge (most prominently with respect to the natural sciences) and the formal sciences (mathematics and logic). The book will close with a number of chapters on progress in valuation, this being the one that constructs the framework for looking at the dynamics of interaction among moral, ethical, and personal values, progress in aesthetic valuation, and, finally, religious progress.

The chapter won't be as long as what I've given you, because I shall be able to draw on material from earlier in the book. Here I've had to insert explanations to summarize points I've made before. Again, I'm sorry to burden you with extra stuff, but I wanted to be clear.

Lots of footnotes and references are missing. All I've done here is to point to a few sources where a topic is treated at greater length.

Finally, since it's a draft (and needs work!), please don't quote it or cite it.

## **PROGRESSIVE VALUATION**

### Setting the Stage

Besides our advances in the natural and formal sciences, human beings seem to have made progress with respect to values. Many people think of us as having a clearer understanding of what goals are worth pursuing, of how we should pursue them, of the kinds of societies we should try to create and of the kinds of individuals we should aspire to be. Most of us engage in inquiry in this domain (even if that seems too dignified a description for everyday activities), when we ask ourselves what to do or what to strive for. The aim of what follows is to understand what progress in value inquiry might be, to vindicate some claims that this kind of progress has occurred, and to suggest how progress with respect to values might be “more systematic and sure-footed” (in Dewey’s aspirational phrase.)

Subsuming a diverse set of investigations under a single heading - “value inquiry” - sets up a sprawling, amorphous domain, something far less well-defined than “the natural sciences” or “the formal sciences.” Wouldn’t it be simpler to break up this vast area into subdomains, to proceed, as discussions typically do, by concentrating on moral inquiry or ethical inquiry or aesthetic inquiry or religious inquiry? Superficially easier, to be sure. I opt for a more complex picture in order to bring out the kinship among investigations of different species of values and to take account of the interactions among different kinds of values.

So far I have followed a familiar practice, one based in ordinary talk. I have referred to things called “values”. As will soon become evident, I propose to resist the reification of values. Should we conjure an abstract realm of values, the counterpart of the ultra-realist’s structured world or the supposed universe of abstract objects mathematicians are sometimes taken to explore? Given the stances adopted in previous chapters, my answer should cause no surprise: we should not.

I offer instead a different picture of progressive valuation. In the course of human history, individuals, groups of people, societies, and (occasionally) virtually the entire human population have learned some things about how to live better and about ways in which societies can be improved. This is not to suggest that progress has been steady, evenly distributed, or permanent. What has been recognized at one historical stage has often been forgotten by those who come later. Nevertheless, at various points in history, advances have been made. Human beings have overcome deficiencies or limitations in their judgments about what ends to seek, what actions to perform, the types of lives they should try to live, and the kinds of appraisals that should inform their lives. To talk of “overcoming deficiencies” here is to view the changes adopted as initially justified and as retaining that status in the indefinite future, so long as people make further justifiable amendments to their practices. Moreover, these changes are not restricted to their psychological lives, matters merely of improved beliefs. The progressive changes connect the judgments about what is valuable with how people live and what they do. (Mere modification of psychological attitudes without consequences for conduct wouldn’t suffice.)

These advances occur at various scales. Some are confined to a single person. Others reach further, to an entire family or to the members of a local community. Or even more widely, to a large and heterogeneous society. At the broadest extent, some become the common property of humanity.

All this is to gesture, expansively and vaguely, at the phenomena I hope to treat more systematically. To make progress in thinking about progressive valuation, it is necessary to start slowly, and to clarify important concepts and distinctions. As I have noted this is a disorderly domain. Some conceptual geography will help us to find our way around.

### Ontological Reform

A tempting, but unsatisfactory, characterization of my project would describe it as attempting to understand “the progress of values.” That language invites us to think of values as things, like cabbages or continents, lying about awaiting the discoverers who will come to claim them. Not ordinary physical things, however – values (as opposed to valuable things) must be denizens of some more abstract, nebulous realm. To consign them to an ethereal sphere, however, provokes hard questions about what exactly occurs when people find them. This common language also

casts debates in peculiar forms. Questions of whether values belong in science, or, if they do, which ones are admissible, conjure up the vision of a door, marked *SCIENCE*, outside which a queue of petitioners forms, each hoping to be let in. The supposed tension between the values of Freedom and Equality prompts images of a contest in which contenders – boxers? swordsmen? sumo wrestlers? – struggle for superiority. The recent history of value theory provides ample motivation for seeking an alternative idiom.

Of course, values are not people nor are they combatants. People have values, or so we tend to say. What are they, these things people have? That's a bad question. We should recall some lessons about ontology taught long ago by Quine. People also sometimes do things for the sake of someone else; on other occasions, they do things for their own sake. What are these sakes, these things people have? Don't ask, Quine advised us. Don't inflate ontology by pulling nouns out of syncategorematic expressions, and then theorizing about their referents.

'Value' is both a noun and a verb. If we're tempted to ask what values are, we are treating 'value' as a noun. Maybe, however, the verbal form is primary. People value. Their values are manifest in the things they value (manifest how, exactly?). If you start down this path, you might connect values with desires: to value a possible outcome is to want to bring it about; to value an object might be to want to acquire it, or to preserve it, or to restore it; to value a property is to want to see it realized more extensively; and so forth. Maybe valuing properties is the fundamental notion. You value an object or an outcome because of some property it exemplifies. So you fight to preserve a natural landscape, because you value its beauty. You want it to be there for others to enjoy as you have done. To value is to desire (desire just what?). But values can't be linked to any old desire. Some objects of desire are just too unimportant to you to express your values. Maybe then the things you value correspond to *special* desires, the important ones, the desires that really matter. Or better, your values are expressed in the desires to which you give priority, the ones you really want to be satisfied.

I have staggered to a formulation that provides clues about how to go on. Let's retrace the route a little more carefully. The verbal form is primary: what is fundamental is *valuing*. To be a value for a person is to be the target of an act of that person's valuation. 'Valuation' is both ambiguous and vague. Ambiguity first. An act of valuation can be one of appraising or of prizing (Dewey 1938/1988). My claim about the relation between values and valuation would make no sense if the ambiguous term were used in the former sense. Not everything appraised is

pronounced valuable. Hence I shall reserve ‘evaluation’ (or ‘appraisal’) for the former sense and use ‘valuation’ solely in the latter. Our values are the things we prize.

But what is it to prize something? Of course we want – *desire* – the things we prize. Nevertheless, the vast majority of our desires are for things we do not prize. One way to mark the distinctive quality of the things we value is to recognize the relative length of the period through which we prize them. People don’t prize the objects of their evanescent desires. Valuations endure across a segment of a person’s life. But, in many instances, they do not persist until its end. Identifying valuations as dispositions to desire, fixed from the time of acquisition until death, will not do. Moreover, there are numerous long-term proclivities we’d be reluctant to count as valuations. Plenty of human beings have a robust tendency to desire chocolate, but few (if any) of us *prize* chocolate, or count it among our values.

Prizes are typically awarded on the basis of some distinction – the recipient of the prize is elevated above other things of the same type. A prize pig isn’t on a par with other desirable porkers. Recognizing this, we might extend the idea of valuation to cover relatively stable desires that, in some sense to be explained, take priority over others. They are the upper crust of the desiring world.

That form of characterization raises an awkward question: how thick is this crust? Where should the line between valuation and ordinary desire be drawn? The concept of an ordering of desires poses no problems. The priority of my desire for poetry over my desire for pushpin would be expressed in my entertainment choices as I consider how to pass my leisure time. So we can easily make sense of a hierarchy of valuations (or of values), almost certainly not a complete ordering, and variable across different contexts (as will shortly become clear). Trouble comes, however, when we try to draw a line across this ordering, dividing the prize-winners from the also-rans.

Why is any such line necessary? As I have noted, we do attribute values to people, and one way of glossing such ascriptions is to imagine a set of desires (or propensities to desire) decorated with rosettes. There’s an alternative construal, however. Perhaps someone’s values shouldn’t be viewed as an unordered set, comprised of desires with special status, but as a *scheme of values*, the partial ordering that structures their choices and their behavior (except when some other factor interferes). To characterize a person as valuing poetry and not valuing pushpin isn’t to

place poetry in one box and pushpin in the other, but to recognize the desire for poetry as dominating the desire for pushpin. ‘X’s values’ is shorthand for ‘X’s scheme of values’, a relational structure that governs X’s desirings and X’s choices (except when the governing body relaxes or is temporarily overthrown).

One advantage of adopting this perspective is that it makes explicit the function of our talk of valuation. Values guide people in the regimentation of their desires. Informed by the hierarchy of our valuations, we give some of our options priority over others, thus helping us achieve the ends we regard as most important.

Our values, then, are expressed in the *priority ordering* among our desires. Don’t ask how highly ranked in this ordering a desire must be to count as expressing a value. Just pay attention to the ordering. People have *schemes of values*, standing psychological dispositions to give priority to some desires over others. Moreover, this ordering is affected by context. We give priority to one desire in the presence of other desires, but that may be reversed when a different set of background desires is in play. The citizens of the Weimar Republic who, under conditions of daily inflation, traded precious family heirlooms for food, only did so because of the threat to their continued survival. Similarly, a scientist who gives priority to getting on with the follow-up experiment because the inquiry needs to go as quickly as possible to combat a wave of infection, would, under less urgent conditions, view that as an illegitimate exercise in corner-cutting.

The notion of a scheme of values needs some further clarification and refinement. I think of a scheme of values as a standing psychological disposition, operative over a period of time, that plays a causal role in a person’s choices. Onlookers see the scheme of values expressed in her behavior. She also has a self-conception that includes what considerations take priority over others. She says, for example, “My family takes priority in my life. I always put them first.” From time to time, though, her acquaintances detect what they take to be a mismatch between her self-description and something she does. Their verdict might be unjust; there may be no divergence between the scheme of values and her conduct, but simply a factual error on her part. In response to criticism, she explains how she had misidentified crucial features of the options confronting her. “I thought,” she says, “that working late would give me the means to provide important things for the children, but I now appreciate that spending the time at home would have been more beneficial to them.”

Or the critic might be correct in seeing a mismatch, and she may, in response, modify her scheme of values to bring it into accord with her characterization of it. The woman I have described isn't entirely self-deceived. Most of us have only a rough sense of our scheme of values, in that we can rarely (never?) anticipate the full range of circumstances in which we shall face choices. We claim to give *X* priority over *Y*, not appreciating the extra pull *Y* would exert on us in a situation in which *Z* were also present. When such situations occur, others point out to us how we have diverged from what we professed, and we respond either by modifying our self-conception or the disposition that guided the choice of *Y* over *X*. We say "You're right. It turns out that I don't give *X* priority in all circumstances." Or, instead, we alter our dispositions. Perhaps we now try to avoid situations in which *Z* shows up (keeping ourselves out of temptation.) Or, knowing of *Z*'s disruptive power, we are very careful to be on the lookout for its presence and inclined to stiffen resistance to *Y*'s charms. When someone pursues the latter course, there is something deeply correct about the initial self-description: the subject really *does* give priority to *X*, and that shows up in the strategy for responding to the apparent failure. People's schemes of values aren't only expressed in their choices, but in their regrets and their ways of *revising* when things appear to go wrong. The scheme isn't revealed in a set of successive decisions alone, but also in the pattern of its growth.

The structure of a scheme of values is that of a complex partial ordering. It's complex because the features we pick out in assessing our options often don't stand in determinate relations with one another. Perhaps in most, even almost all, combinations with other identifiable features, *X* dominates *Y*, but there are some combinations in which the relation is reversed. When we describe ourselves we do so by appealing to readily identifiable features, and, in consequence, our self-descriptions aren't entirely accurate (although few people, I suspect, are massively self-deceived.) Moreover, as we have seen, more complexity enters because of our dispositions for responding to unforeseen situations. It's partial because for some pairs of identifiable features, most prominently for those occurring at the top of the ordering, there may be no general presumption that one will outrank the other. Perhaps in some situations there's a disposition for one to take priority, dependent on contingent characteristics of the perceived situation. Often, however, the person may struggle with a choice, seeing a "fundamental value conflict" or "incommensurable values."



Finally, many people can be attributed several schemes of values. Elsewhere, I have credited an individual scientist with a “broad scheme of values”, an “epistemic scheme of values”, and a “probative scheme of values” (Kitcher 2011). The first is the overarching scheme within which the latter two have their place. The second covers the judgments made by “the scientist *qua* scientist” (Rudner 1953), and the third is expressed in a particular area of scientific work. Similar considerations apply to anyone who assumes different roles with different norms. We suppose physicians to practice according to a more stringent scheme of values than that expressed in their off-duty conduct. Weber and his followers regard scientists as giving priority to epistemic standards once they enter the laboratory, taking on a different scheme than the one guiding them in their non-scientific lives. In such cases, the overarching (broad) scheme of values must itself license the choice of steering by the subordinate scheme when the person takes on the appropriate role. The broad scheme allows the taking on of the role and conforming to its norms during the practice of that role.

