

On Progress: A Thick Conception of Moral-Political Progress

Daniel Adam Wilkinson
Balliol College, University of Oxford



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Abstract

The concept of progress played a central role in political theorising during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. However, only a small number of political theorists engage with the concept today. This thesis argues that political theorists should re-engage with the concept of progress and investigates what form a conception of progress must take for it to enrich the normative toolbox of political theorists. The thesis begins by outlining the reasons why political theorists turned away from the concept of progress and then sets out the positive reasons why political theorists ought to re-engage with it. It clarifies that, in normative political theory, progress refers to moral-political progress and taxonomizes conceptions of moral-political progress according to their normative-teleological, causal-agential, and historical elements. It distinguishes between thin and thick concepts of progress and argues that the thick concept is the relevant one as it enables all-things-considered judgements about moral-political change. The thesis then advances in two sections. Section One engages in a *geistesgeschichte* analysis of three major historical conceptions of progress – Enlightenment, Kantian, and Hegelian – and evaluates their normative-teleological, causal-agential, and historical elements to assess which aspects remain tenable. Section Two engages in a conceptual analysis of the two contemporary approaches to theorising about a thick conception of progress. The thesis criticises and rejects the approach of philosophical pragmatism. It then defends the approach outlined by Amy Allen and highlights aspects of the approach that can be enhanced. To this end, the thesis integrates into the Allenian approach the methodological resources of Michael Walzer. The thesis concludes by detailing the resulting conception of moral-political progress, outlining how it can respond to the conceptual concerns, and identifying the commitments that must be maintained for it to serve as a tool for political theorising.

'If we think of the struggle as a climb up a mountain, then we must visualise a mountain with no top. We see a top, but when we finally reach it, the overcast rises and we find ourselves merely on a bluff. The mountain continues on up.

Now we see the "real" top ahead of us, and strive for it, only to find we've reached another bluff, the top still above us. And so it goes on, interminably.'

(Saul D. Alinsky)

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Introduction: The Idea of Progress

The language of progress is a persistent feature of our moral and political discourse. Appeals to progress are made by political actors, adopted by political parties, and invoked to justify contemporary values and practices. However, despite its widespread use, the concept remains deeply contested. Consider how the terms ‘progress’ and ‘progressive’ have been adopted by political organisations. The language of progress has traditionally been adopted by left-wing groups such as the Congressional Progressive Caucus of the American Democratic Party and the think tank Progressive Britain (formerly Progress).¹ However, the language of progress has been recently co-opted by conservative and far-right political parties such as the Norwegian Progress Party, the Danish Progress Party, and the Brazilian Progressistas. To complicate the matter further, the term has been adopted by parties outside the left-right binary, such as the populist Serbian Progressive Party and Iceland’s agrarian Progressive Party.² These contradictory appropriations illustrate the concept’s profoundly contested use. Rhetorical appeals to moral and political progress are just as contradictory. On the one hand, when Martin Luther King Jr. proclaimed that ‘the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends towards justice’ he demonstrated how the rhetoric of an ever-better future and the idea of being on the right side of history can be used as a tool to motivate emancipatory change.³ On the other hand, references to the perfectibility of mankind have been used to justify colonial, genocidal, and eugenic ideologies on the grounds that they are required to bring about the state of perfection.⁴ So although the concept of progress is readily

¹ Historical examples of left-liberal ‘progressive’ political organisations include: Czech Progressive Party (1900-1918); Progressive Party (Belgium, 1887-1900); Progressive Party of Canada (1920-1930); Progressive People’s Party (Germany, 1910-1918); Progressive Party (United States of America, 1912-1920).

² The oxymoronic Progressive Conservative Party of Canada (1942-2003) epitomises this confusion.

³ Luther King Jr., M., ‘Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution’, (13 March 1968).

⁴ For colonial justification, see: Ferry, J., ‘Speech Before the French National Assembly’ (28 July 1883); Mill, J. S. (1859); Macaulay, T. B. (1835); Mill, J. (1817). For analysis of the genocidal justification, see: Redles, D. (2005); Koonz, C. (2003); Burleigh, M., Wippermann, W. (1991); Bauman, Z. (1989); Mosse, G. L. (1964). For analysis of the eugenic justification, see: Stern, A. M. (2005); Paul, D. B. (1995); Kevles, D. J. (1985); Horsman, R. (1981).

invoked in moral and political discourse it is imprecisely understood and used to further radically different ends.

It might be expected that in and of itself this lack of conceptual clarity would motivate interest from political theorists, especially self-styled analytic philosophers keen to resolve conceptual imprecision. However, on the whole, contemporary political theorists have avoided the concept. One justification for this lack of engagement could be that the language of progress is nothing more than an empty rhetorical signifier, a linguistic placeholder that can be filled in by any normative goal. However, history of political thought scholars analysing the concept of progress strongly reject this view. Instead, they emphasise the concept's profound practical significance. Sidney Pollard suggests that 'the idea of progress is, in this modern age, one of the most important ideas men live by, not least because most hold it unconsciously and therefore unquestioningly'.⁵ Similarly, Robert Nisbet claims that '[n]o single idea has been more important than... the idea of progress in Western civilisation'.⁶

It is important to note that the concept of progress has not always been on the fringes of political thought. The concept emerged during the Enlightenment and became a central preoccupation for political thinkers until the twentieth century. Reinhart Koselleck defends this view and argues that during the Enlightenment the concept of progress moved beyond the Hellenic idea of cyclical decay and the early Christian idea of linear degeneration.⁷ In doing so, the concept of progress included an infinitely open time horizon which permitted potentially endless improvement. The prospect of achieving earthly perfection ensured that the concept of progress became a central preoccupation for political thinkers following the Enlightenment. John Scott reiterates this point, writing that it is 'no exaggeration to say that philosophers in the 18th and 19th centuries

⁵ Pollard, S., 1968, 13.

⁶ Nisbet, R., 1980, 4.

⁷ Koselleck, R., 2002, 221.

became obsessed with the idea of progress'.⁸ However, by the end of the twentieth century, the concept of progress occupied a very different place in political thought. Defenders of the concept became hard to find and those who did reference the concept were highly critical of it.⁹ As a consequence, the concept of progress fell out of fashion as many political theorists either openly repudiated or quietly distanced themselves from it.

So there is a discrepancy between the importance of the concept to political actors, intellectual historians, and post-Enlightenment thinkers and the irrelevance of the concept to contemporary political theorists. This thesis takes that disparity as its starting point and begins by questioning why political theorists chose to turn away from the concept of progress.

Critique of Progress: Reasons Behind The Rejection

As a result of various concerns, political theorists moved away from the concept of progress. Of these, five stand out as particularly significant.

First, there is the empirical concern. This concern states that the threat of climate change, the prospect of biodiversity collapse, the growth of economic inequality, the breakdown of the rules-based international order, the emergence of neo-fascist movements, and the resurgence of authoritarianism are taken to constitute an interrelated set of crises that prove we are not moving towards ever-greater perfection and that previous progressive achievements can be undone.¹⁰ Of course, this objection to the concept of progress is not new. The horrors of the twentieth century led Walter Benjamin to label the course of history 'one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage'.¹¹ Theodor Adorno echoed this concern when he stated that following the Holocaust a progressive

⁸ Scott, J., 2014, 600.

⁹ Wagner, P., 2016, vii.

¹⁰ Demaria, F. D., Gomez-Baggethun, E., 2023, 41-42; Jaeggi, R., 2023.

¹¹ Benjamin, W., 1942, 249.

reading of history was unconscionable.¹² So there is a longstanding doubt that progress has occurred or that it will continue in the future.¹³

Second, there is the political concern. This concern arises from the fear that the concept of progress, when understood teleologically, can justify any course of action in the pursuit of a final end. Isaiah Berlin articulated this concern and warned that if such a final goal is thought possible, then the prospect of achieving it can be used to justify any course of action. As Berlin put it, the ‘possibility of a final solution – even if we forget the terrible sense that these words acquired in Hitler’s day – turn out to be an illusion, and a very dangerous one. For if one really believes that such a solution is possible, then surely no cost would be too high to obtain it’.¹⁴ It was according to this logic that totalitarian, genocidal, and eugenic ideologies were justified during the twentieth century.¹⁵ For this reason, Ashis Nandy refers to the idea of progress as ‘one of the most violent intrusions in our lexicon’.¹⁶ As a result, political theorists turned away from the concept on the grounds that ‘the idea is simply too dangerous to be employed’.¹⁷

Third, there is the value-pluralist concern. This concern is related to the political concern but notes that when the telos is taken to contain multiple values, two problems arise. First, the problem of value incompatibility. This states that certain values are mutually exclusive so that the realisation of one may come at the expense of the other. The inescapable trade-off between values means that the full realisation of one value blocks the full realisation of another. As Berlin put it, ‘some values clash... equality and liberty cannot be fully fulfilled together’.¹⁸ The clashing of values leads to ‘trade-offs – rules, values, principles

¹² Adorno, T., Horkheimer M., 1944; Adorno, T., 1955, 1966.

¹³ For further contributions to the empirical concern, see: Ryan, C. (2019); Slaboch, M. W. (2017); Wright, R. (2004); Sale, K. (1999); Kauffman B. (1998); Sorel, G. (1969); Becker, C. L. (1932).

¹⁴ Berlin, I., 1988, 15.

¹⁵ Glover, J., 2001.

¹⁶ Nandy, A., 2015.

¹⁷ Buchanan, A., Powell, R., 2018, 8.

¹⁸ Berlin, I., 1996, 5; 1969, ‘[i]f X is chosen, Y may be irretrievably lost, and nothing can be done about it’, 14.

must yield to each other in varying degrees in specific situations'.¹⁹ Second, the problem of value incommensurability. This states that when values are incompatible there are no means by which we can judge gains or losses in one value against gains or losses in another. For example, it is impossible to determine whether a certain increase in liberty that occurs alongside a certain decrease in equality is an overall improvement. The only way an overall judgement could be made was if each value corresponded to a common value and different values realised that common value by different amounts.²⁰ However, as Berlin showed, once value monism is rejected 'there can exist no 'super-standard' for the comparison of entire scales of value'.²¹ Therefore, in the absence of a common value to which all other values can be reduced, we cannot determine whether gains or losses in one value combined with gains or losses in another is an overall improvement. The further concern is that the problem of value pluralism is overcome by adopting a naïve assumption that there is a bundle of non-conflicting normative desirables.²² The concept of progress is said to lead theorising astray because it suggests that it is progressive to advocate for all items on a shopping list of desirables without paying any attention to how these desirables may be mutually exclusive or involve trade-offs with one another. Progress is taken to mean advancing on all fronts or at least an advance on some fronts that do not entail a retreat on any other. For example, from a left-wing perspective, progress comes to look like securing racial justice, enhancing the rights of minorities, strengthening environmental protection, decarbonising the economy, eradicating global poverty, making international trade more equitable, improving the material conditions of the economically disadvantaged, and defending more liberal immigration, asylum, and refugee schemes. The concern is that the concept of progress fails to ask uncomfortable questions about how elements of this agenda might conflict. The further concern is that if the

¹⁹ Berlin, I., 1998, 18.

²⁰ The most common monistic account is utilitarianism. On this account, all values affect happiness and comparisons can be made amongst rival sets of values according to how far they increase or decrease happiness.

²¹ Berlin, I., 1955, 136-137.

²² I am grateful to David Miller for raising this concern.

concept of progress moves beyond the naïve assumption of a set of complementary values, then it relies on an equally naïve *ceteris paribus* assumption; namely, it makes claims on the grounds that all other things remain equal and excludes any consideration of trade-offs between developments.²³ Therefore, because value incompatibility and value incommensurability appear to prohibit claims of overall progress from being made without the addition of questionable assumptions, theorists have opted to distance themselves from the concept of progress.

Fourth, there is the Eurocentric concern. The concern is that Eurocentrism is not just a bug but an ingrained feature of the concept of progress. The idea of progress emerged in a context influenced by Montesquieu's climatic theory of oriental despotism, hierarchical accounts of civilisation that took the mechanisms of progress to apply exclusively to European societies, and cultural assumptions that took non-European forms of social organisation to be either static, 'primitive', or 'backward'.²⁴ The concern is that these assumptions became ingrained in the conceptual architecture so that the Eurocentric perspective is not just a historical anomaly or a remedial flaw but a structural feature that cannot be easily removed. As a result, Loren Goldman warns that the concept of progress tends to produce 'triumphant developmentalism and paternalistic domination'.²⁵ The triumphant developmentalism concern worries that the concept of progress takes the history of European development to detail the social, political, and economic systems that are deemed normatively desirable. This fosters an ignorance towards non-European societies that marginalises and disregards their histories. The paternalistic domination concern worries that the concept of progress reinforces an exclusively Eurocentric vision of modernity. Since the telos of world history is read out of the history of European development the European form of modernity is taken to be *the* valid version.

²³ I am grateful to Elizabeth Frazer for highlighting this aspect of the concern.

²⁴ Montesquieu, C. de Secondat, baron de, 2002, Book XIV, 231-245.

²⁵ Goldman, L., 2023, 3.

This entails that the ideologies of colonialism and imperialism have grounds for justification. For if European states were the first to progress and arrive at the advanced form of civilisation, then those states would be justified in imposing their form of social order on others to bring about or speed up their development. It is for this reason that James Tully refers to the language of progress and development as ‘the language of oppression for two-thirds of the world’s people’.²⁶ Since theorists have been unconvinced that the Eurocentric worldview can be jettisoned from the concept of progress, they have avoided the concept altogether for fear of reinforcing those pernicious implications.

Fifth, there is the historicism concern. This concern distinguishes between two forms of historicism and argues that the concept of progress is wedded to the stronger form. The weaker form of historicism emphasises the importance of interpreting values, practices, and institutions within their historical and cultural contexts. This form of historicism seeks to explain how events actually unfolded without presuming any overarching purpose or trajectory to history. The stronger form of historicism, the form that analyses History with a capital H, stipulates the existence of a directionality to historical events. The concern is that since the concept of progress presupposes the possibility of comparing two temporal states of affairs, favourably assesses the latter against the former, and assumes that the latter is likely to persist into the future, it implies a notion of historical directionality. Given that the concept of progress presupposes a philosophy of history, the concern is that it appears to be wedded to the stronger form of historicism. This generates a problem for the concept of progress because the stronger form of historicism is said to ignore historical reality and rob human agents of a meaningful sense of causal agency.²⁷ The concern states that since the

²⁶ Tully, J., 2012; cited from ‘personal communication’ in Allen. A., 2016, 232.