So far, an outline of what is meant when we discuss someone’s values (the account will be refined below.) Often, though, we detach values from any agent, talking about values (period.) This is to introduce a normative concept, to identify the priorities an agent (or perhaps all agents in a particular group, or all agents) ought to set. Values are the targets of properly-conducted valuations, those expressing schemes of values with the right priorities.

But what can ‘properly-conducted’ and ‘right’ mean here? Valuation guides human thought and behavior – as well as the thought and behavior of some non-human animals. Rather than seeing the standard for correct valuation as set by some external realm, I invert the dependence. To be properly valued is to be valued in a justified act of appraisal. A scheme of values would set the right priorities just in case the appraisals it generated continued to be justified in an indefinitely extended sequence of appraisals. In William James’s formulation, when the scheme “works in the long run and on the whole” – that is, when justification *sticks*.

I owe an explanation of what justification amounts to. Plainly, I cannot identify justified processes of valuation as those reliably mapping an independent world of values. What alternative is there? A fashionable answer to this question invokes a *different*, allegedly less dubious, external source of constraint on appraisals. There is, we are told, a realm of reasons. Justified processes of appraisal are those conforming to the features of this realm. Proper valuation identifies what “we have most reason to choose.” A different picture – one with its own style of strangeness. The

inhabitants of the realm of reasons enter our minds and do battle there, and, if all goes well, the strongest prevail.

Here again, I follow Quine in deflating ontology. Should we believe in reasons? To be sure, people engage in processes that end in decisions. As a result of those processes, they form new beliefs and engage in action. Many of those processes don't involve careful weighing of different considerations – some are habitual or impulsive. Nevertheless, let's stretch a term, and use 'reasoning' to cover all of them. Reasonings often involve valuation, and they are subject to the same kind of normative appraisal. So, in both cases, I want to replace the odd ontological picture with an attempt to explain when the processes are justified.

Not only is the picture of reasons strange. It is also blurred to the point of indecipherability. For those who appeal to reasons – creatures of a supposedly independent world – concede that they can say very little about them. A theory of valuation so attenuated is of little help in any attempt to make progress with respect to values more systematic and sure-footed. Nor is its attempt to reveal the possibility of objectively correct valuation likely to prove convincing. Skeptics who view talk of “proper appraisal” as self-deception will surely ask why they should believe in some constraining realm about which its champions can tell them so little.

For some domains, we know something about how to distinguish good reasonings from bad ones: we appeal to the methodological canons for inquiry in those domains. There are (evolving) standards for proof in mathematics, and (evolving) standards for supplying proper evidence in the various branches of the natural sciences (and, to a lesser extent, in the social sciences as well.) So I shall take one further pragmatist step. Rather than trying to anchor the processes underlying valuation in a realm of reasons, I see them as justified in light of conforming to methodological canons, *themselves generated in the pursuit of valuational inquiry*. These canons emerge from a historical process, in which people, individually and collectively, arrive at judgments about what is valuable. As they revise their judgments, they can reflect on what kinds of processes underlie what they perceive as the successes and failures of the past, thus formulating explicit methodological principles. Putting these methodological principles to work, they arrive at further value judgments, sometimes modifying their previous appraisals. In light of what has emerged, perceptions of success and failure can shift, thereby prompting revision of the accepted canons. So it goes in an indefinitely extending process, in which valuation and the methodology of valuation co-evolve.

There are no firm foundations here. Rather a picture of inquiry (and of knowledge) as shaped by a long history (and by the contingencies of that history), in which, at each stage, the best that human beings can do is to take stock of the past in light of what it has delivered, revising, refining, and rejecting where the judgments made by predecessors and the canons they have applied appear defective. “The trail of the human serpent is thus over everything.”

The *best* human beings can do ... Actual history, of course, falls spectacularly short of the best. Human advances in the sphere of valuation are relatively infrequent, and usually attained by struggles that are contingent, messy, and even bloody. Improving the record of success cannot be the province of philosophy alone. However sublime a philosophical account of method and of progress may be, it will not implement itself. Yet that account is needed, and supplying it, making method explicit, is the philosophical task. For, just as modern science was fueled by early efforts at identifying “method” – vague, apparently inconsistent, and restricted as they were – human inquiry into how to appraise will, pragmatists hope, have a similar effect in the valuational domain. Progress in this domain will thus *have the chance* to become more systematic and secure.

To undertake the philosophical task will be impossible without further conceptual geography. We’ll need a firmer grasp on the kinds of entities that can make valuational progress, about the character of the progress they make, and about the divisions and interactions of the various subdomains of valuation. The next sections will attempt to map this territory.

### Levels

So far I have talked casually and unsystematically about the entities to which progress in valuation can be attributed. I’ll now try to remedy that.

Individual human beings are obvious examples of such entities. We recognize people as rejecting goals they should not have set for themselves, as abandoning habits they ought never to have adopted, as coming to appreciate things that enrich their lives, and so forth. The ontologically inflated approaches I have rejected offer a simple account of these cases. The subjects in question discover that what they have taken as values don’t belong to the domain of values, or that something they haven’t previously seen as valuable does have a place there. On the related account in terms of reasons, they learn that they don’t have reasons for valuing as they have done, or that the balance of reasons favors valuing things they have slighted. I cannot avail myself

of these straightforward interpretations, and the construal I offer must be more complex. Indeed, as we shall see, it will involve recognizing valuational progress at a different level. The progress of individuals and of groups will turn out to be interdependent.

Groups, including societies and even the whole human population, can also make progress in valuation. There are familiar examples. The United States made moral progress – *some* moral progress – when slavery was abolished; and made further progress with the end of Jim Crow, and the attempt to ensure some civil rights for African-Americans. It recognized the values of freedom and of equality in broader forms than had previously been appreciated. Universities made moral and ethical progress when they opened their doors (or their examinations) to women; indeed, since the end of the eighteenth century, many societies have made moral and ethical progress – unevenly – by expanding the opportunities available to women. They have understood the value of women’s broader participation in a variety of roles. In my lifetime, the two societies I know best, the United Kingdom and the United States, have made considerable progress in recognizing the value of loves that previously could not speak their name. There are signs today of increasing appreciation of a more diverse set of valuable forms of artistic expression. That, too, constitutes valuational progress. By contrast, the recent retreat to dogmatic insistence on the unique correctness of a single set of theological doctrines, and the corresponding shrinkage of ecumenical attitudes, shows valuational regress in matters of religion.

Many people would agree with these claims about progress, and I shall not question their correctness. It is not easy, however, to explain exactly what they mean. Does the moral progress of a group require similar progressive changes to occur among all its members? That would surely set too high a bar. In none of the three moral revolutions to which I have pointed was unanimity achieved. To this day, a large number of societies (perhaps all?) include people who believe in the inferiority of black and brown people, think of “woman’s place” as the domestic sphere, and regard love between members of the same sex as a disgusting, sinful perversion. The moral progress of societies involves something less than the universal acceptance of a moral attitude correcting a prior moral mistake and translated systematically into different conduct. Retreating into vagueness, I shall say that the new and progressive attitude becomes “dominant” in the society, and is expressed in a “significant” modification of individual behavior.

What do these cloudy phrases mean? Different things in different cases. One sign of the moral progress of a society is a change in its laws. One mode of legal progress is the adjustment of

laws to reflect a morally progressive attitude. The previous legal code embodied one moral perspective, the present version a different one, and for an agent to switch from the former to the latter would constitute individual moral progress. The Emancipation Proclamation and the repeal of laws against sodomy thus constitute legal progress and are *symptoms* of moral progress at the social level. Other symptoms consist in the adjustment of rules and conventions within specific institutions. Despite failure to add the Equal Rights Amendment to its constitution, the United States has made social progress through the modification of rules for admission to educational institutions, for participating in various professions, for engaging in leisure activities (creating competitive sporting events for women, for example), as well as by passing laws against discrimination on grounds of sex or gender. Just as the law may come to reflect a morally progressive attitude, so too with social progress. Moreover, social progress symptomatic of moral progress need not occur on the large scale of institutional reform. It becomes visible in everyday adjustments of social interaction, in the kinds of jokes no longer seen as amusing, in the language people use, in altered conversational patterns or modified versions of the division of domestic labor.

The wide variety of ways in which group-level progress may be manifested exposes the difficulties of offering a clear and precise standard by which the progress of groups can be judged. It would be absurd to demand that each member believe some new value-judgment, always act in accordance with it, that there be new laws and conventions universally adhered to, and so on. At the general level of discussing valuational progress, the best we can do is to acknowledge the multi-dimensionality of the relevant changes, and ask for advances of sufficient size and importance on some dimensions to compensate for whatever stasis, or even retreats, occur on others. Not much improvement on declaring that the new attitude is “dominant” and is expressed in a “significant” modification of individual behavior. Yet appreciating multi-dimensionality should alert us to one point. Similar troubles occur, admittedly on a lesser scale, in appraising the progress of individuals.

Sometimes the progress people make with respect to valuation is perfect. The processes through which they appraise their options thoroughly absorb a new insight, apply it consistently, without unbalancing other habits of valuing or generating harsh reactions to those who have not yet seen the light, and the result is a consistent improvement in conduct without any new regressive effects on behavior. Cases of this sort do exist, but they are rare. Typically, incorporating a

disposition to valuation takes time. In some contexts, no trouble arises, but the subject often has to learn how to combine the new propensity with previous habits of judgment. Converts to a cause may avoid expressing the prejudices they have now abandoned, at least in the most obvious contexts, while slipping into subtler forms of biased judgment, adopting a patronizing tolerance rather than genuine sympathy, becoming over-zealous in decrying those who exhibit the conduct they have repudiated, or overestimating the modifications in behavior that are needed (bending over backwards in ostentatious displays of new virtue.) Taken all in all, their new character may be an improvement, and a sober assessment of the gains and losses may report a positive balance. Nevertheless, the variety of the domains in which those changes are registered challenges any precise general account of what counts as progress. Here, too, we find multi-dimensionality. In consequence, the best we can do is to see the new insight as “dominant” in the person’s thinking and as expressed in a “significant” modification of behavior.

Below, I shall suggest how these fuzzy formulations can be sharpened a little by concentrating on particular types of values and valuational progress. Before that can be done, however, some more conceptual geography is needed.

### Two Types of Progress

For all the skepticism sometimes expressed about talk of progress, most people are happy to identify the progress of many different sorts of enterprises: building houses, learning a musical instrument, particular kinds of technology, hospital patients, workplace conditions, schools, national economies, and a vast number of other examples. I’ll use the bland term ‘system’ to characterize the entities to which progress talk is applied. In the application, someone chooses particular features of the system, regarding those features as collectively specifying the state of the system at a time (or through a time period). The features pick out the *state variables*, and, in making a judgment of progress, the appraiser compares the values of those variables at two different times (or in two different periods). Someone considering the progress of a patient might, for example, concentrate on the values of particular parameters at hourly intervals. Someone interested in the progress of the papacy, might consider measures of adherence to doctrine, of social outreach, of support for the church, and so forth, during the reigns of successive popes.

Progress talk isn't committed to issuing verdicts about any two states of the focal system. In some instances, it may be conceded that certain kinds of comparisons don't issue any clear judgment of progress, stasis, or regress. It is, however, vulnerable to charges of omitting relevant features. Critics may reasonably protest a judgment of economic progress based on appeal to national productivity alone, contending that levels of unemployment or the distribution of wealth should also be taken into account. Skeptics often use the simplifications made in enthusiastic progress judgments to decry the possibility of any warranted claim about the progress of the system in question. (It's an appropriate challenge, but it's only the beginning of a serious debate.)

For our purposes, the most important distinction among progress concepts divides cases of *teleological* progress from *pragmatic* progress. A simple formulation: teleological progress is progress *to*; pragmatic progress is progress *from*. *Pace* Thoreau and Don Quixote, most journeys proceed towards a place fixed in advance, and progress is appropriately measured by the decreasing distance to the destination. The progress of a hospital patient can sometimes be assessed in either fashion. Doctors may scrutinize the gap between parameter values and "the normal range," or they can be gratified by the increasing distance from the initial worrying values.

There are many examples in which the criterion for progress doesn't inspect the distance between the states to be compared and some ideal state. For there may be no definable ideal state. A young violinist may make progress, even though there is no ideal violinist exemplifying musical perfection across the spectrum of the actual repertoire (let alone all possible pieces.) Smartphones make progress but there is no Platonic Form of the device. In both cases, progress consists in solving problems and overcoming limits. Violinists improve their technique, become subtler at interpretation, command a wider range of pieces, and so forth. Smartphones become able to perform more tasks, overcome the glitches in the software, are easier to use, etc.

As previous chapters have argued, progress in the best-studied forms of inquiry - the natural and the formal sciences - should be seen as pragmatic progress. Here, I want to show how the same goes for valuational inquiry. Much writing about values, in moral philosophy, in ethics, in political philosophy, in social philosophy, in philosophy of religion, and even in aesthetics is held by a picture (usually tacitly taken for granted) that progress in these domains is teleological. That is, I claim, a fundamental error.

For what could the goal be? Finding the complete truth about the domain in question? Devout people might propose that as a goal for religion – and this is the instance with most plausibility. In all cases, there are inevitably far too many truths for humanity, from its origin to its extinction, to arrive at more than an infinitesimal fraction. Presumably, we ought to seek the most important truths. But how are these determined? The religious believer might supply an answer, by invoking the will of the preferred deity(ies). That won't do for the other domains. So an appeal must be made to a kind of organization traditionally envisaged for science (as a whole). Just as the ideal of scientific knowledge is to arrive at a completely axiomatized system of the laws of nature, so too we want counterparts for morality, ethics, politics, social life, and aesthetics. Since that ideal fails lamentably for science (an orthodoxy of contemporary philosophy of science about which outsiders seem blissfully unaware), there's little reason to embrace it in areas where debates are rife and the products of inquiry are far more scattered and disorganized. Teleology about progress in these domains is simply a matter of faith.

Further, of course, avowing that faith commits the believer to heralding judgments about the values in question as true, independently and in advance of inquiry in the pertinent domain. How is this notion of truth to be understood? In terms of the inflated ontology I have proposed to abandon? If so, the prospects for arriving at any clear criterion of progress appear bleak, for, as I've remarked, when enthusiasts are queried about the "realities" in which they anchor talk of truth – worlds of values, realms of reason, imaginary museums of artworks, and the like – they turn surprisingly quiet.

Hence, it's at least worth exploring the possibility of viewing valuational progress (even, I suggest, in religion!) as pragmatic progress, and taking whatever notion of truth is attributed to be understood in the way suggested by James and Dewey (following Peirce). First take a transition to be justifiably accepted as progressive when it overcomes what has been justifiably identified as a problem. Second, identify the transition as progressive (*tout court*) when it continues to be justifiably accepted as progressive in the indefinitely proceeding further course of inquiry – when it endures "in the long run and on the whole."

Much of the work of later sections will consist in attempting to show how this strategy might be pursued.



## Differentiating Domains

Before undertaking that more conceptual geography is needed. The next step will be to fix a taxonomy of various domains of value inquiry. I'll start with the most familiar distinction. That between morality and ethics.

Morality, as I shall understand it, is concerned with action. Its central question is: "What should be done?" Ordinary language countenances acts of judgment. Allowing this broad sense, how we form our beliefs falls under the purview of morality, allowing for moral appraisals of people's attitudes, even when their judgments are never expressed in overt behavior. Nevertheless, our moral approval of the righteous believer whose ideals never prompt action is surely limited, and our condemnation of prejudices that are always restrained from exhibiting themselves is mitigated. Morality's target is a complex, consisting of the judgment and the conduct it drives. Shaping that conduct is the point of the moral project.

Ethics has broader scope. It is concerned not only with what someone should do, but with how a person should be. Ethical appraisal includes moral appraisal. To be a good person, to live well, is, in part, to think and act rightly. Yet high moral quality doesn't seem to be enough. People can be exemplary in discharging their duties, and still lead pinched lives. This may be no fault of their own, for the world may not allow them opportunities for developing their psychological capacities very far or give them occasion to contribute to any worthwhile enterprise. Alternatively, they may choose some trivial venture for themselves, or simply drift through a sequence of harmless but unfruitful days, so that their lives never amount to anything.

The moral progress of an individual consists in changes through which that person's moral practice improves. In rejecting the idea of any independent realm for moral judgments to map, I abandon a teleological conception of moral progress. Instead of viewing progress in terms of the (usually partial) attainment of goals, I see it as consisting in the overcoming of existing problems and the transcending of previous limitations. Moral progress is driven from behind, rather than drawn forward by the call of the Right. The moral agent is better seen as a musician in training, a violinist, say, whose technique is currently deficient in various respects, and whose interpretive capacities are limited, rather than as a believer whose tasks are to identify the Moral Truth and to strengthen the Will so belief will be translated into action.

In speaking of a moral practice, I recognize at least two dimensions along which moral agents change. One of these comprises beliefs about the moral qualities of actions; the other consists in their dispositions for modifying their beliefs and for the guidance of conduct by belief. As we shall see, these dispositions can be decomposed into a number of subsidiary psychological capacities – *sensitivities* as I shall call them (Kitcher 2021a, Chapter 3). Some important modes of moral progress involve refinements of these sensitivities.

Because ethics subsumes morality, when someone makes moral progress, that person also makes ethical progress, given the proviso that the change does not interfere with capacities underlying ethical judgment. The proviso can be violated. Most of us have encountered people who, in becoming morally diligent and more scrupulous, adopt a narrower vision of the possibilities for themselves and for others. Youthful recognition of many valuable “experiments of living” gives way to a rigidly circumscribed set of life patterns.

The central ethical question is “How to live?” Part of the answer is deferred to morality: “First, act well.” Since ethics is broader than morality, that response is incomplete. Acknowledging the incompleteness, the questioner might ask: “What else?” So, in discussing ethical progress, the distinctive question focuses on modes of progress (and regress) that are independent of changes in moral beliefs and moral sensitivities. What types of modifications of the non-moral dimensions of a person’s ethical practice make life go better (or worse)?

Here too I think of progress as pragmatic (“progress from”) rather than teleological (“progress to”). Distinctively ethical progress occurs through remedying deficiencies in people’s capacities for conceiving or appraising potential life trajectories for themselves, or in their dispositions to realize the patterns they have chosen. Hence the proviso of two paragraphs back. Moral advance can blunt the sensibilities distinctively ethical progress refines.

To clarify this view, it’s useful to contrast it with two rivals, both prominent in Greek thought. One of these (a relative of the idea of an independent realm of values) postulates a list of objective goods, including the virtues, accomplishments, friendship, the contemplation of truth, and the like. The other focuses on agents and their feelings. Hedonists think lives go well when they are rich in pleasures and poor in pains. Notice that both views need development to answer the ethical question as it is traditionally posed. Explaining what it is to live well requires saying *how much* of the specified goodies is required. Approaching the issue in terms of progress dodges that

issue. When the question is posed comparatively – “How to live better?” – a list of valuable things will suffice. More is better.

My preferred approach modifies the liberal tradition of addressing the question, pioneered by Mill, and further articulated in recent times by John Rawls, Bernard Williams, and Susan Wolf. At its heart is an emphasis on freedom, or more exactly on a particular style of freedom. As Mill specifies it, “The only freedom which deserves the name is that of pursuing our own good in our own way, so long as we do not deprive others of theirs or inhibit their attempts to attain it.” Liberals set this freedom at the heart of the good life. They react to the obvious (and sad) historical fact that most people who have ever lived have had the pattern of their lives thrust upon them, assigned to a particular station and a particular role by race or sex or caste or class. Living well is not being enslaved in this way. Instead the person chooses what are to be the things that matter most, specifying a “life project” or “plan of life.” Living well is to select the project freely, and to pursue it with some success. (Here again, we might ask “How much?” As before, my comparative formulation sidesteps that question.)

Is that enough? Apparently not. Some possible “life projects” are too trivial to anchor a well-lived life, however successfully they are pursued. A classic example: someone freely chooses to retreat to some isolated place, avoiding any sustained human contact, devoting each day to counting and recounting the blades of grass in a particular area, and recording the totals; as life ebbs away, the volumes containing the tallies are burned to avoid passing the precious information to a world unworthy to receive it. The grass-counter has not discovered an unprecedented new way to live. The project is pathological, and the pursuit of it pathetic.

Hence, it appears, some further condition is required. Perhaps something from the list of objective goods must be added? Many liberals develop views about how to live, by judicious borrowing in this way. An approach akin to mine could be developed along these lines by adding a *Community Condition*: The project of a well-lived life must aim at making a positive difference to the lives of others, and the life must attain some success in achieving this aim. In effect, Mill’s inspiring sentence would be rewritten to replace the emphasis on negative freedom with a demand to enhance positive freedom: “The only freedom which deserves the name is that of pursuing our own good in our own way, so long as we thereby help others to attain theirs.”

Philosophers who emphasize positive freedom typically conceive the relation between the individual and society differently from liberals like Mill and his successors, and from earlier figures such as Hobbes and Locke. They reject the idea of independent, fully-formed individuals who interact with one another to create and maintain a society. Rather, they insist on the social shaping of the individual. “The conception of mind as a purely isolated possession of the self is at the very antipodes of the truth” (Dewey 1916/1980, 304). Liberalism can be improved by rewriting Mill’s sentence in the suggested fashion. It can be improved further by replacing Mill’s pre-social individual with the socially-embedded self favored by Dewey and his kin.

To appreciate this point, consider the concept of autonomy Mill borrowed from von Humboldt. It is absurd to imagine a self fully-formed at birth, eventually choosing a life-project expressing its innate dispositions. Autonomous selection of a pattern for our own lives must result from the proclivities we develop as we mature (a process that, as I’ll suggest below, may take a lifetime). Those proclivities are inevitably influenced by the state of the world in the period through which we grow, limited by the store of ideas then available, further constricted by the small sample of the human population guiding our growth. After the breakdown he suffered in his early adulthood, John Stuart Mill revised the plan for his life, recognizing the role he had previously chosen, that of Benthamite reformer, as thrust upon him by the extraordinary (monstrous?) education his father had devised for him. Reading Wordsworth and meeting Harriet Taylor had broadened his horizons, opening up possibilities beyond his previous imagination, and enabling him (as he thought) to make a *freer* choice of his own good. As I interpret his route to the philosophical views expressed in *On Liberty* the famous sentence I have quoted bears the traces of his breakdown and his recovery from it.

If the pre-breakdown Mill doesn’t count as autonomous, who does? *All* of us are influenced, *profoundly* influenced, by the particular people who loom largest in our early socialization. So must we dismiss the idea of free pursuit of our own good as illusory? Surely not. Freedom of the kind celebrated by Mill comes in degrees. Nobody has the maximum amount. It does not follow that all human beings have the same amount. Even before poetry and love opened his eyes, Mill’s choice of his own good (becoming the Benthamite apostle for his generation) was more autonomous than that of the tanner of hides whose “life project” is assigned on the basis of caste, or than the nineteenth-century miner whose education and whose choices are confined by social class – or, for that matter, than the young Harriet Taylor. One distinctive style of ethical

progress, exemplified in Mill's own life, consists in the modification of a life plan in the light of increased freedom.

As I have contended, the question "How to live?" is best given a comparative form. Posed in that way, an embryonic answer can be given. Individuals come to live better, if they make moral progress, or, given my amendment of the liberal account of the good life, if their selection of their own good becomes more autonomous, their pursuit of the good becomes more successful, or their contributions to the lives of others become richer. Provided, of course, that the changes along the various dimensions in which advances occur do not interfere with one another.

So far, then, preliminary accounts of moral and ethical progress for individual human beings. Moral and ethical judgments are, of course, species of value judgments. In talking about someone's ethical character or moral code, it is natural to attribute particular values, or, better, to recognize the person's scheme of values. This person, we say, values patient efforts to learn; that one values intellectual courage and complete honesty. Judgments of this kind can be appropriate without sparking any attempt to decide which of the two is right. We should not exclude the possibility of pluralism, of two traditions, each of which recognizes the attractions of the priority ordering favored by the other, both making ethical progress without ever completely converging.

Moreover, the priorities we assign do not all fall within the moral or the ethical sphere. We recognize people who value poetry and those who value gardening. For many such people, treating their reading (and writing?) of verse or their tending of the flower beds as constituents of their life projects would be a mistake - and it would be even more of a blunder to suppose they take engagement with poems or weeding to be morally required. So there seems to be another class of values. Let's call them *personal values*. They can be roughly characterized, for the moment, as associated with valuations whose targets - objects, properties, events, processes, states of affairs - are viewed by the person as permissible enrichments of life. Attempts to introduce the valued targets into the person's life does not violate any moral demand, nor does it disturb the pursuit of the life project. They are not only harmless in this way, but also bring pleasure, satisfaction, and fulfillment. They may even be regarded as reinforcing the person's moral commitments and enhancing the ability to pursue the chosen project.