²⁷ Popper, K., 1945, forcefully articulated this point: ‘If we think that history progresses, or that we are bound to progress, then we commit the same mistake as those who believe that history has a meaning that can be discovered in it and need not be given to it. For to progress is to move towards some kind of end, towards an end which exists for us as human beings. ‘History’ cannot do that; only we, the human individuals, can do it... And we shall do it much better as we become more fully aware of the fact that progress rests with us, with our watchfulness, with our efforts, with the clarity of our conception of our ends, and with the realism of their choice’, 483.

concept of progress rests on a belief in fixed universal laws of history it ignores how history is affected by unpredictable developments, new ideas, innovative technologies, and individual action. In the absence of an argument for how to separate the concept of progress from the strong form of historicism, political theorists have been hesitant to engage with the concept and endorse such an account of historical development.

Although each concern is forceful in its own right they are not always entirely distinct. For example, aspects of each concern are at work when political theorists voice their unease about prophetic visions of a utopian future. Nevertheless, the important point is that the collective weight of these concerns led political theorists to leave the concept of progress on the sidelines of contemporary political theory.

The State of Play – Motivating a Return to the Concept of Progress

In order for the thesis not to end here and conclude that political theorists have grounds for leaving the concept alone, political theorists need a positive case for why they should reconsider the concept of progress. Therefore, we ought to consider whether there are countervailing reasons that should motivate political theorists to return to the concept of progress and attempt to rescue it from the conceptual concerns. To determine whether the thesis should proceed with that endeavour, I set out the strongest reasons why political theorists should re-engage with the concept of progress.

Defence of Progress: Reasons to Return

Amongst the various reasons that could be given to motivate a return to theorising about the concept of progress, I highlight three that are especially compelling.

First, flipping the political concern on its head, it is precisely because the concept of progress is so powerful that political theorists cannot turn their backs on it. The realisation of this point was the original motivation for this project. I came to appreciate the devastating potential of the concept whilst walking around the memorials and museums of Yad Vashem. It was here that the sheer volume of references to the concept of progress made it clear that the idea deeply influenced the ideology, rhetoric, and propaganda that led to the Holocaust. No one could walk away from Yad Vashem without appreciating just how dangerous the concept of progress can be when its use is uncontested and its power is left unchecked. It is worth remembering that the upshot of the political concern was that because of its dangerous potential, political theorists ought to abandon the concept of progress. The problem with this prescription is that all it does is bury our heads in the sand. It falsely assumes that by ignoring the concept of progress it will eventually go away. However, the recent use of the idea by far-right political organisations and the emergence of reminiscent ideological and rhetorical tropes show that the dangerous use of the concept of progress is not going anywhere. The concept of progress is part of our practical political vocabulary; it will continue to be used by political actors and widely invoked in our moral and political discourse. Therefore, rather than avoiding it and hoping that it disappears, political theorists ought to accept that the concept of progress is here to stay and acknowledge that the risks of ignoring it are too high to countenance. Consequently, political theorists ought to engage with the concept of progress and determine how the concept should be employed given the problems and dangers associated with it. If we are to live up to the mantra of 'Never Again', then instead of giving up on the concept and surrendering it to those who want to abuse its power, political theorists should return to the concept of progress in order to prevent its misuse.

Second, political theorists acquire a new avenue for normative theorising when they engage with the concept of progress. On the one hand, political

theorists primarily undertake normative theorising with respect to one value. For example, they consider what it means for a society to become more just, more equal, or more free. However, the concept of progress goes beyond an analysis of one value and considers the gains and losses in competing values that occur as a result of social change. Flipping the value pluralism concern on its head, the virtue of the concept of progress is that it enables political theorists to wrangle with the challenge of making claims of an all-things-considered nature without relying on the assumption of a non-conflicting bundle of normative desires or the *ceteris paribus* assumption. Of course, this does not mean that political theorists can ignore the problem of value pluralism. A response to the challenges of value incompatibility and value incommensurability will need to be provided. Nevertheless, the concept of progress enables political theorists to undertake normative theorising of a more complicated nature. It enables all-things-considered comparisons to be made between past and present conditions and empowers political theorists to determine whether or not things have got better and understand in what respects they have improved. Conversely, if things have not got better or appear to be getting worse, then the concept of progress can indicate that all-things-considered betterment has come to a halt and specify the ways in which we are regressing. So the concept of progress enables political theorists to undertake an all-things-considered evaluation of social change and determine what needs to be focused on if there is concern about the direction of travel. On the other hand, political theorists often theorise in negative terms insofar as they consider what it would look like to end an injustice, reduce inequality, or terminate oppression. Clearly, negative political theorising can have immense political power. For example, the claim that slavery is wrong underpinned a societal change that represented a profound instance of progress. However, theorising *exclusively* in negative terms has two important limitations. First, it overlooks the positive elements that necessarily accompany negative critique. For example, to say that the practice of slavery ought to be abolished also, implicitly, makes claims about the dignity, freedom, and equality that ought

to be secured. By using the concept of progress to embrace the positive dimensions latent within the negative, political theorists acquire a framework within which such possibilities can be made explicit and systematically developed. Second, positive theorising can be even more radical and motivating. Employing the concept of progress to outline a vision of the world we want to build offers a constructive image of transformation that can inspire and sustain opposition to the present more powerfully than negation alone. Therefore, my argument is not that negative theorising lacks value but that the concept of progress enables both positive and negative models of political theorising to be held together. The concept of progress recognises the critical force of negative arguments whilst also providing the space for the articulation of positive visions of preferred social orders. In this way, the concept of progress is a tool that enriches the normative toolbox of political theorists.

Third, the concept of progress considers what brings about social change, who plays a role in the causal process, and how the historical sequence of social change unfolds. The strength of the concept is that it explicitly considers the causal mechanism of development and asks how progressive change occurs over time. The weakness of the concept is that it can be uncritically employed by those who invoke progress to cast themselves as its agents and to claim that history is on their side. This allows political actors to see themselves as the vanguard of the future and argue that the hardships endured in the pursuit of their desired change will not be in vain, since history is conceived as an ongoing process that will ultimately vindicate their struggle in the fullness of time. The problem with this kind of thinking is that it can encourage a progressive zealotry that gives rise to either a dogmatic self-assurance that dismisses criticism and alternative perspectives, an arrogance that alienates potential allies by assuming that those who disagree are destined to be on the wrong side of history, and a complacency that fails to recognise the hard work and strategic effort that are required to bring about long-lasting social change. So when political theorists engage with the

concept of progress they must reflect upon the causal mechanics of progressive change and the idea of a historical trajectory of progressive development to prevent the concept from being inappropriately employed. By critically engaging with the concept of progress, political theorists can ensure that the concept remains a useful tool for understanding social change and reclaim it from political actors who misuse it to justify their ideological position.

So there are compelling reasons for political theorists to return to the concept of progress. When political theorists engage with the concept of progress they can prevent its dangerous misuse, employ it as a tool for all-things-considered normative political theorising, and use it to understand the mechanics of social change. This suggests that analysing the concept of progress is a worthwhile endeavour as it will assess whether the concept can overcome its conceptual challenges and become a viable tool for political theorists to employ.

I begin this project by clarifying what the concept of progress refers to when it is employed by political theorists. I then put forward a taxonomy of progress to detail the elements that make up a conception of progress. This makes clear what counts as a conception of progress, who counts as a theorist of progress, and sets out the many forms that a conception of progress can take.²⁸

The Concept: Moral-Political Progress

In general, progress is defined as a ‘movement toward an outcome or conclusion’ that represents ‘a further or higher stage... a better state or condition’.^{29,30} As such, progress could relate to various domains and a range of different goals. In terms of the concept employed by political actors, political

²⁸ I adopt the standard distinction between concept and conception. *Concept* refers to a general, abstract idea. *Conception* refers to a particular, fully articulated interpretation of that idea.

²⁹ *Oxford English Dictionary*, ‘progress (n.), sense 1.1’; ‘progress (v.), sense 4.a’.

³⁰ The etymological root of ‘progress’ and ‘progressive’ is the Latin noun *prōgressus*, meaning ‘forward movement, advance, development’.

theorists, and intellectual historians it must be determined what the better state or condition is that the concept of progress refers to. Alain de Benoist is illuminating on this point and writes that '[p]rogress can be defined as a cumulative process in which the most recent stage is always considered preferable and better', noting how this definition contains 'a descriptive element (change takes place in a given direction) and an axiological element (this progress is interpreted as an improvement)'.³¹ Therefore, in order to determine what counts as a beneficial improvement for political actors and political theorists the concept of progress must reference an account of normativity that details what the values, moral principles, and political norms of a society are that are deemed to be desirable.^{32,33} The values, moral principles, and political norms determine what is worthy of pursuit and set out how individuals ought to act and how the institutions of society ought to be organised.³⁴ As a result, we ought to label the concept of progress relevant to political actors, political theorists, and intellectual historians *moral-political progress* and take it to refer to the values, moral principles, and political norms that govern the moral practices and political institutions of a society. I refer to other forms of progress (such as scientific, technological, and economic) as non-normative progress.³⁵ This thesis considers non-normative progress only insofar as it impacts moral-political progress.³⁶

³¹ Benoist, A., 2008, 7.

³² Approaches to theorising about progress inspired by philosophical pragmatism reject this claim. These approaches deny that an account of normativity is required to distinguish between desirable and undesirable changes to the moral practices and political institutions of a society.

³³ On the relationship between moral and political values, I reject the position of Alex Worsnip and John Leader Maynard (2018, 758-760) and Eva Erman and Niklas Möller (2021, 11-12); namely, that there is no substantive distinction between moral and political normativities because there are no non-moral normative terms in the political domain. Rather, I endorse the position of Matt Sleat (2016, 78; 2022, 470) which states that 'politics and morality are best conceived not as separate but as deeply entwined and in such a way that we can neither understand one without the other' (2018, 17). Therefore, moral *and* political values are relevant to our conception of progress because they are inseparably intertwined.

³⁴ Normative elements influence one another; values inform moral principles and political norms, and vice versa.

³⁵ There is a distinction between two forms of economic progress. First, economic progress may refer to wealth. Second, economic progress may refer to the economic system. The former is a form of non-normative progress. The latter is relevant for the concept of moral-political progress insofar as it details how the economic system of a society ought to be organised.

³⁶ See Roots of Progress Institute for an exploration of non-normative progress.

So the concept of moral-political progress refers to changes in moral practices and political institutions that move a society closer to what is deemed desirable. Inevitably, a conception of moral-political progress could take many forms. In order to analyse these conceptions of progress we ought to taxonomize a conception of progress according to its constituent conceptual elements.

A Taxonomy of Moral-Political Progress

A conception of progress can be taxonomized according to three conceptual elements.³⁷

First, there is the normative-teleological element.³⁸ There are two parts to the element of normative teleology; the normative aspect and the teleological aspect. The normative aspect relates to the values, moral principles, and political norms that detail how we ought to live and how society ought to be organised. The normative aspect enables us to determine whether or not a change is desirable because it shows that the moral practices and political institutions have moved closer to a desirable form.³⁹ The teleological aspect relates to the idea that there is a goal to progressive change. This goal acts both as a benchmark against which judgements of progress can be made and as a lodestar towards which change can be orientated. Since progress implies forward movement towards a desirable goal the teleological aspect is an essential part of a conception of progress.⁴⁰ Without that goal, the conception of progress becomes directionless

³⁷ The Appendix tabulates this conceptual taxonomy and details how the conceptions of progress analysed in this thesis fit into it.

³⁸ The necessity of a normative telos for a conception of moral-political progress is contested by pragmatic and functionalist conceptions of progress. I consider and critique these approaches in Chapter Four.

³⁹ A conception of moral-political progress does not make sense without first establishing what it means to have 'better' moral practices and political institutions. Without the normative aspect, a conception of moral-political progress would lose its meaning and it would be impossible to distinguish 'progress' from 'mere change'.

⁴⁰ This requires only a weak form of teleology (the presence of a normative goal or account of the good towards which change can be evaluated) rather than a strong form of teleology (historical development is necessarily driven by that normative goal or account of the good). Whilst some conceptions of progress may incorporate a strong account of teleology, it is not a necessary requirement of a conception of moral-political progress.

and incoherent.⁴¹ In addition, it is important to distinguish between a change in the normative telos itself and a change in the moral practices and political institutions of a society. On the one hand, moral practices and political institutions might change to either move closer to or further away from the normative telos. On the other hand, the values, moral principles, and political norms of the normative telos may themselves change. Although moral-political progress is defined by the movement of the moral practices and political institutions of a society towards the form detailed by the telos, it remains to be determined how a change in the telos itself can be desirable.

With regard to the normative aspect, the central question is what grounds the account of normativity. The conception of progress must justify the values, moral principles, and political norms that are deemed desirable. In addition, the account of normativity will either be monistic or pluralistic. If the account is monistic, then it is comprised of only one value (such as happiness or human perfection) and what is deemed desirable will be derived from that value alone. If the account is pluralistic, then it is comprised of multiple values. In this case, the challenge of value pluralism is raised.

With regard to the teleological aspect, there are two central questions. First, the question of what the scope of the telos is. The telos may be either universal or particular. If the telos is particular, then it applies to only one context or a specific set of contexts. If the telos is universal, then it applies to all possible

⁴¹ The necessity of the teleological aspect is often contested. A conception of progress that retained only the normative aspect would be concerned with how changes to the moral-political condition align with certain values, moral principles, and political norms rather than achieving a specific goal. This conception of progress would not posit a goal towards which society is moving. Instead, the conception would understand moral-political progress in terms of an ongoing process of improvement to the present conditions. The problem with abandoning the teleological aspect is that the idea of progress entails a sense of direction. Without a teleological framework, a conception of moral-political progress lacks a sense of whether moral-political improvement is being realised or whether the moral practices and political institutions of a society are merely moving in an arbitrary or fragmented way. The teleological aspect gives purpose and direction to the normative improvements and makes the conception of moral-political progress intelligible. A conception of moral-political progress cannot be fully understood without adopting both a normative dimension and a teleological dimension.

contexts. Second, the question of what the status of the telos is. If the telos is definitive, then it is final and once realised progress will 'plateau out'.⁴² If the telos is provisional, then once it is realised a subsequent telos will appear such that progress can continue towards its realisation. When the telos is provisional there will be a sequence of teloi which may end either with a definitive telos or go on *ad infinitum*.⁴³

Second, there is the causal-agential element. A conception of progress must detail how a transition towards the normative telos occurs. To do so, it must explain what the cause of progress is and who the agents of progress are.

With regard to the causal aspect, there are two parts.

The first part of the causal aspect relates to the relationship between moral-political progress and non-normative forms of progress. Moral-political progress will be caused either indirectly (moral-political progress is caused by a combination of scientific, technological, and economic development) or directly (moral-political progress is caused by a direct change to our moral practices and political institutions). If moral-political progress is caused directly, then the relationship between moral-political progress and non-normative forms of progress will be either irrelevant (the level of non-normative development has no bearing on the extent to which moral-political progress can occur) or pre-conditional (a level of non-normative development is required for certain levels of moral-political progress).