Recognizing personal values deflects a charge frequently leveled against both the ancient ("objective list") answer to the question "How to live?" and to its liberal successor. Although

hedonists are often scornfully dismissed by partisans of both views, they have a point: even if it would be better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied, replacing dissatisfaction by joy would be a further improvement. In recording his personal crisis, Mill effectively concedes the point. What plunged him into dejection was his sudden awareness that achieving all his goals would not be “a great joy and happiness” to him. Indeed, as Wordsworth and Harriet Taylor combined to bring him relief, he came to recognize the absence of joy as a symptom of the incompleteness of the project he had set for himself. I shall return to the implications of this point later.

To understand the progress of individuals with respect to personal values, including both the domains of aesthetic experience and of religion, is, I suggest, to recognize how modifications of people’s schemes of values contribute to the ethical quality of their lives. In elaborating this proposal, we shall have to consider not just how some changes enrich them, but also the impacts upon others. Indeed, shared advances in personal values can generate forms of social progress.

Groups, as well as individuals, can make moral and ethical progress, often manifested in their legal and political institutions. They are also able to make social changes whose effects are felt by individuals in the progressive realization and modification of their personal values. Group-level progress comes about, of course, through the decisions and actions of individuals. On the other hand, the life of any individual is shaped by the character of the social groups to which that individual belongs. Each of us is taught, at an early stage, to give priority to some things over others. We acquire habits of action and of reasoning that our communities think it appropriate to instill in their members. Even the processes through which we come to reject parts of the lore we have initially absorbed originate in capacities and dispositions that are molded by our early socialization.

So much is commonplace. It invites a simple picture, one in which progressive changes in the valuations made by individuals modify something at the group level – a moral code, a social constellation of ethical, aesthetic, and religious options – that affects the socialization of subsequent generations of individuals, with the cycle repeating itself indefinitely. The picture is a useful idealization, but we should be aware, from the start, of its limitations. The dichotomy of two levels is a fiction. Even in the sciences, there are intermediate scales between the lone inquirer and the consensus of the community. In turning to values, the fiction is strikingly evident. Young people do not acquire from some unique “collective” an initial understanding of values. Perhaps there is

some overall societal consensus on such matters. Typically, however, it subsumes further kinds of distinctive agreements among smaller groups, often through many levels. Some general moral maxims may be endorsed by all members of the society, articulated and extended by those who adopt a specific religion (or humanistic world-view), further developed in different sects, given additional twists by local congregations, and even receiving distinctive emphases within a particular family. The development of the young starts at home, within the narrowest group, but, of course, as we grow, we move within – and are influenced by – broader groups, many of which reject things we were initially taught. The thought of a single interaction between individual and collective practices is a grotesque distortion of actuality.

Nevertheless, it can usefully stand in for a more refined picture, in which a single interaction between the individual and the most general collective (“society”) substitutes for a multi-layered reality (with different layers in different cases.) Adjacent layers interact, and, in consequence of the combination of many different interactions, what happens at the individual level is felt at the societal level, and what occurs at the societal level is transmitted to individuals. For my purposes here, the crude idea of direct reflection of enough individual change in social change and of social change in the modified socialization of individuals can be used as the model for the more complex dynamics that actually occurs.

I’ll sum up the overall picture, by offering a blueprint for discussions to come. Individuals make moral or ethical progress when they identify and/or partially resolve existing problems in morality or ethical life. They improve their schemes of values through changes in personal values, when those changes lead to experiences that enhance their lives and those of others in ethically permissible ways. Out of these forms of individual progress may come progressive social changes. Society is made *healthier*. Its increased health is reflected in the more widespread moral and ethical progress of its members, brought about by improvements in the ways in which the young are now socialized.

I’ll conclude this lengthy conceptual geography with a brief remark on the medical analogy I have adopted. Progress in matters of health should not be seen in terms of diminishing distance from a goal – the patient comes closer and closer to “perfect health.” For there is no such thing as perfect health. Just how long would the ideally healthy person live? With what sensory and cognitive capacities? What kinds of lung capacities or heart rates? What running and swimming speeds? People become healthier by overcoming the problems that have beset them, and by

transcending their previous limits. By the same token, societies become morally healthier through curing their prior pathologies. We record the particular types of their advances in moral health as legal progress, or social progress, or political progress – just as we might characterize the improvements of a patient as superior mental health or a return to basic bodily functionality or increased physical fitness. Judgments of these types would be based on observations of changes in phenotypic traits, often measured by physiological or psychological parameters. These changes would be viewed as indicators of an improvement in the patient’s underlying condition, progress with respect to health. Legal progress, social progress, and political progress are likewise symptoms of improvements in a society’s underlying condition, its healthier state – its ethical progress. Moreover, the diseases from which moral progress brings recovery are diverse in the particular symptoms and the kinds of symptoms through which we identify them. So, I suggest, attempting to say exactly what is meant by describing an attitude as “dominant” or behavior as “significantly” modified is as hopeless as trying to specify the symptoms that must be observed for a patient to be cured. Everything depends on the prior disease, and, as we know, diseases are highly diverse. The lack of a fully general account does not, however, prevent precision in the particular instance: we know how to describe recovery from the common cold or from a potentially fatal cancer. Social pathologies also come in many varieties. Here too there is no great difficulty in treating specific cases. We may, for example, point to the large and small social changes, the legal changes, and the political changes that signal how a new attitude became dominant in the United States during the 1860s, and to the modifications of conduct indicating how a significant change in patterns of behavior had occurred.

Although precision and clarity are philosophical virtues, we should resist turning them into philosophical fetishes. Everyday talk of the moral progress (and regress) of societies can be endorsed without providing an account that is both precise and general. As the great evolutionary biologist Richard Levins taught his colleagues many years ago, the cost of demanding precision and generality is typically a disastrous loss of accuracy.

### The Genealogy of Valuation

My goal is to understand the ways in which progress in various types of valuation can occur, in hopes that these forms of progress can come about more frequently and less chancily. As in



previous chapters (and as in much of my philosophical work), I find it useful to seek this goals by reflecting on the history of our practices. The *long* history. What passes for the history of ethics (as philosophers understand it) is typically a history of *theories* (and not of ethical life) and it starts far too late (in ancient Greece). Penetrating the deep past, before the invention of writing, plainly involves a certain amount of conjecture. Even a speculative genealogy, though, can loosen the hold of entrenched assumptions.

Practices of valuation are extremely ancient, antedating moral life. They arose initially (I conjecture) from a recognized need to regiment desires and impulses. Our evolutionary cousins, the chimpanzees, can learn from their experiences, quelling their desires when attempting to do so would bring unpleasant consequences. The “Machiavellian intelligence”, well-documented by primatologists, depends on a propensity to identify types of situations and of actions, and to repress behavior that would occur under more benign conditions. This propensity was almost certainly present in our last common ancestor with the chimps and bonobos, and has been passed down through the hominin lineage. Prudence is very old.

The generic problem of regimentation requires agents to make distinctions among the various springs of action. The agent recognizes potential behavior as leading to alternative outcomes, and, in light of the anticipated quality of the outcomes, ranks desires, impulses, intentions and plans. Urges for immediate copulation are suppressed in the presence of a dominant member of the band – sexual desire is implicitly ranked as inferior to maintaining bodily integrity. In the unfolding of valuation in hominin and human life, the problem sometimes takes this simple form. The agent’s decision echoes Hamlet: “to do or not to do.” In the resultant choice, one outcome is evaluated as meriting or not meriting pursuit. Often, however, more sophisticated versions arise. Prudent agents are faced with alternatives, and the problem becomes comparative. Should this be ranked higher than that? Finally, at some stage in our past, our predecessors undertook the superlative version of the problem. They asked: “What is the best that can be done in this situation?” In dealing with the many instances of these problems, human beings have learned to recognize connections among situations, actions and consequences, discovering what brings enduring satisfaction and distinguishing it from what yields immediate pleasure at the cost of long-term regret. Ranking their desires and the objects of those desires, they have implicitly separated what is desired from what is valuable. They have constructed a partial scheme of personal values.

As I have proposed elsewhere, moral life enters at some point between one hundred thousand and fifty thousand years before the present.<sup>1</sup> It transfers the activity of regimenting desires to the collective level. A group – the local band of some forty to seventy hunter-gatherers – comes to view certain recurrent situations as problematic not only for at least one of the affected parties, but for all. Interactions leading to quarrels, with consequent suffering for some of those involved, are now taken to be a collective matter. They are problematic for *us*.

The trigger for this shift was (I suggest) the fragility of the social lives of pre-moral human beings (and their hominin ancestors). Like the chimps and the bonobos, our predecessors participated in an unusual form of sociality. Their bands were mixed by age and sex, containing multiple adult males and multiple adult females. Coping with this form of social life required a particular trait, one that can be identified in contemporary chimps and bonobos: a capacity for recognizing the desires, plans, and intentions of others and of modifying behavior to facilitate their success. The members of these social groups were (and are) *responsive* to one another. Responsiveness is a psychological trait (or, perhaps, an ensemble of psychological traits), about whose evolutionary history I shan't speculate. The trait is required to prevent societies of this special form from rapid dissolution.

The trouble, however, is that human responsiveness is limited. In some contexts, agents will respond to one another, with happy results. In others, the anticipated cooperation is withheld. From this emerges the fundamental problem from which moral life arises. We have enough evolved responsiveness to live together in small groups. But we lack sufficient responsiveness to manage this stably and smoothly. Like the societies of our evolutionary cousins, ancestral bands (hominin and early human) were always vulnerable to falling apart, undergoing phases of social division from which they were rescued by time-consuming rituals in peace-making. To allow those societies a less fragile existence, some device, some technology, was required. That technology had to address the underlying problem: our limited responsiveness to our fellows.

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<sup>1</sup> Intra-group regulation of conduct must have been well-developed before trade among neighboring groups became possible. Current evidence suggests that there were trading networks between twenty thousand and thirty thousand years ago. We are unlikely ever to know the details of how adjacent bands became able, first to tolerate one another and then to engage in exchanges of resources, but it's hard to imagine these transitions as occurring without a long period of exploratory interactions. They presuppose the extension of moral codes that are recognizably followed and that offer guarantees of protections to those subject to them. Hence my conjecture that moral life began at least fifty thousand years before the present.

The technology in question is, of course, morality. It serves as an amplifier of human responsiveness, a device to bring about responsive behavior under circumstances in which agents would otherwise be unresponsive. Since I have often been misunderstood on this point, let me be heavy-handed and repetitive. Morality is a technology for solving a *psychological* problem, the problem of limited responsiveness. Of course, the pioneers who invented it did not see it in those terms. They recognized the *symptoms* of a disease they couldn't diagnose: they observed *behavioral* troubles, breakdowns in cooperation. But the fundamental issue to be addressed, the source of the recurrent breakdowns, is psychological. Morality *isn't* merely a device for bringing about cooperation, a set of patches, if you like. It's an attempt to decrease the frequency of breakdowns in cooperation through tackling the disease, for modifying our psychology (specifically, that part of our psychology prompting us to action) so that we are less inclined to be unresponsive. That is, it seeks to regiment our desires and impulses in an unprecedented way.

Consider the kinds of situations likely to have spurred the first attempts at moral life. Important resources are unequally shared. Or a confrontation among band members turns violent. Tired of the continual eruption of these episodes, the band decides - "in the cool hour" - to lay down certain patterns for the behavior of members. Resources are to be shared (in whatever ways are seen as roughly equal). Violence isn't to be initiated. Rule-breakers are to be punished. Prior to the introduction of these simple rules, there are frequent situations in which conflict arises. The situations have two main properties: first, there's an agent (or agents) who isn't deterred from starting a conflict through any prudential consideration; second, some other agent (or agents) suffer from the conflict. Unchecked by prudence, and unconcerned with the wishes of another band member (or members) - *that is: unresponsive to that individual* - the initiator goes ahead. A desire is unregimented. After a pattern for behavior has been prescribed, a prudential motive is introduced where none existed before. To avoid punishment, would-be initiators have to restrain themselves. Morality works through the collective regimentation of individual desires.

At the first stages of moral life, the rules adopted and the patterns of behavior commended were surely simple and crude, focused on the most obvious instances in which the limits of responsiveness were felt. Moreover, many moral theorists would surely protest the thought of this type of change as initiating truly *moral* life. For those who conform to the nascent code do so out of purely prudential motives. They have not yet risen to "the dignity of the moral agent."

I see the situation differently. Once what I have described as “moral life” has begun, cultural evolution will favor the emergence of further mechanisms for directing behavior to accord with the rules. As with biological evolution, important functions are guarded by having back-up devices: our bodies are well-buffered against many sorts of major disturbances. Early human societies developed ways of socializing the young so as to secure moral conformity even when the prudential motive might prove ineffective. One of those back-up devices is the conception of “gods as guardians of morality.” Another lies in instilling a sense of group identity so that forbearance becomes part of “who we are” and of “what we do”. The young take pride in according with the precepts of the band. Deviating from them (or, at least, from some of them) comes to seem unthinkable.

Thus a gradual process leads to something we might think of as “a conscience.” Yet I doubt whether, at any point along the way, older and cruder devices for amplifying responsiveness are discarded. The pure moral agent, committed to right action out of respect for the moral law, and moved by that alone, is a fiction. Although that sort of respect may sometimes be uppermost in our minds as we direct our conduct, I suspect that each of us remains a psychological motley, and that each of the inculcated mechanisms proves useful on some occasions. In consequence, there’s no obvious place to draw a line between the moral pioneers, with their prudent pseudo-responsiveness, and contemporary human beings. Which is by no means to deny that many of us, on at least some occasions, are moved by moral reflection to genuine identification with the needs and interests of others, so that we act from the recognition of what they aspire to and from a sympathetic wish for their success. In such cases, human responsiveness has been genuinely amplified.

Tens of thousands of years lapsed between the beginning of moral life and the first written documents, with their complex codes of legal – and moral – pronouncements. During that period, the small bands learned to trade with one another, a development that required the extension of moral protections beyond the individual groups. Human societies grew larger. Bands merged, first temporarily, and then on a more permanent basis. By 8000 years before the present some settlements included as many as one thousand people (apparently still living on terms of relative equality.) Communities of that size, or even as large as the combined bands of the later Paleolithic would have been utterly impossible without the social technology morality provided. (Primateology provides ample evidence of the difficulties chimpanzee bands experience as they grow in size.)

Yet the same deep problem remains for us, as it did for those remote ancestors who began the moral project. Even with all the complexities introduced in the long evolution of our moral codes, there are still many occasions on which the limits of human responsiveness manifest themselves. To appreciate that it's only necessary to look around (or even to reflect on your own conduct.) We are not moral angels.

Along the way from the first steps to the cities of the ancient world, morality expanded to become ethics. For tens of thousands of years, the focus was on action: What to do? In the context of the hunter-gatherer life in the early stages of the moral project, the question "How to live?" makes little sense. Yet, as we know, by the fifth century BCE, in Athens, that question had arisen, and reflections on right action had become subordinated to it. (I suspect that the question was posed, perhaps in different terms and in a more restricted way, far earlier - in Mesopotamia, in Egypt, or in other parts of the Near East.) What prompted the emergence of ethical life?

To consider how you should live is to envisage alternatives, and, for most of our career as a species, the options have been highly restricted (to say the least.) For small groups, struggling to survive from day to day, the serious question concerns how individuals can continue to stay alive and the band remain intact. Yet, even under harsh conditions, a certain kind of dissatisfaction - and correlative satisfaction - can begin to emerge. Band members can take note of the efforts of their fellows, recognizing the contributions made to advancing the common project. Their observations can be expressed in recognition - or in criticism.

The early phases of the moral project were surely focused on interactions among individuals. Yet, in a demanding environment, the band's prospects depend on the effective contributions of individuals. The young must be trained to discharge the tasks required of all adults; adults must sometimes exert themselves to the limits of their powers. Hence arise prescriptions of "self-regarding duties", seen at this stage, as necessary for the continued success - or even the continued existence - of the social group.

When there is public assessment of individuals' contributions to the life of the entire band, the stage is set for members to start to evaluate their lives along one dimension. Even when there are no special roles, when everyone is expected to participate in every kind of important task, a life can be scrutinized for the effects it has had on the common project. Awareness of your own deficiencies in contributing can thus lead to dissatisfaction with your previous conduct, not in the

atomistic fashion of pre-moral life, where particular actions lead to later regret, but holistically, in a sense that you have not lived as well as you might. Alternatively, reflections on your past life can culminate in recognizing how you have often improved the fortunes of your band, so that you (and others) view your life as having gone well.

Ruminations of this sort are likely to become more frequent, when there is a common practice of joint appreciation of the lives of past members of the band. Intentional burial of the dead is seventy thousand or so years old, and corpses are sometimes decorated or accompanied by grave goods – initially objects used during the lifetime, later figurines presumably of religious significance. Once burial practices had become common in a band, interment was likely the occasion for commentary on the life of the deceased. Celebration of those seen as having served the group well would inspire living members to assess their own standing.

Consideration of how life has been lived can then prompt advance thinking about how to live. (Imagine elderly band members expressing their own regrets in the presence of the young.) Such considerations become more extensive as the outgrowth of two features of human cultural evolution during the Paleolithic. First, as the moral project becomes entrenched, associations between individuals bestow on their repeated cooperative interactions a satisfaction beyond that of merely achieving a mutually beneficial goal. Acting together becomes pleasurable for its own sake. Out of this, I suggest, come new conceptions of relationships and new emotions. The “friendships” observed in chimpanzees – the lifetime associations – become the real thing. Second, the development of the division of labor is expressed in various roles open to members of the band. Contributions to collective success are no longer distinguished simply by the effort expended and the efficacy of the action. Some people are recognized as having distinctive skills, and consequently seen as having a special place in the group’s life. By ten thousand years ago, at the very latest, the question of what kind of life to lead could arise in recognizable forms. Some people could not only consider how they might discharge the duties assigned to them, but also reflect on how their individual contribution might be made and what relationships they might pursue.

For most human beings who have ever lived, the ethical question has arisen only in narrow forms. A privileged few have had the luxury of deciding the direction of their lives – their “life plan” or “life project” – and expressing the “only freedom which deserves the name” (as Mill puts it), that of “pursuing our own good in our own way.” Nevertheless, whether the potential choice is

broad or narrow, the criterion for answering the question, for living in a way that brings satisfaction is, I suggest, what it has always been, that of recognizing your life as one that contributes to something larger than yourself. Paleolithic life registered satisfaction and dissatisfaction in terms of the effects on a small community (and, I conjecture, similar local contributions are crucial to the ideals and sense of worth of large numbers of people from then to the present day.) Once a connection was forged between the fortunes of the band and the wishes of supposed supervisory beings – deities, originally viewed as tribal gods – the value of a life could be reinterpreted in terms of service to a divine plan. Yet whether you play your part in sustaining a small group or aiding (in a tiny way, of course) some grand cosmic scheme or in improving some aspect of life for some part of the human population, the structure of the ethical question is always the same: how can my life bring about positive change for something larger than myself, something that will endure when I am no more?

Autonomy is a matter of degree, and human beings have greater or lesser freedom in adopting conceptions of themselves and their lives. For many people, their self-ideal is largely forced upon them, leaving little space for choice. Within that space they often seek a project that will express their individuality, their talents and qualities of character, and that “plan” or “ideal” will structure their desires, giving priority to some and downgrading others. The choices are characteristically implicit, a matter of taking certain activities to be central, others as peripheral and dispensable. Someone’s self-ideal often becomes visible, to others and to herself, in the regimentation of her desires.

The history of ethical life is a history of attempts to solve a particular problem. How can individual people shape their lives to bring about enduring satisfaction when they reflect on their (probably implicit) choice of self-ideal and on the relation between it and the course of their lives? That satisfaction accrues, I have suggested, from recognizing freedom in the choice (your life is your own, in at least some respects, its pattern is not entirely forced upon you), and from recognizing how it contributes positively to something larger than your individual self, something that lasts beyond your own lifespan. As we shall see, this is fundamental to understanding ethical progress.

Entering into the moral project and participating in ethical life changes the regimentation of desires. In the pre-moral condition, regimentation is a matter of simple prudence: avoid acting on desires that will bring troublesome consequences. Morality adds a new kind of trouble, debarring

people from actions they could previously have performed without regret. Ethical life turns the screw further. Now actions lacking adverse personal consequences, actions entirely acceptable from a moral point of view, arouse regret because they are at odds with your self-ideal. They detract from the success of your plan for your life, subordinating important desires and ends to others you view as relatively insignificant.

Increased regimentation isn't all loss, of course. It yields a more harmonious society, one in which all sorts of unexpected possibilities will develop (increasing group size is only the start of it), and you may hope to avoid the bitter regret that comes when you regard your existence as a waste of time. Nevertheless, the developments envisaged in my genealogy may appear entirely too sober, too prudent, too Puritanical. Where does the fun fit in?

Much of the history of western philosophy takes a dim view of hedonism. From Aristotle to Robert Nozick and Woody Allen, the idea of a life filled with sensual pleasures is taken to be unworthy, not fully human or, perhaps, comical. The images, stories, and thought-experiments constructed to refute hedonism are, however, focused on a single species – solitary pleasures. Moreover, in recognizing how people often want more, aspiring to a sense of self-worth and consequently regretting the hours “misspent in trivial satisfactions,” it becomes easy to over-generalize. Because pleasure is not overridingly important, it is dismissed as entirely insignificant.

Frequently, the actions and experiences bringing delight are shared with others. Pleasure derives not from an hour passed alone in “the experience machine” or the orgasmatron, but from episodes shared with friends and loved ones. Sometimes, the events depend on joint planning and preparation, and the resultant satisfactions are infused with each contributor's sense of having played a part in collective joy. From the celebration of the successful hunt to the festivals of medieval villages, from the Paleolithic to the recent past and even, in some places, to the present, communal hedonism has been the best available answer to the ethical question. What better way to live than acting to diminish the pains and amplify the pleasures of your fellows?

Nor do similar activities and enjoyments entirely lose their significance for people who have arrived at a “higher” conception of what matters in their lives. Most people's self-ideals don't prompt them to (pompous?) pronouncements identifying “what my life is really all about.” They are tacit, expressed in choices, in the regimentation of desires and actions. For someone devoted to a family or a local community, the joy shared among its members, or even the delight some



action has brought to some (or just one) of them, is a truly important pleasure, one interwoven with the implicit self-ideal.

Once this point is appreciated, it becomes easier to do justice to the role of pleasure in ethical life. There are three possible relations between pleasurable experiences and our self-ideals: the experience may contribute to realizing the ideal, or may detract from it, or may be entirely indifferent to it. Here we should recognize the possibility that certain forms of pleasure, while apparently irrelevant (or even apparently contrary) to our central goals, may have indirect positive effects: what seems to be a waste of time – the mindless entertainment or the extra hour in bed – can provide needed relaxation, and thus help someone undertake a challenging task. Further, some pleasures, particularly those derived from the joys of those we care for or those we share with them, are not simply means to promoting some further, loftier, end. They are intrinsic to the realization of our self-conception. Puritanical emphasis on the higher purposes of “fully human” ways of being ignore the insight at the core of communal hedonism: that achieving those purposes can consist in bringing joy to lives beyond our own.

So far my account doesn’t differentiate types of experience that have figured largely in philosophical accounts of the quality of lives. Many writers have regarded religious experiences and aesthetic experiences as particularly important and “fulfilling.” Both types share three characteristics (and the common presence of these properties has inspired some – Wordsworth and Dewey, for example – to assimilate them to a single species.) In both instances, the subject has a sense of heightened vitality, of being most fully alive. The experiences also produce reverberations in subsequent life – they change the tone and quality of later episodes. Finally, they are typically viewed as producing cognitive changes, particularly in modifying the concepts used in describing the world. These three features confer special significance: undergoing these kinds of experiences yields major episodes in a person’s life.

For religious experience, this importance is readily integrated with the subject’s self-ideal. Those who take themselves to have had a religious experience typically view the episode as testifying to an aspect of reality already given primary place in the accepted conception of what matters, or as indicating an ideal for human living that must henceforth be accepted and pursued. (Think of Saul/Paul on the road to Damascus.) Aesthetic experience, by contrast, appears quite independent of ethical life. Does that force a crucial modification of the account I have offered, one granting a potential answer to the ethical question in terms of aesthetic satisfaction alone?

Would a life of uplift and delight in listening to music or in looking at paintings be a life worth living?

Only, I claim, if those experiences registered in some way in an individual contribution to the lives of others. I take this to be shown by two familiar cases. Consider, first, the “fulfilling” experiences prompted by morally problematic works of art. Surely many German citizens were thrilled and inspired by *Triumph of the Will* – and, later, after they had come to terms with the full extent of Nazi atrocities, felt remorse for their earlier sense of uplift. If aesthetic experience reinforces an ideal for life that should be rejected, the sense of fulfillment it brings is corrupted. Admiration for Leni Riefenstahl’s directorial skill remains, but it is seen as profoundly compromised by the vision of human existence it was exercised to serve.