The second part of the causal aspect relates to the type of causal account. There are two distinctions relevant to the type of causal account adopted by a conception of progress. First, as Charles Van Doren outlined, there is a distinction

⁴² Van Doren, C., 1967, 14.

⁴³ The teleological aspect could remain agnostic as to whether the telos is provisional or definitive and only assert that a definitive telos has not already been achieved.

between a cosmogenic and an anthropogenic cause. If the cause is cosmogenic, then 'the source of progress is in the cosmos... progress is the design of Providence, or it is the effect or manifestation in the human sphere, of a cosmic principle that brings about progress'. If the cause is anthropogenic, then 'the source of progress is in man himself – in what he is, in what he does, in what he learns... Mankind, in short, progresses unaided... without the help of God or any cosmic principle or law'.⁴⁴ However, the idea that a supernatural entity or a cosmic force determines the path of progress and guides mankind to act in a certain way no longer appears plausible to political theorists. Therefore, the question of causation will be approached from an anthropogenic perspective.⁴⁵ Second, the cause of the transition may be either necessary or contingent. If the cause is necessary, then the transition is predetermined to occur according to a pre-set trajectory. If the cause is contingent, then the transition is not inevitable, its trajectory has not been pre-set, and it is dependent upon its causal factors being operationalised for it to occur.

With regard to the agential aspect, there are three parts.

The first part of the agential aspect relates to the agents of progress. The account will have to specify who the agents of progress are. The agents of progress may be individuals (either any individual or only certain individuals), a profession (e.g. thinkers, merchants, industrialists, military officers, statesmen), a class (e.g. economic, social, political), or a collective (e.g. people, culture, social movement, nation, or state).

The second part of the agential aspect relates to the type of agency. The type of agency the agents of progress possess correlates to whether the anthropogenic account of causation is necessary or contingent. If the account is

⁴⁴ Van Doren, C., 1967, 23.

⁴⁵ For the purpose of historical analysis, the cosmogenic component of the taxonomy remains important.

necessary, then their agency is catalytic (the trajectory of progressive development is predetermined and human action can only hasten a change that was always going to occur).⁴⁶ If the account is contingent, then their agency is creative (the trajectory of progressive development is not pre-set and human action can forge the path of progressive development).⁴⁷

The third part of the agential aspect relates to the intentionality of progressive actions. Progress may be the result of either the intended or unintended consequences of either normative or non-normative action. Normative actions are orientated towards realising a normative end (actions aimed at changing a moral practice or political institution). Non-normative actions are actions that are focused on non-normative goals (such as the advancement of techno-scientific knowledge or economic enrichment). As such, causal agency may be located in the intended consequence of normative actions (the agent directly attempts to cause a transition to a better normative state and their actions do cause the intended effect), in the intended consequences of non-normative actions (the agent indirectly attempts to cause a transition to a better normative state through their non-normative actions and their actions do cause the intended effect), in the unintended consequences of normative actions (the agent directly attempts to cause a transition to a better normative state but their actions bring about a progressive development other than what was intended), or in the unintended consequences of non-normative actions (the agent does not attempt to cause a transition to a better normative state because their actions are orientated towards non-normative ends but those non-normative actions cause a

⁴⁶ On the necessary account of causation, although human action is the cause of progress it cannot affect the trajectory or end of progressive development. If a certain agent did not perform an action, in the fullness of time, another agent would. Therefore, an individual can only affect the time at which progress occurs.

⁴⁷ On the contingent account of causation, human action causes and also determines the trajectory and end of progressive development. If a certain agent did not perform an action, then the path and end of progressive development could be different. Therefore, an individual can affect the course of progressive change.

progressive transition as an unintentional result).⁴⁸ Whenever causal agency is located in normative actions (intended or unintended), an epistemic explanation of how the agent gains knowledge of the normative telos must be provided.

Third, there is the historical element. A conception of progress needs an account of history that can make sense of the apparent directionality of change over time and the relatively stable rate of improvement, detail the form that progressive transitions take, and justify the presumption against the reversibility of progressive change.

There are three forms that such an account of history can take.

First, there is the continuous account of history. On this account, history is understood as one long continuum without clear-cut periods or breaks. Transitions are incremental; they occur in a gradual and cumulative manner. If regressions occur, they are similarly gradual. However, regressions are only ever temporary. Following a regression, progress will resume but need not retrace itself and follow the same path of prior progressive development.

Second, there is the stadial account of history. On this account, history is understood as one long sequence of development divided into a series of discrete stages. Progress is the movement along the stages. Transitions are sequential; they occur in a step-by-step manner such that each instance of progress is additive and follows logically from the previous one. Depending on the stadial account, backsliding to a prior stage may be possible.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, when subsequent progress occurs it continues according to the series of stages.

⁴⁸ 'Cunning of Reason' accounts of causation take progress to be the result of unintended consequences. This illuminates a crucial distinction between Cunning of Reason accounts of causation; namely, where the unintended consequences are the result of normative or non-normative action. As such, it is possible to have either a normative unintended consequences Cunning of Reason account of causation.

⁴⁹ Common explanations of stadial backsliding include warfare, natural disasters, pandemics, environmental collapse, resource depletion, technological regression, or political decay.

Third, there is the epochal account of history. On this account, history is divided into distinct periods and the idea of a single sequence of progressive development is rejected. Transitions are dialectical; they occur following the collapse of the prior epoch. Since transitions to a subsequent epoch mark an irreversible change, regressions to a prior epoch are impossible.⁵⁰ However, regressions within an epoch are possible.

Taxonomizing the elements of a conception of progress in this way makes clear that a conception of progress: (a) tells a normative story that connects the past and the future to a goal that can explain why a change is progressive, (b) details a driving mechanism that explains how progressive change comes about, and (c) provides an account of history that conceptualises the path of progressive development. In addition, this taxonomy establishes who counts as a theorist of progress. All theorists of progress view history as having a narrative that can be understood in positive terms and believe that there is a force propelling that narrative forward. With this taxonomy and definition in mind, we can turn to individual theorists of progress to analyse how they construct their conceptions of progress with different variations of each conceptual element. This reveals which aspects remain plausible and which aspects need to be altered or abandoned for the conception of progress to be credible today.

In addition to the theorists of progress that emerged following the Enlightenment, there are a small number of contemporary theorists who are returning to the concept. However, it is not clear how the contemporary conceptions relate to the post-Enlightenment ones. It is necessary to analyse the conceptions of progress found within the resurgent literature to determine what, if anything, they have in common with the concept of moral-political progress.

⁵⁰ The claim that transitions between epochs are irreversible applies under ordinary conditions; that is, in the absence of extreme exogenous shocks. Cataclysmic events (e.g. an asteroid impact or sudden ecological collapse) could unwind epochal transitions and cause a reversal to a prior epoch. However, these scenarios are exceptional and do not undermine the prohibition of inter-epochal regressions under normal conditions.

This will establish whether the conceptions of progress that emerged following the Enlightenment and the contemporary conceptions are part of the same genealogy or whether they should be considered as two distinct conceptual projects. This will reveal whether the contemporary conceptions of progress can be deconstructed according to the above taxonomy or whether they should be considered as referring to a separate concept entirely.

Literature Review: Contemporary Conceptions of Progress

In what follows, I analyse four approaches that have been influential in the resurgent literature on progress.⁵¹ These approaches are not the exhaustive avenues that could be taken to theorise about progress. Rather, these approaches represent prominent strands of thought that have shaped recent scholarship. I present them in order of least to most influential, not only to reflect the development of the literature but to clarify which approaches continue to shape research into the concept of progress and which can be further utilised to develop a robust theoretical framework for understanding moral-political change.

First, reductionist conceptions of progress understand progress as the realisation of a specific moral principle or small set of moral principles. The 'reductionist' moniker comes from the fact that progress is 'reduced' to compliance with valid moral principles.⁵² These moral principles have a determinate and fixed content; namely, they have been valid throughout history and do not vary according to context. As such, they can be used to make claims of progress across time and geographical contexts. For example, Ruth Macklin reduces progress to compliance with the 'principle of humaneness' which is

⁵¹ The renewed interest started around the turn of the Millennium in Anglo-American analytic philosophy and has since expanded to the Frankfurt School of critical theory.

⁵² Buchanan, A., Powell, R., 2018, the 'reductionist' moniker differentiates these accounts from pluralistic accounts that outline other types of moral progress. As Buchanan and Powell write, '[t]his view may be labelled "reductionist" in that it understands other apparent types of moral progress, such as changes in moral concepts, moral reasoning, moral motivation, and understandings of the virtues of morality itself as instances of moral progress only insofar as they contribute to better compliance with valid moral norms', 68.

defined as having a 'sensitivity to (less tolerance of) the pain and suffering of human beings' and the 'principle of humanity' which is defined as having a 'recognition of the inherent dignity, the basic autonomy, or the intrinsic worth of human beings'.⁵³ Dale Jamieson expands these principles and claims that progress is also exhibiting a 'respect for animals and nature'.⁵⁴ Michael Shermer provides an alternative Aristotelian reductionist conception of progress and argues that progress is the 'improvement in the survival and flourishing of sentient beings'.⁵⁵ The most prominent reductionist account of progress is put forward by Peter Singer who argues that progress is the expansion of moral concern. On Singer's account, progress would conclude when all human beings and the appropriate animals have full moral standing and moral concern is extended to all beings whose welfare is affected by human action.⁵⁶ What unites reductionist conceptions is that progress is only taken to refer to compliance with one or more universally valid moral principle. The reductionist approach occupied a prominent place in the early stages of the resurgent literature. However, interest in this approach reached a high-water mark with Singer's contribution that has declined since.

Second, Allen Buchanan and Russell Powell advance a pluralistic, provisional, and dynamic conception of progress. Buchanan and Powell argue that reductionist accounts 'reduce moral progress to better compliance with norms whose contents are thought to be presently ascertainable' and 'ought to be rejected... [because] there are some types of moral progress that are not reducible to better compliance with moral norms'.⁵⁷ Instead, Buchanan and Powell adopt a pluralistic conception claiming that 'there is more than one irreducible type of moral progress' and put forward a ten-part classification of the types of moral

⁵³ Macklin, R., 1999, 372.

⁵⁴ Jamieson, D., 2002, 321.

⁵⁵ Shermer, M., 2015, 19.

⁵⁶ Singer, P., 2011, 120.

⁵⁷ Buchanan, A., Powell, R., 2018, also argue that functionalist accounts should 'likewise be rejected because there are important types of moral progress that are not explicable in functionalist terms', 107.

progress.⁵⁸ Their ten types of moral progress are: (1) better compliance with valid moral norms, (2) better moral concepts, (3) better understanding of the virtues, (4) better moral motivation, (5) better moral reasoning, (6) proper demoralisation, (7) proper moralisation, (8) better understanding of moral standing and moral statuses, (9) improvement in the understanding of the nature of morality, and (10) a better understanding of justice.⁵⁹ Each type is independent and irreducible to any other type of progress. They make clear that a coherent account of progress should remain 'sceptical that [each type of progress] can be reduced to one kind'.⁶⁰ In addition, Buchanan and Powell's conception of progress is provisional because they take 'current beliefs as to which moral norms are valid, as well as our current understanding of improvement in moral concepts, of the virtues, and of moral reasoning' to be 'subject to revision over time'.⁶¹ Finally, the conception of progress is dynamic in that the irreducible types of progress are themselves open to change. More forms of moral progress may be added to the ten-part classification and any pre-existing form may be altered if it is deemed appropriate to do so. Buchanan and Powell provide the example that 'the achievement of moral improvement by "clean" means... might become a requirement for what counts as moral progress *tout court*'.⁶² The ability to add the achievement of moral progress by clean means (i.e., achieving moral progress without relying on problematic methods) as a form of moral progress is said to demonstrate the dynamism of the account. In sum, Buchanan and Powell's conception of moral progress is pluralistic in that there are multiple types of progress each of which is irreducible to any other, provisional in that our understanding of the irreducible forms of moral progress is open to revision, and dynamic in that the types of progress themselves are susceptible to change. Whilst Buchanan and Powell's criticism of other conceptions of progress has been

⁵⁸ Buchanan, A., Powell, R., 2018, 92.

⁵⁹ Buchanan, A., Powell, R., 2018, 54-60.

⁶⁰ Buchanan, A., Powell, R., 2018, 20.

⁶¹ Buchanan, A., Powell, R., 2018, 93.

⁶² Buchanan, A., Powell, R., 2018, 108.

influential, their approach to theorising about progress has not ignited significant subsequent engagement.

Third, pragmatic and functionalist conceptions of progress draw from the philosophical pragmatism of John Dewey and Richard Rorty to define progress as the overcoming of problems. Functionalist conceptions of progress build upon this definition and take morality to be a social technology whose function is to overcome collective action problems by constraining the situations in which members of a group act in a self-interested way that would undermine the interests of the group. Christopher Boehm illustrates this point with a vivid description of the requirement for our early ancestors to cooperate in the hunting of large game. For Boehm, the function of ethics is to ensure that the resources produced from the hunt are neither monopolised by a cabal of the strongest nor are they distributed to free riders who have taken no part in their social enterprise.⁶³ Similarly, Dennis Krebs states that the mutual benefit of the division of labour between neighbouring groups and the emergence of trade between more distant groups requires a mechanism to distribute the benefits of continual cooperation.⁶⁴ Philip Kitcher develops this position into a functionalist conception of progress by arguing that progress should be understood in terms of discharging the function of morality (overcoming collective action problems) with greater efficacy or efficiency.⁶⁵ Crucially, Kitcher's functionalist account of progress is not only etiologically functionalist but also constitutively functionalist. This means that morality is not only that which emerged as a response to solving collective action problems but that 'this function is *constitutive* of morality'; namely, 'all there is to anything that could properly be called morality is the performance of this function'.⁶⁶ This entails that functionalist conceptions of progress have no concern for what the values, moral principles, and political norms are so long as they overcome collective action

⁶³ Boehm, C., 2012, 141-3, 149-50, 155-8; cited in Luco, A., 2019, 435.

⁶⁴ Krebs, D., 2011, 180; cited in Luco, A., 2019, 435.

⁶⁵ Kitcher, P., 2011, 222.

⁶⁶ Buchanan, A., Powell, R., 2018, 78.

problems. Since *The Ethical Project*, the functionalist conception of progress has received substantial critical engagement. However, it has suffered a range of critiques over that time. As a consequence, recent and forthcoming contributions that follow in a similar vein opt to move away from an overtly functionalist position and return to the roots of philosophical pragmatism. For example, Rahel Jaeggi extracts from philosophical pragmatism the idea of a cumulative learning process to define progress as an ongoing process of social change in which we learn from previous attempts to overcome a crisis in order to respond more appropriately to the problems of the present.⁶⁷ Similarly, Lea Ypi intends to develop this insight to explore how a process takes place that enables political institutions to learn from the ‘trials and failures of the past’.⁶⁸ Approaches that follow in the tradition of philosophical pragmatism continue to be a site of research in the concept of progress.