Or, secondly, reflect on the asocial aesthete. Imagine someone whose life consists in solitary enjoyment of art. This person never feels any impulse to share the emotions generated, or to produce anything in response to them, or to offer commentary that might help others to appreciate what he takes himself to have perceived in the works he loves. In effect, the life is a “refined” version of the orgasmatron or the “experience machine.” Although our subject feels most alive in the presence of art, although it echoes in his further experiences of his environment, although he views himself as having acquired important insights from his perceptual exercises, none of this ever extends beyond himself. No contribution to the lives of others is ever forthcoming. Whether or not his older self realizes it, he might reasonably regret the pattern of his existence.

The aesthetic experiences we treasure are very different from those figuring in these two cases. Typically, what we regard as a fulfilling experience will prompt us to share with others. Or we see it as transforming us in ways that enable us to pursue the ends marked out by our self-ideal. Or, sometimes, it may lead us to modify, even quite radically, our conception of what matters. In all these ways, many aesthetic experiences are integrated into ethical life.

My prosaic explanation of the point recapitulates Wordsworth’s far more eloquent insights in his reflections on revisiting Tintern Abbey. The experience, he claims, has two kinds of deep and positive effects. First, it produces sensations and thoughts

such, perhaps,  
As have no slight or trivial influence  
On that best portion of a good man's life,

His little, nameless, unremembered, acts  
Of kindness and of love.

Beyond that, however, it inspires a kind of rare recognition:

  that blessed mood,  
In which the burthen of the mystery,  
In which the heavy and the weary weight  
Of all this unintelligible world,  
Is lightened:

with the result that

  We see into the life of things.

The yoking of the cognitive to the actions that contribute to the lives of others is, I suggest, deeply significant. Mill's reading of Wordsworth might have lingered on the lines I have quoted, and one of the most inspiring sentences he ever wrote might have adopted the amendment I have suggested: "The only freedom which deserves the name, is that of pursuing our own good in our own way, so long as we thereby help others to attain theirs."

Hence, in the course of our cultural evolution, our regimentation of desires initially is merely a matter of prudence. With the unfolding of the moral project, the constraints on desires are increased. Because the moral project makes possible emotions and ways of living beyond those that could previously be envisaged, it opens the way for ethical life. As individuals and groups conceive of ideals they take to be worthy of pursuit, the pleasures we take are ultimately assessed in terms of their conformity to those ideals. Pleasure continues to be an important part of the well-lived life (at least for most of us), but the regimentation of our desires becomes more intricate. Aesthetic enjoyment, too, is subject to appraisal from our ethical perspective. So also (*pace* Kierkegaard) are what people take to be religious experiences.

### Moral Progress

The story I have told is the prelude to an attempt to understand progress with respect to the various kinds of values I have distinguished. The first stages of inquiry into values are easily understood. Pre-moral prudence distinguishes what is desired from what is valuable (or: desirable), by understanding how the initial impulse can be re-appraised in light of the

consequences of acting upon it. More exactly, an individual subject identifies priorities by recognizing the effects of actions spurred by desires, and reflecting on the desirability of the outcomes.

Prudential progress is not hard to understand. It depends on the efficacy of a scheme of values attuned to the avoidance of trouble and the achievement of goals. The state of the subject can be specified by focusing on the ability to recognize actions likely to promote outcomes the person wants and to differentiate these from others likely to bring about situations the person dislikes, and the capacity to deploy the criteria used in distinguishing the two in shaping conduct. At the earlier stage, the individual sometimes gives priority to features associated with unpleasant results and/or sometimes fails to give priority to the marks of the outcomes desired; or the priority ordering of the scheme of values is sometimes ineffective in directing action. Becoming more prudent is a matter of modifying one or more of these earlier defects, in ways that don't interfere with overall success.<sup>2</sup> Less pedantically, the subject is better able to recognize the connections of types of action with desired or disliked consequences, and less vulnerable to being diverted from acting on this recognition.

Morality begins by extending the prudential perspective to the collective level – and, in doing so, it unselfconsciously responds to an underlying problem in human social life. For the extension requires building a supra-individual subject who can make the estimates of the consequences of various types of action. That subject (analogous in some ways to Adam Smith's impartial spectator) is not formed through asserting the inclinations of any subgroup of individuals, but through taking into account the perspectives of all. To form a genuine “we”, one capable of representing the judgment of the entire band, each member must come to recognize and enter into the standpoints of the others, with mutual adjustment of attitudes. At least in the moments when moral precepts are worked out together, there must be a genuine attempt at extended responsiveness.

For, as I have claimed, the limited character of our responsiveness is the fundamental problem to which the moral project is to provide the solutions – and the character of the method

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<sup>2</sup> The last condition is needed to rule out the possibility that the greater ability to detect the consequences of action is accompanied by a strengthening of the will that is confined to cases in which the capacity for that recognition remains defective. The person's will remains weak where perception is acute and is more resistant to being diverted just where beliefs about connections are still confused.

for resolving a situation should accord with the character of the underlying difficulty. So it should come as no surprise that my preliminary account of method in moral inquiry takes the form of an idealization of the ways in which contemporary hunter-gatherers actually settle questions about what ought to be done. They assemble in “the cool hour”, on terms of rough equality, use the factual information they have, and listen to the concerns of each of their fellows. If we hope to institute method for moral inquiry, our understanding of the fundamental problem suggests emphasizing the characteristics of their discussions, trying to improve the imperfections of the actual processes of decision-making. So, as a first account of moral method (preliminary because, like the early seventeenth century proposals about method in the natural sciences, it surely deserves clarification and refinement), I suggest:

- (M) Moral disputes are to be settled through an *ideal conversation*. An ideal conversation assembles representatives of all those affected by the question under discussion. It uses only the best available factual information. Most importantly, it requires all participants to listen to, and to attempt to enter into, the perspectives of each of the others, and to adjust their own attitudes in light of doing so. Deliberators are to be *mutually engaged*.

A moral judgment is weakly justified if it would be endorsed by an ideal conversation. It is strongly justified if it continues to be endorsed in an indefinitely proceeding sequence of changes according with (M). Strong justification accrues when *justification sticks*.

(M) lies at the core of my approach to moral progress. In (Kitcher 2021a), I follow Kuhn in supposing that reflecting on the history of a practice might illuminate our understanding of it and of how it might best be continued. Specifically, I consider the three major examples of moral progress to which I have alluded here – the abolition of chattel slavery, the expansion of opportunities for women, and the acceptance of love between members of the same sex. Anyone who dips into the history of how these amendments of moral attitudes and practices occurred will quickly discover how fragile and vulnerable these changes were. The core difficulty is well-illustrated by the fact that, although many contemporary people would take the inadequacies of earlier moral attitudes (condoning slavery, confining women, vilifying and persecuting gays and lesbians) to be blindingly obvious, our predecessors regarded those attitudes as completely justified. The pragmatic concept of moral progress I develop will view each case as overcoming

(better: *partially* overcoming) an antecedent problem. Hence, the initial states were problematic, even though that status was not recognized. I owe an account of what moral problems are.

The concept of justification derived from (M) provides the key. A group is weakly justified in recognizing a situation as morally problematic if an ideal conversation would generate the verdict that the situation needs to be amended. In line with what I have already proposed, an amendment of that situation is weakly justified if an ideal conversation would endorse making that change. Weak justification is strengthened when the verdict (recognizing a prior problem) and the judgment about the change are both retained through an indefinitely proceeding sequence of further transitions governed by (M). (More exactly, since (M) is *preliminary*: governed by the methods that emerge from (M) in the pragmatic progress of moral methodology.) You can either think of strong justification as accruing when judgments remain stable “in the long run,” or as justifications as becoming stronger the longer the run continues.

The simplest instances occur when, in the initial state, complaints are already made – perhaps by those who suffer, perhaps by others who recognize their suffering and protest on their behalf. (Moral change is spurred by what William James called “the cries of the wounded.”) Under these circumstances, we can imagine systematic moral progress as initiated by the registering of complaints (and the recognition – stemming from ideal conversation – that the extent of the suffering would make the question urgent, if the complaints turned out to be justified). Cases of *exclusion* arise when the voices of suffering are ignored or dismissed. (M) provides a way of making the identification of such cases and of a response to them more sure-footed than it has historically been. And that is no accident. For cases of exclusion, like my three paradigms, are instances of the fundamental moral problem, the problem (M) is tuned to address.

Yet, though the actual history fails to show a steady and self-conscious application of (M), a *streamlined* version of the history reveals something resembling (M) at work. The discussions of slavery, of the proper role of women, and of sexual relations among members of the same sex, were all precipitated by voiced concerns about the traditional practices, were eventually improved by correcting factual misconceptions, and were advanced, at crucial moments by the testimony of individuals who had entered into the perspectives of the sufferers. Eventually, those who felt the burden of the customary attitudes obtained an audience, an audience no longer completely in thrall to mistaken pieces of supposed lore, and, as that audience expanded, changes – in all cases, partial changes – were made. Thus (M) can be viewed as the “express” version of a winding,

uncertain journey, one constantly threatened by the possibility of losing the way and of reaching some dead end.

My Kuhnian strategy suggests a pragmatic justification for (M). We should accept it because it would be good to eliminate some of the contingency and chanciness of moral progress, and, if we analyze the clearest examples of the past, adopting (M) looks like a good idea. Some of my readers either do not recognize this mode of justification or don't think it's enough. Held by a meta-ethical picture, they want a metaphysics that would endorse (M) as reliable, as likely to yield "moral truth." Given my refusal to reify values (or reasons) I seem to have no resources for satisfying them.

This, however, is a mistake. For my endorsement of (M) doesn't merely rest on an analysis of recent history, but on a genealogical account that ventures into the deep past. Morality, I claim, is a social technology that has transformed the life of our species by addressing problems of a particular type. Those problems stem from a psychological feature of *Homo*: the limitations of our evolved adaptation to respond to our conspecifics. To address problems of that type we need to amplify our responsiveness to those whom our actions affect, and that requires us to understand them and to engage with them. Hence the three conditions (M) imposes – to include all the affected, to get the facts as straight as we can, and to enter into the perspectives of others, seeing the world from their point of view and striving for a resolution they can live with – are adapted to the problem that is to be solved.

Effectively, I am proposing a new concept of objectivity to replace the metaphysics for which some of my critics yearn. Instead of viewing the objectivity of a method as consisting in its capacity to generate truth, where truth is understood as correspondence to some envisaged reality, I view the objectivity of methods as lying in their suitability to help solve the problems to which they are to be applied. Instead of the thought of methods as objective when they help us picture reality, we should adopt a different metaphor. We want methods to be objective when they fit the problem – as when a key fits a lock. That's the objectivity I've claimed for (M), on the basis of my genealogy.

### Ethical Progress

I have offered only the *core* of a moral methodology, and a brief defense of it. For, so far, despite my supposed adoption of a Kuhnian strategy for excavating methods for moral inquiry, I have failed to carry it through completely. I have overlooked a crucial feature of all three histories. In each instance, most prominently in the struggle for expanding the opportunities for women, the actual discussions of the issue were distorted by the acceptance by the sufferers of the roles traditionally assigned to them. Sometimes, it turns out, the wounded do not even cry. Once this facet of the actual course of events is appreciated, (M) must be developed further. Problems of exclusion, as they appear in recorded human history, are affected by a form of false consciousness, and thus become more complex than I have made them appear.

That is because almost all of recorded history is that of societies pervaded by ethical conceptions. What a person should do – and what others may do to that person – is governed by ideals of how people should live. Under conditions in which distinctions are made among kinds of people, when tradition dictates that some kinds should play particular roles, conduct firmly prohibited towards a member of one kind can come to appear not only permissible but also mandatory towards those of a different kind. The slave-owner has the responsibility to discipline the wayward and unredeemed, and the slaves should acquiesce in the restraints and the punishments they receive. Women need the government of their menfolk, and they should be content to play the important (domestic) role higher authorities have assigned to them. Those attracted to members of their own sex should understand how unnatural, perverted, and depraved such inclinations are, and, in consequence, they should seek to quell their disgusting impulses and to root out their wickedness insofar as they can. Although it's impossible to know how extensively slaves, women, gays and lesbians absorbed the attitudes that prescribed some self-ideals for them and forbade others, the historical record shows very clearly how resistance to moral change was fueled by declarations that “good” or “normal” members of these groups accepted the *status quo*.