Fourth, there is Amy Allen’s Frankfurt School of critical theory conception of moral-political progress.⁶⁹ Allen notes that the ‘idea of historical progress refers not just to progress toward some specific goal but rather to human progress or development overall’ and labels this ‘the idea of normative or moral-political progress’.⁷⁰ Allen claims that ‘[i]n order to make judgements about progress, historical or otherwise, all that one needs is a standard or benchmark against which progress is to be measured’.⁷¹ However, Allen notes that when making claims of progress critical theorists reference a benchmark that depends on ‘problematically Eurocentric and/or foundationalist strategies for grounding normativity’.⁷² Allen details the problem in two stages. In the first stage, the approach attempts to avoid the charge of foundationalism by ‘ground[ing]

⁶⁷ Jaeggi, R., 2023.

⁶⁸ Ypi, L., forthcoming, <<https://www.leverhulme.ac.uk/philip-leverhulme-prizes/what-political-progress>>, <<https://www.lse.ac.uk/government/research/research-projects/what-is-political-progress>>.

⁶⁹ Allen, A., 2019, 2017, 2016.

⁷⁰ Allen, A., 2016, 6-7; 10.

⁷¹ Allen, A., 2016, 32.

⁷² Allen, A., 2016, xii.

normative principles within the social world'.⁷³ The problem is that when the normative standard is justified with reference to the present social world it runs the risk of collapsing into relativism and being nothing more than an uncritical reflection of the status quo. In the second stage, the approach attempts to circumvent the problem of relativism by understanding the normative standard to be 'the result... of a process of social development and historical learning' and then using this 'normative orientation... [as] the basis for our moral-political strivings'.⁷⁴ The problem, Allen claims, is that grounding the normative benchmark of a forward-looking conception in a backward-looking account of history is inescapably Eurocentric. For Allen, our normative prescriptions 'cannot be truly progressive if our conception of progress as an imperative rests on a self-congratulatory, Eurocentric story about historical progress as a "fact"' because that backward-looking story asserts that European modernity is the only valid form and 'is bound up with complex relations of domination, exclusion, and silencing of colonised and racialised subjects'.⁷⁵ Allen's solution is to divorce all-things-considered forward-looking prescriptions from a Eurocentric story of modernity that reads out of history the direction for normative advancement in the future. Allen argues that the conception of progress can look to a future-oriented moral-political goal and understand historical advances as prior movements towards an antecedent normative goal. Therefore, to circumvent the problems of relativism and Eurocentrism, Allen claims that the conception of progress must refer to a normative standard that is not extrapolated from an account of history but nevertheless rooted within the social world. The question, then, is how to ground such a normative standard. Allen sketches out a 'contextualist meta-normative position' as a solution to that question.⁷⁶ For Allen, this contextualist position is not a form of first-order relativism but contextualist at the second-order level; namely, on the level of justification for the account of normativity. As such, Allen maintains that claims of moral-political progress can

⁷³ Allen, A., 2016, 14.

⁷⁴ Allen, A., 2016, 14.

⁷⁵ Allen, A., 2016, 19.

⁷⁶ Allen, A., 2016, 34.

be made with reference to a normative standard that is objective for the context in question but justified by an appeal to contingent normative foundations.⁷⁷ Although Allen's approach to theorising about progress has sparked debate surrounding the Eurocentric foundations of critical theory, it has not yet promoted sustained engagement on the concept of moral-political progress. However, Allen's approach is promising and has the potential to profoundly enrich further scholarship on the concept of progress. Therefore, Allen's approach remains a relatively untapped resource for theorising about the concept of moral-political progress.

Although each approach uses the language of progress, I believe that there are two different conceptual projects at play. One project follows in the same vein as the concept of progress that emerged during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It is to this project that the taxonomy applies. The other project seems to refer to a different concept. It is useful to clarify the distinction between these two conceptual projects to determine which contemporary conceptions of progress are relevant to the concept of moral-political progress.

Two Concepts of Progress: Thin vs. Thick

The thought that there are two distinct conceptual projects is shared by Buchanan and Powell. They accept that historical conceptions of progress and their pluralistic, provisional, and dynamic conception of progress are part of two distinct conceptual projects. However, Buchanan and Powell misidentify the distinction between the conceptual projects.

According to Buchanan and Powell, the distinction is between concepts that enable either local or global claims of progress to be made. On the one hand, they argue that local claims make reference to one specific value or practice and

⁷⁷ Allen, A., 2016, 215.

might assert that 'there has been progress in reducing racial or gender discrimination or in abolishing slavery'. On the other hand, they argue that global claims make overall claims of all-things-considered betterment and might assert that 'one society is said to be more morally progressive than another or when the same society is said to be more morally progressive at one time than another'.⁷⁸ Buchanan and Powell argue that claims of progress ought to be local and made with reference to one value or practice.⁷⁹ They consider post-Enlightenment conceptions of progress to be part of the conceptual project orientated towards making global claims of progress.

Although Buchanan and Powell identify the distinction between claims of progress in one dimension and claims of all-things-considered progress, the language of 'local' and 'global' is misleading. We are not concerned with where the concept of progress applies (whether it is local or global) but with what the concept of progress refers to (whether it refers to one value, moral principle, or political norm or all-things-considered judgments of a normative nature). Since claims of an all-things-considered nature can be made for either 'us' locally, for 'them' in another context, or for humanity as a whole, it does not make sense to articulate the distinction in terms of local or global concepts. Instead, the distinction should be framed in terms of the scope of the normative judgements and articulated in terms of a thin and thick concept of progress. The thin concept of moral or political progress refers to progress made against one value, moral principle, or political norm. The thick concept of moral-political progress refers to all-things-considered normatively desirable change.

⁷⁸ Buchanan, A., Powell, R., 2018, 6.

⁷⁹ Sauer, H., Blunden, C., Eriksen, C., Rehren, R., 2021, endorse a similar position and argue that statements about progress 'only make sense locally, for instance, about a particular person or practice in a particular society in a particular time, and not globally, such as for all humans or societies in the free world' because 'global assessments of moral progress will likely require comparing the morality of different cultures or time periods', 3.

When we think in terms of a distinction between thin and thick concepts of progress, the fault line between the post-Enlightenment and contemporary conceptions becomes clear.

On the one hand, the reductionist conception of progress and the pluralistic, provisional, and dynamic conception of progress relate to the thin concept of progress. At no point does either conception attempt to make all-things-considered claims of a normative nature. Both conceptions understand progress to refer to the gradual realisation of a specific dimension of morality. The reductionist conception of progress is thin but global; it speaks to the realisation of a determinate and fixed value across time and context. The pluralistic, provisional, and dynamic conception of progress is thin but can be local or global; it speaks to the realisation of an irreducible plurality of values and practices either within one context or across time and context.⁸⁰

On the other hand, the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century conceptions of progress were thick conceptions of progress. These conceptions of progress referred to all-things-considered judgements of normative change and were not merely concerned with progress against one value, one moral principle, or one political norm. Such conceptions of progress were nothing if not holistic visions of normative betterment.⁸¹

In the same vein, Amy Allen articulates a thick conception of progress. This conception explicitly seeks to make all-things-considered judgements of a

⁸⁰ Musschenga, A. L., Meynen, G., 2017, defend a thin and local conception of progress and argue that claims of progress can only be made when they specify a specific historical period, decide on the specific components of the normative system that is under discussion (beliefs, motivations, behaviour, or institutions), and settle on the relevant criteria to that specific component, 14.

⁸¹ As the taxonomy demonstrated, visions of normative betterment may be either monistic or pluralistic. It may appear as though the distinction between thin and thick progress collapses when we consider a monistic thick conception of progress against a thin conception of progress. Both only refer to a single value. Nevertheless, the monistic thick conception of moral-political progress still encompasses a holistic vision of how society ought to operate. The thin conception of progress has a much narrower scope and even if it is global it remains confined to its specific moral or political concern.

normative nature. For Allen, the thick conception of progress refers to a normative standard that can be understood as a version of the idealised ethical life; it is the collation of all ought statements appropriate to a time and place. Whether the thick conception of progress is local or global remains to be determined and will depend on the scope of the normative standard employed.

Pragmatic and functionalist conceptions of progress are also thick conceptions of progress. They do not refer to progress against one specific value, moral principle, or political norm but to how individuals ought to act and how society ought to be organised. They take it to be an all-things-considered improvement when a society overcomes a crisis or altruism failure that causes instability and conflict. So resolving a collective action problem always results in an all-things-considered desirable change. However, Kitcher argues that pragmatic and functionalist conceptions of progress are local insofar as they seek to ‘assess potential ways of going on from where *we* are’.⁸² Therefore, pragmatic and functionalist conceptions of progress are thick insofar as they make all-things-considered claims of improvement but local in the sense that they are always restricted to a specific context.

There is an important difference between the contemporary thick conceptions of progress. This relates to whether a thick conception of progress requires a normative telos to make claims of progress. Allen argues that ‘the very concept of progress does not make sense without some conception of a goal or benchmark against which progress can be measured’.⁸³ According to Allen, the normative standard acts as a beacon of a better future to which reformist action can aim. However, pragmatists and functionalists challenge the normative-teleological element of the taxonomy and claim that progress does not require a normative telos. On this account, anything that solves the problem will be an instance of progress and these solutions can be found without recourse to a

⁸² Kitcher, P., 2021, 24 [emphasis added].

⁸³ Allen, A., 2016, 226.

normatively desirable end state. Kitcher sums up the thick conception that rejects normative teleology when he writes that: '[p]ragmatic progress consists in solving problems and overcoming limitations... guided by *local* goals' where the 'break with teleology consists in the absence of any goal guiding the whole sequence of transitions'.⁸⁴ Making all-things-considered judgements about local progress in the absence of a normative telos is the hallmark of pragmatic and functionalist conceptions of progress. Because pragmatic and functionalist conceptions of progress challenge the normative and teleological aspects of a thick conception of progress, it needs to be determined whether a conception of moral-political progress can dispense with either aspect of the normative-teleological element and still make all-things-considered claims of progressive development.

I argue that the conceptions of progress that preoccupied political thought following the Enlightenment, as well as pragmatic and functionalist conceptions of progress and Amy Allen's conception of progress, are thick conceptions of moral-political progress; they are concerned with making all-things-considered judgements of normative betterment. Where the resurgent literature relates to a thin conception of progress and focuses on advances with regard to one normative dimension it is speaking to an entirely different concept of progress. Crucially, these thin conceptions of progress give up on what is distinctive about the concept of progress in the first place. If progress is making a given society more just, more equal, or more free, then justice, equality, or liberty are the salient concepts. Progress becomes synonymous with the form of non-ideal theory concerned with the transition towards realising a specific value. When the concept of progress is defined in terms of achieving incremental gains towards a value, progress is no longer a distinct concept but a derivative of the idea of transition. However, for theorists preoccupied with the thick conception of moral-political progress, appeals to progress are nothing if not appeals to all-

⁸⁴ Kitcher, P., 2021, 25.

things-considered claims of normative improvement. If we want to maintain that the concept of progress is distinct, then it is clear that the conception of progress ought to be considered in its thick form.

Therefore, the project to reappraise the concept of progress asks whether a thick conception of moral-political progress can be constructed in such a way that enables it to make all-things-considered claims whilst overcoming the five conceptual concerns.

Reappraisal of Moral-Political Progress: Methodology

The reappraisal of the thick concept of progress will proceed in two parts.

First, I analyse how progress was understood by those who historically believed in the thick concept of progress. This analysis demonstrates that the original theorists of progress in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries articulated thick conceptions of progress and catalogues the strengths and weaknesses of their respective conceptions. This reveals the most defensible thick conception of moral-political progress as things stood before theorists turned away from the concept.

Second, I ask whether the thick concept of progress is sustainable today. Since the highpoint of theorising about moral-political progress, the events of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries gave rise to the empirical and political concerns and the changing intellectual context gave rise to the value pluralism, Eurocentrism, and historicism concerns. So it needs to be determined whether a thick conception of progress can respond to these concerns. To this end, I examine both contemporary thick conceptions of progress to see whether they provide suitable avenues of response. This determines what form the thick conception of moral-political progress ought to take in order for it to retain plausibility.

To undertake both parts of the reappraisal, this thesis moves beyond the analytic/continental binary and situates itself between that dated disciplinary divide. Although the distinction between analytic and continental political philosophy is entrenched and the body of literature pertaining to each camp largely distinct, it is unclear what substantively separates them. On the one hand, continental political thought is taken to be concerned with problematising starting points without necessarily providing ‘positive and principled political argument’.⁸⁵ On the other hand, analytic philosophy is taken to be concerned with conceptual precision and providing specific recommendations for change. However, it is unclear why continental political thought would not be concerned with analytic clarity or the ability to make precise recommendations for change and why analytic political thought would not benefit from an interrogation of its methodological and conceptual commitments. So the distinction between analytic and continental political philosophy is less clear than commonly assumed.⁸⁶ The implications for this project are twofold. First, it implies that the thick concept of progress should be of interest to political philosophers regardless of their disciplinary allegiance. Second, it broadens the methodological tools and pool of theorists from which this thesis can draw. These implications affect the methodologies adopted for the first and second parts of the project.

The first section of the thesis constructs a backward-looking story about conceptual continuity and change. This analysis seeks to determine the most plausible form that the normative-teleological, causal-agential, and historical elements of the thick conception of progress can take. While this endeavour is backward-looking it is not methodologically history of political thought. The purpose of this project is not to engage in a Skinnerian reconstruction of conceptions of progress as an exercise in intellectual history. Instead, this section of the thesis should be understood as a project of *geistesgeschichte* analysis. As Richard Rorty defined it, *geistesgeschichte* operates on the level of ‘skipping-from-

⁸⁵ White, S. K., 2011, 487; Floyd, J., 2015, 161; Owen, D., 2015, 174.

⁸⁶ I am grateful to David Leopold for drawing my attention to this point.

peak-to-peak'.⁸⁷ Instead of entering into interpretive debates by attempting to understand precisely what the theorist was saying, which contemporary texts they were responding to, and what inconsistencies their conception of progress possessed, *geistesgeschichte* 'wants to justify... the sort of philosophical concerns they have' and understand 'what they take it [the conception in question] to be'.⁸⁸ This method of *geistesgeschichte* analysis differs from genealogical analysis in a number of ways. Unlike vindicative genealogy, the *geistesgeschichte* analysis does not seek to detail an ideational trajectory that then legitimises the present form of the idea. Unlike subversive genealogy, the *geistesgeschichte* analysis does not seek to undermine an idea by exposing its problematic origins. Unlike critical genealogy, the *geistesgeschichte* analysis does not seek to highlight the historical discontinuity of an idea in order to suggest avenues for future rupture and change. Rather, the method of *geistesgeschichte* analysis seeks to examine how an idea unfolded according to its internal logic, retained central components, and cast off elements that were problematic. Of course, this analysis will have to 'worry about anachronism'.⁸⁹ It is essential that this *geistesgeschichte* analysis appreciates the appropriate historical and cultural context and does not impose our contemporary concerns and labels onto the theorists in question. Nevertheless, the *geistesgeschichte* analysis is able to look back to post-Enlightenment conceptions of progress and discern which forms of the conceptual elements were discarded and which turned out to be the most defensible.