Moral method must be interwoven with method in ethical inquiry. Ethics, too, makes progress through solving problems. In the historical instances I have considered, those problems take a particular form: a self-ideal is taken to apply to some kinds of people and to be inappropriate for others. For that species of problem, a method of solution is relatively straightforward. Institute a systematic practice of reviewing claims of the form “*I* is an appropriate ideal for members of *G*, but not for others”, where the review (again!) consists in an ideal deliberation among representatives of all groups distinguished in the population. That review is



especially urgent when (as in the historical paradigms I have cited) some members of the excluded group (or outsiders who are concerned for them) protest the exclusion. A society committed to ethical progress (a Deweyan society) would demand more: a continued social practice of investigating the approved distribution of ideals. As I have argued (Kitcher 2021a, 68-71), such investigations often involve experimentation: those who aspire to a particular ideal find out, by pursuing it, whether it succeeds in bringing a sense of satisfaction. Sometimes, when they seek to depart from tradition, what is needed from their fellows are safeguards for those whose lives might be affected by the experiment, and support for people who freely chose to undertake it.

Ethical inquiry, at the most general level, focuses on discovering characteristics common to all successful “experiments of living.” In the foregoing discussion, I’ve supposed that this form of inquiry has already achieved some results: to live well requires some level of autonomy (the pattern of your life must not be thrust upon you), it requires some ability to attain or approximate the goals marked out by your chosen ideal, and it requires a contribution to something beyond the self (typically, a positive impact on the lives of other human beings – although there are conceivable worthwhile patterns for existence whose valuable effects are on other sentient beings – Kitcher 2021b 85-88, 391-393.) My assumptions derive from reflection on a long history of human reactions to various ways of living, from the complaints of those who have felt they have chosen badly and from the serenity expressed by people who take their lives to have gone well. Of course, the sample on which I (and others) base generalizations about the ethical question is radically incomplete (and possibly unrepresentative.) Nevertheless, each of my three putative necessary conditions – autonomy, success, other-directedness – can be given a plausible justification. Plausible, but not ironclad – further investigations of the diversity of human lives could disclose a need for amendment.

Consider, first, the (Millian) suggestion that the pattern for a satisfying life must be freely chosen. Autonomy is, as already noted, a matter of degree. All of us are limited in the possibilities we can pursue with any serious chances of success. Yet, when people are subjected to strict constraints, forced to pursue a menial trade or confined in their activities – as has occurred historically to members of castes and of ethnic groups, as well as to vast numbers of women – there is an initial presumption that an important opportunity has been missed. In many instances, even though the person acquiesces in the restrictions, those who look on can recognize how the life might have gone better, how talents left undeveloped might have blossomed, how there might have

been a satisfying sense of making an individual impact. Sometimes, however, even within the narrow sphere the person occupies, free choices can be made, and we admire the resourcefulness with which the individual expresses herself, within the limited range she has been allowed. That, in itself, testifies to the importance of autonomy, in its perception of how people can discover “their own way” even when the restrictions imposed upon them are severe.

Just as the autonomy condition proves resilient in explaining the possibility of valuable lives in cases where familiar forms of choice are restricted or denied, so too with the successful pursuit of goals. At first sight, complete failure to achieve the ends you have marked out as most important would appear to justify frustration and corresponding regret. Those who set out to modify the world as they find it, to create conditions under which other human lives would go better, often fail abysmally, and, in retrospect, bitterly reject the course they have set for themselves. The judgment is sometimes justified, especially when the late-stage review makes it evident how quixotic the venture always was. Even here, however, the subject’s own verdict can be questioned. Tragic heroes often inspire onlookers with their resolution and courage, their willingness to make great sacrifices for the ends they seek. In those qualities, the observer recognizes a form of success. Through the efforts expended the protagonists serve as a pattern for others, one that may arouse determination, thus aiding those they inspire in reaching their own chosen ends – and even play an important role in encouraging others to realize the goals the heroes vainly sought. Outsiders perceive a kind of success overlooked in the narrower focus of the bitter reflections.

So too with my emphasis on other-directedness. I do not know whether there are any human beings who would be entirely delighted with a life full of solitary satisfactions. Sociality runs deep, and few are so misanthropic as to sever all ties to human society – and those who do, the hermits who retreat from the human world, envisage a different kind of society, one in which they interact with a higher form of existence (and, in doing so, they often view themselves as having a positive effect on the humans they have left behind, in showing them what is truly significant in living.) If a solitary hedonist were challenged to justify the absence of any positive contribution beyond the self, the response might be to declare a total lack of interest in the lives of others. To see the absence as not detracting from the value of the life would exhibit the limits of human responsiveness – the source of the fundamental problem from which the moral project descends – in its most extreme form. Conformity to moral precepts would have to be viewed as a useful

strategy for obtaining the lone satisfactions that are desired. My imagined hedonist would fail to appreciate the ways in which the moral project (and its ethical generalization) has modified our species, how it has been constitutive of the beings we have become. The hedonist thus retreats to a pre-human world, even to a world prior to that of our last common ancestors with the chimpanzees. That, I suggest, can only be seen as undermining the claim that solitary hedonism identifies a valuable way to live.

At the most general level, ethical progress consists in discovering how to live *better*. Because the crucial notions (autonomy, success, other-directedness) are matters of degree, the ethical question should be given a comparative twist. I suggest that ethical progress has occurred at this level through recognition of features that make human lives go better. Advances come when people are liberated from constraints in choosing the patterns of their lives, when they are given greater chances of successfully pursuing their chosen ends, and when they have enhanced opportunities to contribute to the lives of others. This formulation itself, as well as my defenses of the conditions, requires further clarification and refinement, but I hope it sets a direction in which further ethical inquiry might profitably go. Moreover, we should recognize the nature of the aim: it is not to identify what makes for improved ways of living *tout court*, but for living better *at a particular stage of human cultural evolution* (recall my observation that communal hedonism might be an appropriate aspiration for many of our predecessors).

Furthermore, although ethical life starts with late-stage reflections on whether a life has gone well, my remarks should have made clear how the judgment of the subject sometimes needs correction. The oppressed person takes her condition to be entirely satisfactory, the frustrated hero sees nothing but failure. Thus the test of yielding enduring satisfaction – formulated by Schopenhauer and Nietzsche in terms of a willingness to live one’s life over again – needs refinement. We need a notion of justified satisfaction and of justified regret. Once again, I appeal to processes of ideal deliberation. The verdict offered by the subject of a life is subject to correction by others, through a process in which representatives of those potentially affected by that subject’s deeds, with their varying perspectives, use the best available information and engage with one another and with the subject.

Suppose, then, that general ethical inquiry delivers a clear and precise version of the test, and that it identifies characteristics of lives that pass the test. Under these circumstances the way is opened for the more particular investigations that appraise potential experiments of living, both

those that have figured in the historical record and those that strike out in new directions. Current approved patterns for worthwhile lives are reviewed in light of what has emerged at the more general level. Such review may well involve making distinctions among the suitability of various types of people to particular self-ideals – the tone-deaf are unlikely to fare well as opera-singers, just as the color-blind will typically not be successful painters. Yet, as my paradigms should make evident, the terms in which the differentiations are made deserve careful scrutiny.

Finally, the Deweyan society, committed to fostering opportunities for more satisfying human lives, needs to appreciate the possibilities of deeper forms of false consciousness. My examples expose a particular, simple, form: groups of people acquiesce in the self-ideals prescribed for them, thus suppressing parts of their individual potentials. Other forms come in thinking that a removal of easily-recognizable – surface – restrictions will open the way to pursuing an ideal. To different degrees and in different respects, the three historical paradigms show that this is too optimistic. Structural constraints linger long after official declarations of freedom have been announced. Ethical inquiry must recognize this possibility. Fully coming to terms with it requires an integration of ethics with social inquiry. (I shall not try to pursue that here.)

### Individual Progress

Moral inquiry and ethical inquiry (and the correlative notions of progress) have so far been framed at the collective level. I have seen judgments about the moral and ethical progress of societies as justified when an ideal conversation, one meeting my three conditions (of inclusiveness, of appeal only to well-grounded information, and of mutual engagement) would endorse seeing the initial state as problematic and the later state as advancing on it. The attitudes guiding conduct and featured in institutions and roles are replaced by others judged to be superior.

I now want to turn to the decisions made by individuals. As my (admittedly simplified) initial idealization assumed, each of us starts by absorbing the concepts and judgments that have emerged from collective inquiry in our ambient social environment. These provide the starting points for our own inquiries and (with good fortune) for our own progress.

Moral philosophy has had an unfortunate tendency to assume a grossly simplified picture of the moral agent and of moral decision-making. The fiction of some complete system of moral principles has inspired the thought of people ideally equipped with the first principles of morality,

deriving the appropriate maxims for action in all the circumstances they encounter, and resolutely acting on the conclusions at which they have arrived. From this standpoint the tasks of moral education (training?) are twofold. First, children need to learn the correct principles. Then they need to develop a strong will (a nagging conscience?) that will produce conduct in accordance with the subsidiary precepts they have derived. (Perhaps another part of their education is pertinent here: they'll need enough skill in reasoning to generate the appropriate conclusions.)

Dewey's emphasis on the incompleteness of systems of morality, and the concomitant significance of habit, corrects this distorted picture. Most of the time our lives run on automatic pilot. During the evolution of the moral project, societies have learned how to consolidate some of the judgments generated by previous moral inquiry, inculcating habits and routines and enabling smooth conformity to those judgments. In doing so, they have enabled those brought up in them to spend their moral energy on the difficult decisions, the ones in which accepted judgments are hard or impossible to apply directly. When appeal to tradition would supply conflicting answers, or no answer at all, agents have to stop and think. If, that is, they can recognize the occasion as one calling for moral inquiry.

Besides a disposition to act in accordance with accepted conclusions, morally well-educated people require an ability to recognize when the situation calls for reflection and when it does not. We are all inclined to two kinds of errors, to plunge ahead blindly when we ought to stop and think, and to dither Hamlet-like when we ought to act decisively. One form of individual moral progress consists in improving this ability, this basic *sensitivity* (as I shall call it.)

Further sensitivities, too, are required. In dealing with the situations calling for new thought, we need to know *how* to think. Often, we are on our own. We cannot snap our fingers, summoning up a representative body to engage in instant ideal conversation and deliver its counsel. The best we can do is to try to simulate that kind of discussion. How well we do so will depend on other abilities (sensitivities): a capacity for recognizing how our actions will affect others, a power to imagine their responses, to enter their perspectives and summon up their likely feelings, and a sense of what considerations they might urge in engaging with one another - and with us. In our actual moral decision-making we can sometimes help ourselves out by consulting people on whom our actions will bear ("How would you feel if I ...?"), but we are rarely able to obtain testimony to the full ramifications of our actions.

Individual moral practices are multi-dimensional, and we are capable of progress on all the dimensions. Advances can consist in conceptual refinements that enable us better to arrive at judgments according with the verdicts reached by an ideal conversation; in habits that consolidate such verdicts; in increased abilities to detect the occasions on which moral deliberation is required; in improved abilities to simulate ideal conversations, resulting from enhanced powers of recognizing the affected parties, of engaging with their perspectives, and of understanding how their perspectives would evolve in engaged deliberation with one another; in a firmer ability to translate moral judgment into action. As well, of course, as accepting “better moral precepts”, where this is construed, on my account, as the individual judgments emerging from ideal conversation – the counterparts to what traditional moral philosophy tends to take as almost the entire story. (We may think of the standard picture as the analog of a faulty, pre-Kuhnian, picture of science, one that takes scientific progress as the accumulation of truth and supposes application of the truths in solving problems to be trivial. No one who has ever had the experience of reading the physics text chapter, diligently committing the equations to memory, and then being utterly baffled by the problems at the end could take that picture seriously. Why should we think of it as adequate in the moral domain?)

Since morality is part of ethics, an individual’s ethical progress can consist in moral progress. Someone has formed a self-ideal, improves her moral practice along one or more of the dimensions I have (roughly) characterized, and the modifications are now felt in the ways she pursues the goals marked out by her ideal. Beyond that, however, ethical progress may be a matter of finding a better answer to the question “How should I live?”, adopting a self-ideal that advances on the prior state (indecision, perhaps, or devotion to a less worthwhile plan for one’s life.)

The language just used is dangerous. For it suggests some conscious process of posing to oneself the Resonant Socratic Question (an earnest, lapel-clutching moment, in late adolescence or early adulthood, when the subject sits down and asks how his life should be lived.) As I have noted (in this chapter, and in other places), that is surely inaccurate as a description of most people’s ethical lives. The sense of what is worth pursuing arises in a piecemeal way, assembling the goals the subject comes to regard as most significant, and revising, discarding, and adding, often throughout the subsequent lifespan. The self-ideal remains implicit, although it might be

ascertained under thoughtful questioning, by showing how it subsumes just what is taken to be most important and valuable.

Because of the possibility of rendering self-ideals explicit, it helps to begin with the unusual cases, with the reflective people who do deliberate with themselves about how they should live. Given an account of their ethical progress, it is possible to transfer it to the less self-conscious individual, by considering how the changes that individual undergoes would be assessed if the tacit ethical attitudes were made fully explicit. In effect, ordinary, piecemeal ethical decisions are assessed by considering how they accord with what a completely reflective counterpart of the individual might have chosen. (The strategy here runs parallel to that deployed for individual moral progress, where decisions are evaluated by comparing them to an ideal collective discussion.)

Given my suggested answers to the general ethical question – that lives go better when greater autonomy is exercised in the choice of self-ideals, when the goals identified by the ideals are pursued more successfully, and when there are greater positive contributions to the lives of others – it is possible to identify ethical problems for an individual, and thus to understand progress in terms of the overcoming of those problems. Limited autonomy can give way to greater autonomy, partial achievements in realizing ends may be completed, the enhancements to the lives of others may be increased. Yet, as we shall see, the obstacles may be diminished without ethical progress by the individual. Much depends on *how* the improved situation comes about.

Consider an obvious possibility. A fully reflective person, aware of the limitations on choice of self-ideal imposed by her society, makes an autonomous decision among the narrow range of options available to her. Social reform occurs. New possibilities are opened up for people like her. But she is indifferent to what has happened. She does not consider modifying her priorities (or possibly re-affirming them from her new standpoint). Ethical progress has occurred at the social level. Some members of the society have been given a broader opportunity. She, however, hasn't taken advantage of it. She has done nothing, and thus has made no ethical progress.

On the other hand, her peers who do seize the opportunity, who now reflect anew, can make ethical progress. That would occur if they were to recognize how changing their plans expressed more clearly what they justifiably want for themselves: that is to say, they have sufficient

understanding of their character traits and talents to see how a modified self-ideal would suit them better. Alternatively, when they take stock, the same kinds of self-understandings may lead them to renew their commitment to the project they have already selected. (After a thoughtful self-interrogation, the subject says to herself “Although my options when I originally chose were limited, the one I decided on fits me better than any of these further possibilities. This is who I am.”) Here, too, there is ethical progress. For, in going on as she would have done, she exercises greater autonomy, making a firmer, better-grounded commitment than she previously could.

Even without the imagined social reform, ethical progress can be generated from increased autonomy. For the obstacles to autonomous choice of life-plan may be internal. They may reside in a failure to recognize predilections and abilities. People sometimes pursue “autonomously chosen” self-ideals based on wild misconceptions of their character and talents. Someone who comes to greater understanding of who he is, adjusting his self-ideal in accordance with the revised vision, has made ethical progress.

My examples exhibit familiar ways in which autonomous choice of life-plan can be blocked, and how ethical progress can consist in removing obstacles and renewing reflection. Similar points arise for the success dimension of ethical life. Progress at the social level can occur when reforms remove conditions that previously prevented people from attaining their ends. This can be a purely external matter, a gift from on high. Lives go better but not because of anything the fortunate people do. Or, as in the case of autonomy, the social reform may provide an opportunity, enabling the individual to act differently and thus obtain greater success. Or, without any social change at all, individuals may discover ways to promote their ends, means that were previously obscure. The cognitive advance is simultaneously individual progress in ethical life. Finally, someone may come to see how apparent failure can be an unanticipated form of success. The tragic hero goes beyond bitterness and self-reproach, recognizing further goals that have actually been attained, refining the self-ideal, and dying with a sense of fulfillment. (This I take to be the situation of Oedipus at Colonus.)

Again, with respect to other-directedness, the same distinction can be drawn. Actions performed by others that amplify the effects of someone’s positive contributions don’t redound to the ethical progress of that person. On the other hand, those who discover how they can enhance the lives of special concern to them make genuine ethical advances. Imagine people dedicated to preserving and sustaining a small community. Realizing how building a center where people can



meet for regular discussions of their shared difficulties will improve their cooperation, coordination, and shared welfare, they plan and construct something they had previously not envisaged.

My brief remarks are far from a complete map of the ways in which, beyond the moral sphere, fully reflective individuals can make ethical progress. But, as I have conceded, few people are completely explicit about their self-ideals and direct their conduct in anything akin to the ways I have imagined. How then are we to make sense of the ethical advances of the many (assuming that their ethical progress is not to be dismissed)? To say that a less reflective person acts as his reflective counterpart would have done is insufficient. For that might be a matter of sudden impulse, stemming from some entirely non-ethical motive. Some guidance from ethical considerations is required, but it cannot be the (ponderous) considerations weighed by the counterpart. My previous suggestion that self-ideals exhibit themselves in the choices made and the priorities set in the course of daily life proves helpful here. The community-sustainers of the previous paragraph need not be led to their building project by considering how it would promote their self-ideal. It would suffice for them to care about their fellows, to recognize the difficulties that affect them through lack of a shared space for discussion, and to understand how the construction project would remedy that. More generally, the specific goals marked out by a life-project, together with emotional ties to particular people, can serve as entirely satisfactory ethical surrogates for the more abstract reflections of the fully reflective agents.

I'll close my account of the moral and ethical progress of individuals by noting an important ethical sensitivity. During the course of most human lives, experience tends to teach us more about our own talents and the possibilities open to us. In light of what we learn, periodic appraisals of our goals are warranted. For most people, a decision in late adolescence or early adulthood about a "life project" would be premature. Quite reasonably, we strike out in a particular direction. It would be an unfortunate limitation, however, for us never to reflect on the course we have chosen, even if we never met with circumstances provoking us to ask if we had chosen rightly. The ability to pause for self-examination, and to carry it through is a capacity conducive to individual ethical progress. In its well-developed forms, it prompts people to consider how freely they had chosen, the extent of their successes in achieving their goals, and whether those goals contributed to an enterprise larger than themselves. One of the brilliant accomplishments of Tolstoy's *War and Peace* is his depiction of the vicissitudes of processes of

reorientation in the lives of his three central characters (Pierre Bezukov, Natasha Rostov, and Andrei Bolkonsky.)

### Personal Values

Once again, my discussion of progress in ethical life veers towards the Puritanical. Focusing solely on progress with respect to our self-ideals ignores an important part of our development. As people grow, they sometimes (not always, by any means) learn more about what most satisfies them. They discover what kinds of experiences prove most fulfilling, and what circumstances or activities give rise to those experiences. Moreover, these discoveries are not inevitably subject to screening by our currently accepted plan for our lives. No stern censor stamps those at odds with the reigning version of a self-ideal as forbidden. Instead, the power of the experiences can help us realize how to amend that version for the better. (Again, think of Saul/Paul on the road to Damascus.)

Acceding to that power is, of course, dangerous. Some of the Germans I imagined as remorseful in recalling the thrill of watching *Triumph of the Will* probably felt their bitter regret precisely because they realized how the film had deepened their sympathies for Nazism. Nevertheless, experiences with the three qualities I highlighted – the sense of living to the full, the ability to resonate in future experience, and the cognitive impact (especially in changing our conceptualization of experience) – can reveal limits in our adopted self-ideals. Justified modifications can *begin* in appreciating the force of an experience, but they must involve a more extensive process of exploration, one in which ethical and moral considerations come into play. The outcome of any clash between potent experience (aesthetic or religious, for example) and prior ethical judgments is not foreordained. The situation resembles one familiar from discussions of change in the natural sciences, where the possibilities of revision in light of “recalcitrant experience” are far from automatic.

To recognize this point is not to withdraw my previous claim about the priority of the ethical. In one sense, the ethical has priority: when a self-ideal is strongly justified, subjects ought to avoid experiences that would undermine its realization. On the other hand, forceful experiences do provide occasion for reconsidering the justification of the specific conception of

our lives we have so far adopted: they urge us to inquire whether there is something missing in our current version of our self-ideal.

Furthermore, the experiences we hail as especially significant (those with the three qualities I have noted) are valuable not only because they serve as potential sources of instruction. They are *intrinsically* important. Human lives go better when such experiences abound. Precisely because of that, they pose challenges to self-ideals that would frown upon them. They ask us: is something missing? Ethical inquiry is then required to disclose whether that is so, to separate cases of over-strict Puritanism from destructive temptations.

The picture I have been sketching can be developed a little by considering the constraints on admissible schemes of values. We might think of the personal ordering of priorities as subject to requirements from morality and ethical life. Tendencies to patriotism or other forms of loyalty should be restricted within moral and ethical limits. However great the uplift from celebrating the charismatic leader, people should not be swept into persecuting innocent victims or betraying their own, reflectively chosen, self-ideals.

It is inappropriate to expect perfection. Human beings typically cannot choose the optimal pattern for their lives, enjoy those pleasures (and only those pleasures) that would best advance the projects they set for themselves, and modify their goals, as they proceed, in an ever more refined awareness of how they have grown. The standards for admissibility ought to acknowledge our shortcomings. An analogy with the assessment of scientists can help to make this clear. The history of the sciences reveals the improvement of the methods that guide particular types of inquiry. We do not hold researchers at fault if they pursue their investigations in accordance with the methodological standards of the age, although we might heap special praise on their contemporaries who forge some (often crude) version of a new standard. Many of the early seventeenth century defenders of Aristotelian conceptions of the universe were entirely reasonable in the arguments they offered, following the accepted canons of the day, even though they did not see, as Galileo did, that investigations of motion, in the heavens and on the earth, might attend to types of evidence they ignored. Both rationality and reasonableness can be recognized in the conservatives who stick to the old ways, and in the pioneers who seek out new methods.

By the same token, someone who uses the moral ideas she has been taught to frame her own ideal of herself, and to select pleasures conforming to those ideas and reinforcing her ideal,

cannot be dismissed as harshly as those whose choices simply flout existing standards without any attempt to engage in moral inquiry. The conservative Aristotelians did better (far better) than those of their contemporaries whose opinions on the workings of nature were founded on whims and fancies. Yet the obvious incompleteness of the moral framework we inherit is manifested in our constant need to refine it and extend it in response to predicaments it has not previously envisaged. Each of us must work to adapt our conduct and our life plan to unanticipated situations. I don't claim that the method I have sketched – and characterized as the initial step in the enterprise of making moral methodology explicit – is the last word on the subject. It serves, however, to recognize the sensitivities that should guide our decisions: some capacity for recognizing when to stop and think and when to act decisively, an ability to recognize those whom our actions will affect, understanding of what the impacts will be and how they will be received, and above all a sympathetic disposition to enter the perspectives of others and to seek a resolution that will be tolerable to all.

What we can rightly demand of our imperfect selves is a commitment to making progress. Hence the dominant strategy of this book – to consider how progress might be accomplished in the various domains of human lives. In the specific case of valuation, that involves integrating three different types of valuation. We make moral progress by recognizing the limitations of the moral framework we have inherited, by exposing the moral problems that beset it, and by finding (partial) remedies. We make ethical progress by identifying an ideal for ourselves that suits our abilities, and by modifying it as we grow in pursuing it. We make progress with respect to personal values through our choice and enjoyment of experiences that enrich our lives – *and that sometimes teach us new ways of modifying our moral conceptions and of developing or even changing our life plan.*

To recognize this integration, and the ways in which our pleasures sometimes instruct us, can easily encourage a form of high-mindedness (Mill on steroids) that neglects important aspects of what makes human lives go well. The subjective impact of experiences in which people delight is set aside in terms of an assessment of how our moral character is enhanced or our ethical understanding of our lives is refined. Joy vanishes from the picture. Any adequate account of progressive valuation should bring it back. The ancient condemnation of hedonism has a point, in that a life consisting in a sequence of solitary pleasures is lacking something. But so too is a life of contributions, chosen freely and wisely, to the larger human project, when it is consistently undertaken in grim and joyless determination.

Mill was correct to hail the value of poetry (or its selected counterpart), but there is also a place for pushpin (or cricket or chess or movies or gardening or crossword puzzles ...). The extent to which people can dwell on “the heights” is surely variable, but, for each of us, there are times when some form of “mindless relaxation” is crucial to prepare us for the activities that matter most to us. Sometimes we rightly value our holidays.

The dynamics of progressive valuation is thus complicated. It is also highly individual. The next chapter will attempt to focus the picture I have outlined here by considering a small number of examples – and, since actual lives are messily complex, with many details left hidden, I shall turn to the obvious source. Works of fiction.

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