The second section of the thesis engages in a forward-looking form of conceptual analysis by critically assessing the strengths and weaknesses of contemporary approaches to theorising about the thick concept of progress. Although I undertake a conventionally analytic project of conceptual analysis, I engage with conceptions of progress that have their roots in the traditions of

⁸⁷ Rorty, R., 2019, 260.

⁸⁸ Rorty, R., 2019, 256.

⁸⁹ Rorty, R., 2019, 260.

philosophical pragmatism and the Frankfurt School of critical theory. In addition, I analyse the utility of an approach that straddles the divide between the continental and analytical camps.⁹⁰ Therefore, the second section of the thesis intentionally ranges across methodological divides.

Plan of the Thesis

The first section of the thesis undertakes a *geistesgeschichte* analysis of three historical thick conceptions of progress. These conceptions are analysed because they tell a certain story about how the idea of progress changed in response to conceptual challenges. Analysing different forms that the conception of moral-political progress took reveals what aspects of the conception are no longer plausible. In turn, this suggests the form that the normative-teleological, causal-agential, and historical elements of the conception of moral-political progress ought to take if we are to engage with the conception today.

First, I analyse the conception of progress that emerged during the Enlightenment and reflect upon Jean-Jacques Rousseau's critique of it. The conception of progress eventually outlined by Anne Robert Jacques Turgot and Nicholas de Condorcet consisted of a universal and definitive telos that was envisaged as the perfection of mankind and society; an indirect and necessary account of causation which stated that thinkers were predetermined to make gains in scientific and technological knowledge through the intended consequences of their non-normative actions which, in turn, brought about moral and political perfection; and a stadial account of history where the stages of history refer to periods of techno-scientific and economic development, the movement through which cannot be reversed and, once the final stage is reached, the progressive journey will come to an end. The analysis then turns to Rousseau and his challenge to the Enlightenment account of causation. Rousseau

⁹⁰ Wolff, J., 2013, refers to Michael Walzer as a theorist who exists 'on the outer fringes of analytic political philosophy, without being identifiable as continental philosophy', 817.

powerfully argued against the claim that progress in scientific and technological knowledge will cause moral-political progress and the claim that moral-political progress is predetermined to occur. As a result of this criticism, the shortcomings of the progress-in-knowledge indirect account of causation become clear and the difference between a catalytic and creative account of causal agency is revealed. In addition, the challenges for an account of history that corresponds to a contingent account of history are laid out as well as the Eurocentric implications of a stadial account of history with a rigid developmental logic.⁹¹

Second, I examine the conception of progress of Immanuel Kant. The Kantian conception consisted of a universal and definitive telos which projects into the future a cosmopolitan ideal in the form of a community of republics within which our moral capacities develop so that each person can autonomously act in accordance with rational moral principles; an indirect and necessary account of causation where the laws of unsocial sociability and mutual antagonism ensure that progress is brought about by the unintended consequences of the non-normative actions of statesmen and merchants; and a continuous account of history that can accommodate minor regressions whilst still detailing an overarching movement towards the moral-political goal. The analysis of the Kantian conception reflects upon the utility of forward-looking, universal and definitive normative telos that is abstract, ahistorical, and trans-contextual. The analysis also questions whether human agency can retain a meaningful place on a Cunning of Reason account of causation that foregrounds the unintended consequences of non-normative actions. This enables us to reflect upon an indirect causal mechanism that appeals to self-interested pursuits. The analysis also enables us to reflect on the plausibility of a continuous account of

⁹¹ Although Karl Marx offers one of the most influential historical accounts of progress, an analysis of his conception of moral-political progress lies beyond the scope of this thesis. Nevertheless, many of Marx's materialist theses are anticipated in Rousseau's challenge to the assumption that advances in science, technology, and material production necessarily yield moral-political improvement. As such, several of the themes central to Marx's conception of progress are indirectly addressed through the discussion of Rousseau's critique.

history; one that, by adopting a linear notion of historical progress, reduces the space for reveals and plateaus.

Third, I examine the conception of progress of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. The Hegelian conception consisted of a particular and provisional telos in which the end of progressive development was the complete realisation and actualisation of freedom (understood as the liberation of human consciousness); a direct and contingent account of causation where the path of progressive development is created by the unintended consequences of the normative actions of world-historical individuals; and an epochal account of history where each understanding of human consciousness collapses as a result of its own contradiction until the complete liberation of human consciousness has occurred. The analysis of the Hegelian conception investigates whether it is possible to justify the telos of a context immanently. For Hegel, prior world-views collapsed under the weight of their contradiction and their failure justifies the resultant world-view. This raises the questions of whether Hegel offers a sufficiently forward-looking prospectus for normative change, whether the resultantly justified state of affairs can be independently criticised, and whether a vision of modernity that looks back and by reading out of a certain development narrative arrives at the desirable form of societal organisation has inescapably Eurocentric implications. The analysis also considers whether there is a more substantial role for human agency within an account of causation that rejects inevitability, foregrounds creative human agency, and takes the Cunning of Reason to refer to the unintended consequences of normative action. The analysis also reflects upon the plausibility of an epochal account of history; one that justifies the suffering involved in the process of historical progress, takes progress to be able to continue within the final epoch, and rules out regressions to a prior epoch whilst retaining the possibility of regression with a particular epoch.

As a bridge between the first and second sections, I translate the conclusions of the *geistesgeschichte* analysis into a tentative conception of moral-political progress. I extract the conceptual desiderata from the *geistesgeschichte* analyses and construct the normative-teleological, causal-agential, and historical elements of the thick conception of progress accordingly. This reveals the most defensible conception of moral-political progress as things stood before political theorists moved away from the concept.

The second section of this thesis conducts a conceptual analysis of the two contemporary thick conceptions of progress. The purpose of this analysis is to explore how contemporary thick conceptions of progress respond to the conceptual concerns. The strengths and weaknesses of the two approaches will reveal how the reappraised conception of progress needs to be fleshed out for it to address the conceptual concerns.

The fourth chapter analyses pragmatic and functionalist conceptions of progress and outlines how they attempt to overcome the conceptual concerns by abandoning normative teleology. I begin by unpacking the Deweyan and Rortyan roots of philosophical pragmatism in order to demonstrate how the approach eschews normative teleology and rejects conceptualising progress in terms of a movement towards a normative goal. Instead, pragmatic and functionalist conceptions of progress define progress in terms of solving problems. I then critique the attempt to make claims of progress in the absence of a normative telos. I argue that pragmatic and functionalist conceptions of progress undermine themselves by relying on implicit normative notions to identify genuine problems and legitimate solutions. In addition, I argue that pragmatic and functionalist conceptions of progress are unable to articulate who the agents of progress will be because they possess a purely retrospective account of causal agency. Finally, I argue that an account of history that references the solution to problems is unable to make sense of the directionality of history and

that it is unable to be critical of the actual path that history took. Therefore, I demonstrate that the attempt to overcome the conceptual concerns by disowning normative teleology fails because it results in a flawed conception of moral-political progress. As a result, I conclude that we should not turn to philosophical pragmatism to theorise about moral-political progress.

The fifth chapter analyses Amy Allen's approach to theorising about moral-political progress. I examine her attempt to overcome the Eurocentric concern by grounding the normative-teleological element of a thick conception of moral-political progress in an immanent account of normativity. I defend the utility of this approach and argue that it can be strengthened to articulate a fully fleshed out and coherent conception of moral-political progress. In particular, I argue that the bold ambitions of the approach can be better met by outlining a positive normative telos, that an alternative immanent account of normativity can more forcefully address the charge of cultural relativism and make sense of ostensibly universal normative commitments, that the account of causal agency can be bolstered by foregrounding the creative capacity of social critics who can challenge and transform the normative status quo, and that an explicit account of history can be laid out in order to round out the approach. To do so, I draw on the methodological resource of Michael Walzer. I demonstrate that the approaches of social construction, reiterative universalism, and social interpretivism can be adopted in order to ground an immanent yet non-relativistic account of normativity, incorporate a version of the multiple modernities perspective, address the concern of deterministic causality and retrospective agency, and put forward a plausible account of history.⁹² As such, I show that these methodological tools enable a conception of moral-political progress to follow in the Allenian vein and build upon the strengths of her approach.

⁹² Eisenstadt, S., 2002; Arnason, 2015.

The thesis concludes by reflecting upon the extent to which this conception of moral-political progress is viable. I examine how it might address the conceptual concerns and explore the challenges that such a conception of moral-political progress will continue to face. As a result, the conclusion outlines the contours of the most plausible conception of moral-political progress and interrogates the commitments that would need to be upheld for it to be a meaningful resource for political theorists to engage with today.

Chapter One: The Enlightenment Conception of Progress and Rousseau's Critique

For some intellectual historians of progress, the seeds of the concept can be found in the ancient idea of cyclical decay.¹ For others, the root lies in the early Christian idea of a linear time horizon.² For others still, the concept of progress originated in the Enlightenment.³ To flesh out the Enlightenment position, John Marriott argues that although 'Christian theology displaced earlier conceptions of cyclical historical time with one that was essentially linear' it was in the Enlightenment where advances 'in the sciences and in knowledge of successful civilisations beyond the reach of Christianity encouraged secular visions in which progress was attendant on the accumulation of empirically based knowledge of natural and later human phenomena'.⁴ In line with this view, I detail how the conception of moral-political progress emerged out of a process of conceptual evolution that took place between Francis Bacon, Bernard la Bovier de Fontenelle, Anne Robert Jacques Turgot, and Nicholas de Condorcet. I argue that Bacon and Fontenelle ought not to be considered theorists of progress but understood as thinkers who laid the conceptual groundwork upon which Turgot and Condorcet constructed their conception of moral-political progress. I demonstrate that according to the Turgot-Condorcet conception of moral-political progress, subsequently referred to as the Enlightenment conception of progress: (a) the telos of progress is universal and definitive and is conceptualised as the perfection of mankind and society (a utopian vision of a perfect socio-political world marked by material abundance);⁵ (b) the account of causation is indirect and necessary insofar as it is predetermined that the intended consequences of the non-normative actions of thinkers will cause advances in

¹ Cf. Dodds, E. R. (1985); Adams, B. (1985); Edelstein, L. (1967); Guthrie, W. K. C. (1957); Teggart, F. J. (1947).

² Cf. Marriott, J. (2018); Hoffman, T. (2018); Baillie, J. (1950); Löwith, K. (1949); Tuveson, E. (1949).

³ Cf. Stachon, M. (2021); Bowden, B. (2009); Plamenatz, J. (1992); Bossard, J. H. S. (1931).

⁴ Marriott, J., 2018, 10.

⁵ Henri de Saint Simon and August Comte adopt a similar position. However, for the positivist conception of progress, 'perfection' refers to the rational operation of our minds and the rational organisation of society.

knowledge that, in turn, cause mankind and society to progress (inevitably, thinkers pursue knowledge and their discoveries cause moral-political progress); (c) a stadial account of history (history is conceptualised according to a series of stages, progress is marked by the sequential transition through each stage, and progress terminates at the final stage of perfection).⁶

I then consider Jean-Jacques Rousseau in response to the Enlightenment conception of progress. Historically, Rousseau has been interpreted as the archetypal theorist of regress on the grounds that he inverts the logic of progress by positing a causal force that propels humanity in a regressive direction.⁷ I argue that this is a crude caricature of his thought.⁸ Instead of interpreting Rousseau as a theorist of regress, Rousseau should be understood as a critic of the ideas that underpin the Enlightenment conception of progress. Although Rousseau did not critique Turgot and Condorcet directly, he anticipated and implicitly critiqued their account of causation.⁹ Rousseau challenged the indirect entailment by showing that progress in knowledge does not necessarily cause moral-political progress and the necessary aspect on the grounds that preventing regress and achieving progress is contingent upon specific individual actions.

As a consequence of analysing the Enlightenment conception of progress and Rousseau's critique, conclusions can be drawn regarding the causal-agential element and historical element of a conception of moral-political progress.

⁶ Although I refer to the Turgot-Condorcet conception of progress as 'the Enlightenment conception of progress', I accept that the Enlightenment was a diverse intellectual movement with conflicting conceptions of progress. Nevertheless, I refer to the conception of progress outlined by Turgot and Condorcet in these terms because this conception embodies a particularly crude adoption of the idea that a rational and systematic approach to thought yields piecemeal improvements in science and technology that improve moral practices and political institutions.

⁷ Bowden, B., 2009, 75; Pollard, S., 1968, 56-57; Van Doren, C., 1967, 123; Bury, J. B., 1932, 100.

⁸ Although regression theorist interpretations of Rousseau have become rare, arguing against this view is useful because it clarifies how Rousseau implicitly challenged elements of the Enlightenment conception of progress.

⁹ Rousseau's major works were written before Turgot's *On Universal History* (delivered at the Sorbonne in 1751) and Condorcet's *Sketch of An Historical View of the Progress of the Human Mind* (posthumously published in 1795). However, the key ideas formalised in these works (particularly those concerning the impact of scientific, technological, and economic development on the condition of mankind and society) were already circulating. Rousseau responded to this broader intellectual context, which Turgot and Condorcet would later systematise.

The core of the Enlightenment conception of progress is the indirect causal entailment between growth in knowledge and the better-lived experience of mankind.

Francis Bacon proposed this entailment and stated that scientific knowledge enabled mankind to gain control of the natural world. His reverence for scientific inquiry is illustrated in the depiction of Salomon's House in his unfinished utopian schematic, *New Atlantis*. There Bacon wrote that the institution is dedicated to 'the Study of the Works and Creatures of God' and praised it as 'the noblest foundation... that ever was upon the earth' and the 'lanthorn of this kingdom'.¹⁰ This idealised institution exemplified Bacon's conviction that the systematic production of scientific knowledge enabled mankind to achieve dominion over nature.¹¹ For Bacon, this control over the natural world made possible a state of material abundance. As Bacon wrote, the 'true and legitimate goal of the sciences is to endow human life with new discoveries and resources'.¹² However, inventions and riches were not valued as ends in themselves but as a means of achieving the 'relief of man's estate'.¹³

The 'relief of man's estate' has been interpreted in several ways. Charles Van Doren interprets it in a circular manner and refers to it as 'human progress'.¹⁴ Hans Jonas interprets it as the 'improvement of the human lot'.¹⁵ John Francisco Sagasti refers to the end as 'the benefit of humanity'.¹⁶ More interestingly, John Bury presented Bacon as a proto-utilitarian and noted that, for Bacon, 'the end of

¹⁰ Bacon, F., 1627, 84.

¹¹ Lucas, P., 2018, contrasts this with Thomas More's *Utopia*. More only briefly mentions astronomical, agricultural, and mechanical knowledge and focuses on social and political innovations on the grounds that those directly cause the betterment of humanity, 116-118.

¹² Bacon, F., 1620, LXXXI, 66.

¹³ Bacon, F., 1605, 36.

¹⁴ Van Doren, C., 1967, 63.

¹⁵ Jonas, H., 1984, 140; quoted in Sagasti, F., 2019, 1.

¹⁶ Sagasti, F., 2019, 1.

human knowledge is utility' because 'the proper aim of knowledge is the amelioration of human life, to increase men's happiness and mitigate their suffering'.¹⁷ John Plamenatz reiterates this utilitarian reading of Bacon, writing that, for Bacon, 'knowledge [is] a means to power, and power [is] a means to happiness'.¹⁸ The array of critical interpretations speak to the opacity of Bacon's thought. Nevertheless, although it is anachronistic to label Bacon a utilitarian, the label does get close to his position. Bacon thought that scientific knowledge empowers mankind to manipulate the natural world in such a way that their basic needs can be met and their material wants can be fulfilled. For Bacon, the end goal is utilitarian insofar as the better-lived experience of mankind is understood as nothing more than an end to physical suffering and the complete fulfilment of our material wants.

Even on the utilitarian interpretation, Bacon should not be understood as a theorist of progress. There is a difference between the thin concern Bacon had with the material condition of mankind and the thick conception of progress. A conception of progress relates to all-things-considered improvement and includes a vision of how each person ought to be and how society ought to be organised. Bacon theorised about neither of these. He sought material benefit *for* mankind by utilising scientific knowledge to control the natural world. He did not believe in the progression *of* mankind and society. Bacon was exclusively concerned with material conditions and put forward no broader account of how mankind should be, how society should be organised, and how the world should operate. As such, Bacon was not a theorist who outlined a conception of progress.

Even though Bacon cannot be considered a theorist of progress in the thick sense, his thought was integral to the formation of the indirect account of causation. As Robert Nisbet puts it, '[n]o one, before or since, has exceeded Bacon in his dedication to the idea that men may learn, may advance through

¹⁷ Bury, J. B., 1932, 30.

¹⁸ Plamenatz, J., 1992, 306-307.

knowledge, [and] may attain power over nature through her mastery by intellect'.¹⁹ In doing so, as John Bury said, Bacon 'contributed to the creation of a new mental atmosphere in which the theory of Progress was afterwards to develop'.²⁰ Subsequent Enlightenment theorists engaged with Bacon's account of causation and expanded it in light of this conducive mental atmosphere. The first was Bernard Le Bovier De Fontenelle.

Bernard Le Bovier De Fontenelle – Necessity and Infinity

Fontenelle developed the idea of an increasing stock of knowledge in his contribution to *la querelle des Anciens et des Modernes*, the debate that questioned whether the literature of contemporary France was superior to that of antiquity.

Fontenelle addressed the broad question of whether 'the ancients were more intelligent than we'. Fontenelle accepted that contemporary knowledge was superior to the knowledge of the ancients. However, he argued that there is no difference between the intelligence of his contemporaries and the intelligence of the ancients. Fontenelle stated that 'we are now all perfectly equal, ancients and moderns, Greeks, Romans, and Frenchman'.²¹ Fontenelle defended this position because he thought that there is a uniform distribution of intelligence across time. Fontenelle wrote that '[c]enturies do not put any natural differences among men' because 'Nature has at hand a certain clay which is always the same and which she unendingly turns and twists into a thousand different shapes, thus forming men, animals, and plants; and certainly she did not shape Plato, Demosthenes, or Homer from finer or better-prepared clay than she used for our philosophers, orators, and poets of today'.²² The idea of a uniform distribution of intelligence has two implications.

¹⁹ Nisbet, R., 1969, 102.

²⁰ Bury, J. B., 1932, 30.

²¹ Fontenelle, B. de, 1688, 358.

²² Fontenelle, B. de, 1688, 358-360.

First, Fontenelle argued that since there is a uniform spread of intellectual ability, we can be certain that each generation will continue to build upon the knowledge of the last. Fontenelle wrote that '[i]f we had been in their place we would have done the discovering; if they were in ours, they would add to what has already been discovered'.²³ Fontenelle did accept that adding to the stock of knowledge 'often requires a greater effort of mind than the original discoveries did'.²⁴ However, he made clear that later intellectuals are not required to have a greater intellect. Fontenelle argued that whilst intellectual ability remains constant, later intellectuals are 'in a much more advantageous position' because their minds have 'already been enlightened by the very discoveries one has before one's eyes'.²⁵ So when Fontenelle said 'all Archimedes could have done in the earliest ages would have been to invent the plough', he established a logic of development in which the constancy of intellectual ability and the predisposition of thinkers to pursue knowledge entails that there will always be thinkers who are able to absorb the stock of knowledge and add to it through their intellectual endeavours.²⁶ Therefore, Fontenelle set up a necessary account of knowledge development. For Fontenelle, it is a predetermined inevitability that knowledge will continue to advance into the future.

Second, Fontenelle thought that there was an infinitely open future in which knowledge would advance. Fontenelle did make a distinction between the restricted potential for progress in the arts and the endless potential for progress in the sciences. Fontenelle stated that in the domains of poetry and eloquence, we only require 'a certain number of rather narrow ideas' and that 'mankind could easily amass in a few centuries a small number of ideas, and liveliness of imagination has no need of a long sequence of experience nor of many rules before it reaches the furthest perfection of which it is capable'.²⁷ This is why

²³ Fontenelle, B. de, 1688, 360.

²⁴ Fontenelle, B. de, 1688, 361.

²⁵ Fontenelle, B. de, 1688, 361.

²⁶ Fontenelle, B. de, 1688, 358.

²⁶ Fontenelle, B. de, 1688, 361.

²⁷ Fontenelle, B. de, 1688, 362.

Fontenelle thought that '[a]s far as eloquence and poetry are concerned... the ancients may have attained perfection in them because... such perfection can be achieved in a few centuries'.²⁸ In contrast, Fontenelle stated that 'science, medicine, mathematics, are composed of numberless ideas and depend upon precision of thought which improves with extreme slowness'.²⁹ Whilst progress cannot be cut off it can be hindered by anything that inhibits intellectual endeavour. As Fontenelle put it, mankind 'would be much farther advanced if the passion of war had not occupied him for a long time and filled him with scorn for that learning to which he has at last returned'.³⁰ Nevertheless, although it can be slow, Fontenelle made clear that the growth of knowledge in these domains 'is endless'.³¹ As a result of the 'endlessly growing stock of ideas', Fontenelle argued that because 'the sound views of all subsequent thinkers will forever be added to the existing stock' we can be certain that 'mankind will never have an old age... [and] will never degenerate'.³² Fontenelle's statement that 'we shall be the ancients some day' sums up his view that the development of scientific and technological knowledge will continue throughout an illimitable future.³³

Therefore, Fontenelle's contribution to the *querelle* discourse was the idea that scientific and technological knowledge is guaranteed to occur throughout a limitless future. As Plamenatz puts it, Fontenelle's insight was that 'unless something happens to prevent its doing so, knowledge will accumulate... in a certain order'.³⁴ Similarly, Bury claims that, for Fontenelle, 'progress must not only be conceived as extending indefinitely into the future, it must also be conceived as necessary and certain'.³⁵ For this reason, Sylwia Chrostowska describes the *querelle* and Fontenelle's place in that dialectic 'as proleptic to the

²⁸ Fontenelle, B. de, 1688, 363.

²⁹ Fontenelle, B. de, 1688, 362.

³⁰ Fontenelle, B. de, 1688, 366.

³¹ Fontenelle, B. de, 1688, 362.

³² Fontenelle, B. de, 1688, 367.

³³ Fontenelle, B. de, 1688, 363.

³⁴ Plamenatz, J., 1992, 310.

³⁵ Bury, J. B., 1932, 61.

idea of progress'.³⁶ However, another strand of interpretation goes a step further and attributes to Fontenelle the first formulation of a conception of moral-political progress. For example, Nisbet claims that Fontenelle put forward 'the first expression of the modern idea of progress; the idea that civilisation has progressed in the past, is now progressing, and will continue to progress into the illimitable future'.³⁷ More recently, Dagmar Zajíčková has argued that Fontenelle fused onto Bacon the 'idea of infinite progress within a linear conception of time' to create an 'infinite, necessary, and guaranteed' conception of progress.³⁸ It seems to me that Nisbet and Zajíčková go too far in the claim that Fontenelle marked the first expression of the thick concept of progress. Fontenelle's understanding of progress is still limited to the domain of knowledge accumulation in science and technology and did not challenge the thought that the increase in knowledge was beneficial only insofar as it facilitated a dominion over nature that could satisfy our material wants. Therefore, although Fontenelle conceptualised an infinite time horizon and the necessity of knowledge accumulation, he did not articulate a thick conception of moral-political progress; namely, he did not set out a vision of what we ought to value, how we ought to act, and how society ought to be organised.

Nevertheless, Fontenelle provided the foundations upon which a thick conception of moral-political progress emerged and could move beyond the idea that the accumulation of knowledge was solely desirable for the material benefit of mankind.³⁹ The conception of progress that builds upon these foundations was first outlined by Anne Robert Jacques Turgot and developed by Nicholas de Condorcet during the second half of the eighteenth century.

³⁶ Chrostowska, S. D., 2021, note 2, 263.

³⁷ Nisbet, R., 1969, 104.

³⁸ Zajíčková, D., 2014, 416-418.

³⁹ Nisbet, R., 1969, 113.

Turgot remained committed to the idea that progress in knowledge results in a better state of affairs for mankind. Edward Younkens described this as a debt to Bacon and Fontenelle on two fronts. First, Turgot adopted the idea that '[p]rogress is found in man's singular ability to conceptualise and store knowledge, improving upon it, and making it available to each new generation'. Second, Turgot retained a belief that the increasing stock of knowledge will enable 'men... to use reason to change and reconstruct, in part, their natural environment', which in turn 'enables man to build a better future'.⁴⁰ However, Turgot also moved beyond Bacon and Fontenelle to construct a thick conception of moral-political progress with a normative-teleological, causal-agential, and historical element.

Turgot's normative-teleological element took the goal of development to be the perfection of mankind and society. Whilst this goal incorporated the idea that material abundance improved the lived experience of mankind, it went beyond the thin concern for material well-being and outlined a vision of how mankind and society ought to be. Turgot took this vision of perfection to apply to humanity, which was conceptualised as a single unit. As Turgot wrote, 'the human race, considered over the period since its origin, appears to the eye of a philosopher as one cast whole, which itself, like each individual, has its infancy and its advancement'.⁴¹ However, Turgot claimed that because '[d]ifferent series of events take place in different countries of the world' the path of development will vary between contexts. As such, a country might have more periods of stagnation, more periods of decline, or just take longer to end up at the same destination. Nevertheless, Turgot maintained that the terminus of progressive development will always be the same because 'all of them, as if by so many

⁴⁰ Younkens, E. W., 2008, 110.

⁴¹ Turgot, A., 1750(a), 41.

separate paths, at length come together to contribute to the same end'.⁴² In the fullness of time, Turgot thought that the 'whole human race, through alternate periods of rest and unrest, of weal and woe, goes on advancing, although at a slow pace, towards greater perfection'.⁴³ Once achieved, Turgot argued that the perfection of mankind and society cannot be surpassed. Therefore, the normative telos is universal insofar as it applies to all of humanity and definitive insofar as once the final stage of perfection is reached no further stage of moral-political progress is possible.

One problem with Turgot's normative-teleological element is that it never precisely defines what the perfection of mankind and society consists of. Nevertheless, a sense of what the perfect forms look like can be discerned from his various suggestions. With regard to the perfection of mankind, Younkins captures what Turgot had in mind when he notes that the 'human mind, including the exercise of reason and volition, has the potential for progress' and that 'moral behaviour was subject to improvement and that moral progress depended upon obedience to reason and natural law, the practice of tolerance, rational acceptance of law, recognition of the importance of the virtues and utility'.⁴⁴ With regard to the perfection of society, it seems to consist in the establishment of a state with a market economy where the role of government is limited to protecting property rights and maintaining order.⁴⁵ When combined, the perfection of mankind and society represents a holistic vision of how mankind ought to act and how society ought to be organised. The perfection of mankind and society creates a righteous people within a prosperous, peaceful, and free state. As such, Turgot reformulated the goal from progress *for* mankind

⁴² Turgot, A., 1750(a), 56.

⁴³ Turgot, A., 1750(a), 41.

⁴⁴ Younkins, E. W., 2008, 111.

⁴⁵ Of course, the state may become superfluous when the perfection of mankind has occurred. William Godwin (1793) pointed out that in such a utopia, perfect individuals would act according to their moral conscience and require no external authority to ensure ethical action. However, if our moral fallibility entails that morally imperfect action is still a possibility, then the state will be required to mediate and there will be a perfect (minimal) form that these structures can take.

and society to progress *of* mankind and society. This marks the initial formulation of an all-things-considered desirable goal.

For the causal-agential element, Turgot adopted an indirect and necessary account of causation and an intended consequences of non-normative actions account of agency.

For Turgot, progress is caused indirectly because progress in scientific and technological knowledge causes mankind and society to progress towards their perfect state. However, Turgot also claimed that progress in moral and political knowledge can aggregate over time to bring about 'progress of governments and their morality'.⁴⁶ Turgot believed that an increase in knowledge across political and moral domains would entail that 'all the present chaos will evolve... all the elements will have become co-ordinated, and the science of government will then become easy'.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, the account of causation is still indirect because moral-political progress is not taken to be caused by a direct change to the moral practices and political institutions of a context. Rather, the perfection of mankind and society is brought about by scientific and technological development and the advances in moral and political knowledge that occur in tandem. Therefore, it is the advancement of non-normative forms of knowledge that accompany gains in moral and political knowledge that bring about the perfection of mankind and society.

Turgot argued that these indirect causes of moral-political progress are predetermined to occur. To unpack Turgot's account of causation, we should note the change in focus between the two discourses delivered at the Sorbonne in 1750. The first discourse, 'The Advantages Which The Establishment of Christianity Has Procured For the Human Race', advocated for a cosmogenic account of causation and placed a strong emphasis on an interventionist God as

⁴⁶ Turgot, A., 1751, 83.

⁴⁷ Turgot, A., 1750(b), 511.

the cause of progress. The second discourse, 'A Philosophical Review of the Successive Advances of the Human Mind', turned to an anthropogenic and necessary account of causation in which human agents were predetermined to act in a way that brought about progress.⁴⁸ Following the *Second Discourse*, progress became, as Nisbet describes it, 'a fixed natural law, anchored in purely human faculties and motivations, reaching back to the most primitive of times and forward to an indefinite if not endless future, and encompassing not merely the arts but the very structure of society'.⁴⁹

The necessary interpretation may be challenged on the grounds that in 'Research on the Causes of Progress and Decadence of Science and the Arts or Relictions on the History of the Progress of the Human Spirit' Turgot claimed progress has three causes each of which appears to be contingent upon agential input.⁵⁰ Turgot wrote that the 'causes of progress can be reduced to three: the state of the language of the people; the constitution of government, peace, war, the genius of principles; [and] the chance of genius, Descartes, Columbus, Newton, etc.'.⁵¹ The objection argues that Turgot put forward a contingent account of causation because specific geniuses and certain actions were required to cause progress. However, this objection misinterprets the role of human agency in a contingent account of causation.

Take Turgot's statement that the development of knowledge is spurred on by chance events. Turgot claimed not only that chance 'give[s] birth to such a genius' but also that there are 'many chances which contribute to the progress of science and the arts'.⁵² To make sense of this position, consider the fortune that the apple fell in front of Newton's gaze, that Alexander Fleming left out the petri

⁴⁸ Meek, R. L., 2010, hypothesises that the change might relate to Turgot's 'mental struggle which was going on in his mind in the months immediately before he announced that he was abandoning his ecclesiastical career', 7.

⁴⁹ Nisbet, R., 1975, 217.

⁵⁰ Turgot, A., 1749, 117-122.

⁵¹ Turgot, A., 1749, 117.

⁵² Turgot, A., 1749, 122.

dish of penicillin, or that Edward Jenner stumbled upon milkmaids whose exposure to cowpox prevented them from contracting smallpox. In each case, it was a chance event that caused the eureka moment and spurred the development of knowledge. Given that, in the fullness of time, chance events are guaranteed to occur, the progression of mankind and society is inevitable. Of course, this does not erase individual agents from the causal picture. Individual thinkers continue to play a role in the causal process. However, the development of knowledge does not depend upon any specific individual making a certain discovery. For example, if the apple had not fallen in front of Newton and he had not formulated the laws of motion at that point, then in the fullness of time a different chance event would have spurred another thinker to make the same discovery. Turgot justified this position with two claims. First, Turgot echoed Fontenelle and argued that since there is a uniform distribution of natural talents across time there will always be a genius available to make the knowledge-advancing discovery. Turgot claimed that 'nature, distributing her gifts unequally, has given to certain minds an abundance of talents which she has refused to others' and argued that any such mind 'contains the potential for the same progress'.⁵³ So, in the fullness of time, another genius will take the same step forward.⁵⁴ Second, Turgot made clear that the trajectory of progressive development did not depend upon the actions of any specific thinker. Turgot claimed that '[i]f Christopher Columbus and Newton had died at fifteen, we might have been two hundred years longer without knowing America and the true system of the Universe'.⁵⁵ According to Turgot, the absence of a specific thinker can only delay progress. Because plausible counterfactuals lead to the same end, the absence of a specific thinker only postpones its realisation. Taken together, Turgot took the development of knowledge and the progression of mankind and society to be inevitabilities that were predetermined to be brought

⁵³ Turgot, A., 1750(a), 43.

⁵⁴ Turgot, A., 1749, also suggested that as the population increases there will be a greater number of geniuses so the importance of any one individual genius is diminished: 'Genius is spread over the mass of men like gold in a mine; the more mine you take, the more metal you have', 119.

⁵⁵ Turgot, A., 1749, 122.

about by the knowledge-seeking discoveries of thinkers. Whilst the actions of specific thinkers cause the advancement in knowledge and, thus, the progression of mankind and society these causal actions merely hasten predetermined progressive change.⁵⁶

This necessary account of causation ensures that human agency takes a catalytic form. To make this point clear, consider the difference between a creative and catalytic account of causal agency. On a necessary account of causation, a specific individual causes but is only a catalyst for a progressive change because were the individual not to perform their action, then the progressive development would still occur at some point. So, a particular individual cannot alter the trajectory of progressive development; they can only affect the pace at which it occurs. On a contingent account of causation, a specific individual causes and creates a progressive change because if the individual had not performed that action, then that progressive change might not occur. As such, on the contingent account of agency, human agency is creative; it is able to cause progressive development that does not adhere to a pre-set plan. Therefore, although necessary and contingent accounts of causation similarly take particular individuals to cause the progressive transition, the type of causal power differs between the two accounts.

On the account adopted by Turgot, since progress is predetermined and its unfolding a necessity, actions of human agents will be causal but catalytic. The actions of an individual thinker can only speed up the progressive transition but not divert it from its pre-set path.

⁵⁶ Heffernan, M., 1994, describes Turgot's conception of progress in similar terms; 'human advancement [is] inevitable' so even though the 'rate of progress might vary from one civilisation to another... the eventual triumph of humanity was predetermined', 329. This 'ultimate outcome' manifests in the 'evolution of a single, enlightened world with a uniform culture and civilisation' where 'isolated units would be drawn together progressively to form larger units and these would, in turn, coalesce to create a single world civilisation', 337.

For the historical element, Turgot adopted a four-part stadial account of history. According to Turgot, the four stages of development are the hunter-gatherer, the pastoral, the agricultural, and the commercial.⁵⁷ Turgot maintained that every society moves through the stages and ends up as a commercial society similar to those found in eighteenth-century Europe. This account of history is sequential because the transition between the stages occurs in a step-by-step manner. Each stage follows logically from the previous one and arrives without a violent rupture. However, Turgot claimed that within each stage there are periods of stagnation and decline. Turgot explained that these periods occur because people commit errors, are tempted by evil, and are motivated by jealousy and caprice. As Turgot wrote, 'Progress, although inevitable, is intermingled with frequent periods of decline as a result of the occurrences and revolutions that interrupt it'.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, Turgot is clear that any period of stagnation or decline will be purely transitory.⁵⁹ Turgot stressed that 'through alternate periods of rest and unrest... the human race as a whole has advanced ceaselessly towards its perfection'.⁶⁰ Therefore, although within each stage the path of progress is rugged the long-term trend is a sequential movement through each stage of history.⁶¹ In addition, Turgot argued that regressing to a prior stage was not possible. Since scientific and technological development caused transitions between the stages of history, once a techno-scientific advance had occurred it could not be undone and, therefore, it was not possible to revert to a prior stage. Turgot believed that scientific and technological advancement could not be undone because they reshaped social structures, institutional arrangements, and the form of economic production. For example, Turgot thought that it was impossible for a settled agricultural society to revert to its prior hunter-gatherer form because the domestication of plants and animals, the development of

⁵⁷ Heffernan, M., 1994, 329.

⁵⁸ Turgot, A., 1751, 88.

⁵⁹ Turgot, A., 1766, reiterates the transient nature of interruptions; 'light and freedom... will make us go through these disorders to bring about a happier state' which may only suffer 'harm in passing', 133.

⁶⁰ Turgot, A., 1751, 72.

⁶¹ Heffernan, M., 1994, describes this account of history as one in which there is 'some form of linear progression, even if this took place through cycles of rise and decline', 329.

agricultural tools and techniques, the specialisation of production and trade, and the growth of settlements and social institutions were techno-scientific developments that irreversibly altered society. Therefore, Turgot concluded that once an advance had embedded itself within the fabric of social life, regression to an earlier stage was impossible.⁶²

When the normative-teleological, causal-agential, and historical elements are laid out in this way, it is clear that Turgot built upon Bacon and Fontenelle to construct a thick conception of moral-political progress. For Turgot, progress in knowledge across scientific, technological, moral, and political domains causes mankind and society to progress towards their perfect state. This perfection is universal insofar as it applies to all of humanity and definitive insofar as once the final stage of perfection is reached no further stage of moral-political progress is possible. Although progress is caused by the intentional actions of knowledge-producing thinkers, the progressive transition is predetermined to occur. As such, human agency is downgraded to a catalytic form because the actions of an individual can only speed up progress along its pre-set path. History is taken to have four stages and instances of stagnation and decay are not able to derail the movement through each stage. Under normal conditions, regressions to a prior stage are impossible and once the final stage is reached mankind and society have attained the highest form of moral-political development.

Nicholas De Condorcet – A Normative and Historical Refinement of Turgot

Nicholas de Condorcet is indebted to Turgot and wrote that he was ‘the first and most brilliant apostle’ of the ‘doctrine of the indefinite perfectibility of

⁶² Turgot did not consider whether a cataclysmic external event like an asteroid impact could count as a permanent form of regression. However, it seems as though a cataclysmic event could wipe out the knowledge that underpins scientific and technological developments such that mankind and society would revert to a less developed form. Presumably, Turgot assumed that if a cataclysmic event did occur, mankind and society would, over time, rediscover the knowledge in order to return to the pre-cataclysm stage of development. Either way, we can at least take Turgot to be saying that under normal conditions (in the absence of an exogenous, uncontrollable, and apocalyptic event) regression to a prior stage of development is not a possibility.

the human race'.⁶³ In *Sketch of An Historical View of the Progress of the Human Mind*, Condorcet presented a conception of moral-political progress that innovates upon Turgot's conception in two ways.

The first innovation was to expand the normative-teleological element so that it referred to a moral, political, cultural, human, and intellectual phenomenon. At the opening of the passage regarding the tenth epoch, Condorcet argued that if the 'sole foundation for belief in the natural sciences is this idea, that the general laws directing the phenomena of the universe, known or unknown, are necessarily constant', then the question that logically follows is '[w]hy should this principle be any less true for the development of the intellectual and moral faculties of man than for the other operations of nature'.⁶⁴ Condorcet broadened the conception of progress to encompass progress in the knowledge of the natural sciences, progress in the knowledge of political and social organisation, and progress in the intellectual and moral faculties of mankind. As such, Condorcet concluded that '[i]f man can, with almost complete assurance, predict phenomena when he knows their laws, and if, even when he does not, he can with high probability forecast the events of the future on the basis of his experience of the past, why, then, should it be regarded as a fantastic undertaking to sketch, with some pretence to truth, the future destiny of man on the basis of his history'.⁶⁵ In this statement, Condorcet not only highlighted the necessity of progress but he expanded the normative-teleological element to its logical conclusion. For Condorcet, the end of progressive development was the perfection of mankind and society understood in the most expansive way possible. As Stuart Hampshire puts it, 'Condorcet's originality was to extend the doctrine of progress to every department of human activity; he saw history as the story of intellectual, political, economic, social and artistic progress, all necessarily connected'.⁶⁶ So Condorcet added to Turgot the notion that scientific,

⁶³ Condorcet, M., 1795, in conjunction with Price and Priestley, 102.

⁶⁴ Condorcet, M., 1795, 125-126.

⁶⁵ Condorcet, M., 1795, 125.

⁶⁶ Hampshire, S., 1955, x.

technological, moral, and political knowledge accumulate according to fixed general laws to cause the gradual perfection of mankind and our entire socio-political world.

The second innovation was to expand the stadial account of history. For Condorcet, the mechanism of transition and the understanding of a stadial account of history are unchanged. However, Condorcet conceptualised history in ten stages.⁶⁷ Condorcet claimed that progress had taken place from the first stage of primitive tribalism until the ninth stage of European civil society. Condorcet wrote that the 'history of man from the time when alphabetical writing was known in Greece to the condition of the human race at the present day in the most enlightened countries of Europe is linked by an uninterrupted chain of facts and observations'. However, Condorcet thought that the historical trajectory could be projected into the future so that 'the picture of the march and progress of the human mind becomes truly historical'.⁶⁸ For Condorcet, this meant that there would be no need for conjecture and speculation because the final stage of history can be understood as an extension of the past. This is because Condorcet thought that 'Philosophy has nothing more to guess, no more hypothetical surmises to make; it is enough to assemble and order the facts and to show the useful truths that can be derived from their connections and from their totality'. Accordingly, Condorcet concluded that a new understanding of the forms that social and political organisation could take had been revealed. As such, Condorcet believed that the final stage of development would bring about the perfection of mankind and society. As Nisbet understood it, the tenth stage

⁶⁷ Condorcet, M., 1795, the ten stages: the first stage, 'Men are united in tribes'; the second stage, 'Pastoral peoples: the transition from this stage to that of agricultural peoples'; the third stage, 'The progress of agricultural peoples up to the invention of the alphabet'; the fourth stage, 'The progress of the human mind in Greece up to the division of the sciences about the time of Alexander the Great'; the fifth stage, 'The progress of the sciences from their division to their decline'; the sixth stage, 'The decadence of knowledge to its restoration about the time of the Crusades'; the seventh stage, 'The early progress of science from its revival in the West to the invention of printing'; the eighth stage, 'From the invention of printing to the time when philosophy and the sciences shook off the yoke of authority'; the ninth stage, 'From Descartes to the foundation of the French Republic'; the tenth stage, 'The future progress of the human mind', 9, 12, 16, 27, 38, 54, 63, 70, 89, 125.

⁶⁸ Condorcet, M., 1795, 6.

'will represent man's achievement at last of full equality, liberty, justice, and [the] abolitions of not merely want and hunger but of all remaining restraints upon the mind'.⁶⁹ Therefore, for Condorcet, the final stage of equality, justice, and humanitarianism stood as the inevitable culmination of inexorable progress.⁷⁰

With the addition of these two innovations, the Enlightenment conception of progress takes its most comprehensive form. As articulated by Condorcet, the Enlightenment conception of progress consists of a universal and definitive telos. The perfection of mankind and society occurs alongside non-normative development and is understood as the end to which every person and society is progressing.⁷¹ The Enlightenment conception consists of an indirect and necessary account of causation. Progress in knowledge is predetermined to occur and indirectly cause the transition towards the perfect form of mankind and society. Although the intentional actions of knowledge-producing thinkers cause knowledge accumulation and, thus, moral-political progress, the account of causation takes a catalytic form because of the necessary account of causation. The Enlightenment conception consists of a stadial account of history where intra-stage stagnation and decline do not hinder the inevitable transition between the stages of history. Once the final stage is reached, progress concludes and its achievement is irreversible insofar as a regression to a previous stage is not considered possible under normal conditions.⁷²

⁶⁹ Nisbet, R., 1979.

⁷⁰ Condorcet retained this optimism even as he hid during the fervour of the French Revolution.

⁷¹ Condorcet, M., 1795, 'the human race, emancipated from its shackles, released from the empire of chance from that of the enemies of its progress, advances with a firm and sure step along the path of truth, virtue and happiness', 147.

⁷² Condorcet, M., 1795, 'the progress of this perfectibility, from now onwards independent of any power that might wish to halt it, has no other limit than the duration of the globe upon which nature has cast us. This progress will doubtless vary in speed, but it will never be reversed as long as the earth occupies its present place in the system of the universe, and as long as the general laws of this system produce neither a general cataclysm nor such changes as will deprive the human race of its present faculties and its present resources', 2.

To determine whether aspects of the Enlightenment conception of progress can be incorporated into the reappraised thick conception of progress, it is fruitful to turn to Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Rousseau implicitly exposed deficiencies in the indirect and necessary aspects of the account of causation adopted by the Enlightenment conception of progress. These deficiencies reveal the shortcomings of the Enlightenment accounts of causation and history.

It is important to note that Rousseau is often interpreted as someone who venerated the pre-civilised state of nature and longed for the idyll of a bygone age. This interpretation is not without textual support. Rousseau wrote that '[o]ne cannot reflect on morals, without taking delight in recalling the image of the simplicity of the first time... [which] is a faire shore, adorned by the hands of nature alone, toward which one forever turns one's eyes, and from which one feels oneself moving away with regret'.⁷³ Intellectual historians of progress reference statements like this to label Rousseau a pessimistic theorist of regress. For example, Sydney Pollard labels Rousseau the 'most pessimistic author of the Enlightenment' since he claimed that the 'further we progressed towards civilisation... the further we were from true happiness'.⁷⁴ Charles Van Doren refers to Rousseau as the 'leading proponent of this position' and argues that although his arguments have 'often been misinterpreted' he did put forward 'a true theory of regress'.⁷⁵ John Bury describes Rousseau as an 'optimist in regard to human nature, [but] a pessimist in regard to civilisation... [because] men have lost, through their civilisation, the original liberty for which they were born'.⁷⁶ Pollard, Van Doren, and Bury, represent the interpretation of Rousseau favoured by intellectual historians of progress. For them, Rousseau is the standard-bearer for what it means to reject a conception of progress and maintain the contrary

⁷³ Rousseau, J-J., 1750, 20.

⁷⁴ Pollard, S., 1968, 56-57.

⁷⁵ Van Doren, C., 1967, 115, 123.

⁷⁶ Bury, J. B., 1932, 100.

view that mankind is degenerating from an original point of perfection. I believe we ought to reject this interpretation.⁷⁷ Not only does it simplify his position to the point of caricature, it also misunderstands the implications of his argument.

As a preliminary response to the regression theorist interpretation, it is useful to highlight the changes in tone and focus between the *First Discourse* and *Second Discourse* and the *Third Discourse* and *The Social Contract*. Throughout the period of the former two works, Rousseau focused on the causal mechanism of degeneration and was not optimistic about the prospect of reversing the degeneration of mankind and society. Although Rousseau never advocated for a return to the state of nature, the reverence for our pre-civilised state gives the impression of a pessimistic and reactionary thinker. Throughout the period of the latter two works, Rousseau adopted a more optimistic disposition and turned to the question of what course of action could rediscover our natural goodness and reconcile it with the conditions of civilised modernity. Inevitably, this raises the question of whether Rousseau was consistent. To address this concern, it is important to note that the *First Discourse* and *Second Discourse* are primarily critical works; their intention is to detail how society had arrived at its degenerated state. Rousseau, perhaps pessimistically, said to a critic of the *First Discourse* that ‘I am quite sensible to the fact that one ought not to entertain the chimerical project of making honest men of them: but I believed myself obliged to state plainly the truth I was asked for. I have seen the evil and have tried to discover its causes: let others, more daring or more intemperate, seek the cure’.⁷⁸ Following the diagnosis of the early works, Rousseau decided to take up the challenge himself. The shift can be observed in a letter to Voltaire where Rousseau defended the *Second Discourse* by writing that ‘I showed men how they bring their miseries upon themselves, and hence how they might avoid them’.⁷⁹ The early works diagnosed the causes of our degeneration and suggested

⁷⁷ Rousseau scholars tend to share my position and advance more nuanced interpretations that challenge the naïve regression theorist view.

⁷⁸ Rousseau, J-J., 1751(c), 86.

⁷⁹ Rousseau, J-J., 1756, 242; cited in Neuhouser, F., 2014, 212.

avenues of rectification. These avenues are then explored in the *Third Discourse* and *The Social Contract*. In these more prescriptive works, Rousseau attempts to cure the moral and political degeneration of mankind. The shift from the diagnostic early works to the prescriptive later works explains some of the tonal and substantive inconsistencies in Rousseau's thought and makes clear that Rousseau held the view (eventually if not consistently) that the degeneration of mankind could be addressed.

To substantively address the regression theorist interpretation, I argue that it rests on two false claims. The first claim is that Rousseau wished to return to the pre-civilisation state of nature.⁸⁰ The second claim is that Rousseau took the causal mechanism of degeneration to be inevitable so that mankind is predetermined to continue along its degenerative path.⁸¹

To reject the claim that Rousseau wished to return to the pre-civilisation state of nature, the first point to note is that Rousseau did not take the state of nature to be a time or place that actually existed. As Frederick Neuhouser argues, 'Rousseau denies explicitly, and in more than one place, both that the state of nature... ever existed and that the "developments"... are to be taken as real historical events'.⁸² So the state of nature is not a historical reality that mankind can return to. The second point to note is that Rousseau did not take the state of nature to be an ideal that ought to be brought about. Rousseau dismissed the idea

⁸⁰ Defenders of this claim point to statements such as 'this state was... the best for man, and that he must have left it only by some fatal accident which, for the sake of the common utility, should never have occurred', 1755(b), 171; the state of nature was the 'genuine youth of the World and that all subsequent progress has been so many steps in appearance toward the perfection of the individual, and in effect toward the decrepitude of the species', 1755(b), 171; and that in the state of nature mankind 'breathes nothing but repose and freedom' whereas in civilised society mankind is 'forever active, sweats, scurries, constantly agonises in search of ever more strenuous occupations: he works to death, even rushes toward it in order to be in a position to live, or renounces life in order to acquire immortality', 1755(b), 192.

⁸¹ Defenders of this claim point to statements such as '[t]he first person who, having enclosed a plot of ground, bethought himself to say *this is mine*, and found people simple enough to believe him, was the true founder of civil society. How many crimes, wars, murders, how many miseries and horrors Mankind would have been spared by him who, pulling up the stakes or filling in the ditch, had cried out to his kind: Beware of listening to this imposter', 1755(b), 165.

⁸² Neuhouser, F., 2012, 375.

that 'we should now burn all Libraries and destroy the Universities and the Academies' as a means of dismantling civilised modernity. Rousseau argued that if such action were taken, then '[w]e would only plunge Europe back into Barbarism, and morals would gain nothing from it'.⁸³ Tellingly, Rousseau made this statement in between writing the *First Discourse* and the *Second Discourse*. So, even during his early period, Rousseau did not endorse an attempt to undo civilisation and create a form of social order akin to the state of nature.

To reject the claim that Rousseau took the degeneration of mankind to be inevitable, the first point to note is that Rousseau thought that institutions of modernity could counter the detrimental dispositions of civilised people. For example, Rousseau argued that we ought to 'preserve and even carefully... support Academies, Colleges, Universities, Libraries, Spectacles, and all the other amusements that might to some extent distract men's wickedness, and prevent them from spending their idleness in more dangerous pursuits'.⁸⁴ So Rousseau never advocated dismantling institutions but praised the effects they can have on adapting mankind to the realities of civilised modernity. The second point to note is that in stark contrast to the rationalism of the Enlightenment theorists of progress, Rousseau acknowledged that the emotions, desires, and dispositions of a civilised person cannot be eradicated through rational reflection. Instead, Rousseau thought that they needed to be subtly channelled towards more desirable ends through reformed institutions of civilised modernity. So where proponents of the regression theorist interpretation point to Rousseau's statement that 'never has a people, once corrupted, been known to return to virtue... their hearts, once spoiled, will be so forever; no remedy remains, short of some great revolution almost as much to be feared as the evil it might cure, and which it is blameworthy to desire and impossible to foresee', I believe we ought to highlight the proclamation in the following sentence to 'let the Sciences and the Arts in some measure temper the ferociousness of the men they have

⁸³ Rousseau, J-J., 1751(a), 51.

⁸⁴ Rousseau, J-J., 1752, 106.

corrupted; let us strive wisely to divert them, and try to deceive their passions'.⁸⁵ Here Rousseau asserted that deceiving the passions of civilised people can subtly redirect their dispositions away from corrupt ends and towards a more virtuous purpose. So, instead of envisioning an inevitable sequence of degeneration, Rousseau outlined how the detrimental aspects of civilised modernity can be counteracted to prevent mankind from continuing down the degenerative path.

Therefore, Rousseau neither thought that we should return to a pre-civilisation state of nature nor that the degeneration of mankind was an inescapable inevitability. Instead, Rousseau presented a speculative history and employed the state of nature as a comparative tool to detail what mankind and society lost through the advent of modernity. As Neuhouser put it, the state of nature 'ought not be taken for historical truths, but only for hypothetical and conditional reasonings' that are 'better suited to elucidate the Nature of things than to show their genuine origin'.⁸⁶ So the state of nature is a hypothesised original state of mankind and not a pre-existing condition that can be returned to. Rousseau venerated the pre-civilisation state of nature to paint a picture of the original state of mankind that both illuminates what mankind has lost in civilised modernity and details what needs to be recovered when the degenerated state of mankind is addressed. For Rousseau, since in the state of nature each person is 'a free being, whose heart is at peace, and body in health', the challenge is to find a way to enshrine the natural freedom and peace of mankind within the conditions of civilised modernity.⁸⁷

This suggests that Rousseau should not be interpreted as the archetypal theorist of regress. Instead, Rousseau was forward-looking; he outlined proposals to tackle the corrupted state of mankind and reconcile their natural goodness with the reality of civilised modernity. When viewed in this way,

⁸⁵ Rousseau, J-J., 1751(a), 51.

⁸⁶ Rousseau, J-J., 1755(b), 135; cited in Neuhouser, F., 2012, 375.

⁸⁷ Rousseau, J-J., 1755(b), 153; cited in Neuhouser, F., 2012, 376.

Rousseau's account of how civilised modernity corrupts the natural goodness of mankind and the positive prescriptions that address it can be seen as a challenge to the indirect and necessary aspects of the Enlightenment account of causation.

Critique of the Enlightenment Account of Causation

Rousseau challenged the Enlightenment account of causation by denying that knowledge causes the progression of mankind and society. Although Rousseau accepted the claim that progress in knowledge gave mankind power over nature, he questioned whether those advances and the form of civilisation they created had a desirable effect on mankind.⁸⁸ As Rousseau wrote:

'When, on the one hand, one considers men's tremendous labours, so many Sciences investigated, so many arts invented, so many forces employed; chasms filled, mountains levelled, rocks split, rivers made navigable, lands cleared, lakes dug, swamps drained, huge buildings erected on land, the sea covered with Ships and Sailors; and when, on the other hand, one inquires with a little mediation into the true advantage that have resulted from all this for the happiness of the human species; one cannot help being struck by the astonishing disproportion between these things, and deplore man's blindness which... causes him eagerly to run after all these miseries to which he is subject and which beneficent Nature had taken care to keep from him'.⁸⁹

In effect, Rousseau questioned the indirect link between the growth of knowledge that brought about the advent of civilisation and the betterment of mankind. To challenge the Enlightenment account of causation, Rousseau argued that knowledge brings about developments in the Arts and Sciences and that these developments have undesirable implications for mankind and society.

⁸⁸ For Rousseau, civilisation was a form of social order characterised by complex political structures, rigid social hierarchies, lavish cultural achievements, and economic prosperity.

⁸⁹ Rousseau, J-J., 1755(b), note IX, 202-203.

Rousseau wrote that the 'daily rise and fall of the Oceans' waters have not been more strictly subjected to the course of the Star that illuminates us by night than has the fate of morals and probity to the progress of the Sciences and Arts. Virtue has been seen to flee in proportion as their light rose on our horizon, and the same phenomena has been observed at all times and in all places'.⁹⁰ Although Rousseau never precisely articulated what the Arts and the Sciences consisted of, he variously lists activities that fall under each banner. The Arts include the study of the humanities, philosophy, the writing of letters, and any other aesthetic endeavour. The Sciences include mechanised agriculture, engineering, metallurgy, and any other productive endeavour. Although there are instances where Rousseau referred to scientific and industrial activities as part of the Arts, we can set the imprecision and inconsistency regarding which activities fall into which category aside. The inconsistency does not undermine the argument Rousseau advanced for why the Arts and Sciences caused the degeneration of mankind.⁹¹

Rousseau set out the relationship between the progression of the Arts and the degeneration of morals when he wrote 'I cast my thesis in the form of a general proposition: I assigned this first stage in the decadence of morals to the moment at which Letters first came to be cultivated in any country in the world, and I found the progress of these two things always to be directly proportional to one another'.⁹² Rousseau argued that 'progress of the Arts' is correlated with 'the disintegration of morals' because 'the dissolution of morals [is] the necessary consequence of luxury'.⁹³ According to Rousseau, progress in the Arts causes luxury; luxury causes the disintegration of morals.⁹⁴ In the *Preface to Narcissus*, Rousseau provided a more fine-grained account of the degenerative effects of the

⁹⁰ Rousseau, J-J., 1750, 9.

⁹¹ Rousseau, J-J., 1755(b), 172.

⁹² Rousseau, J-J., 1751(b), 29.

⁹³ Rousseau, J-J., 1750, 10, 20.

⁹⁴ Rousseau, J-J., 1752, because luxury encourages a 'craving distinction' it is the case that 'in every people of the world morals have deteriorated in proportion as a taste for study and letters has spread among them', 99.

Arts when he stated that a 'taste for letters, philosophy, and the fine arts softens bodies and souls. Work in the study makes men frail and weakens their temperament, and it is difficult for the soul to remain vigorous once the body no longer is. Study wears out the machine, exhausts the mind, destroys strength, enervates courage, and... this is how men grow cowardly and pusillanimous, equally incapable of withstanding pain and the passions'.⁹⁵ For Rousseau, intellectual and artistic endeavours sap physical vitality, drain mental resilience, and foster a passive more fragile disposition that is ill-equipped for struggle and self-control. In addition, Rousseau detailed how martial morals are undermined by the Arts. Rousseau argued that the 'taste for letters, philosophy, and the fine arts destroys the love of our primary duties and of true glory'.⁹⁶ This statement reinforces Rousseau's early claim that when 'true courage is enervated, the military virtues vanish, and this too is the work of... the arts'.⁹⁷ Rousseau was particularly concerned with the weakening of martial morals because he thought that people would become obsessed with frivolous activities and ignore the duties they are required to fulfil to protect and support their state. Rousseau mocked the degenerate society on the grounds that it would ensure that 'our children are brought up exactly like the athletes of the ancient public games who carefully avoided using their strong limbs for any kind of productive work because they dedicated them to a pointless and superfluous exercise'.⁹⁸ Rousseau contrasted the degenerate society with a 'well-constituted State' where 'every citizen has duties to fulfil; and he holds these important cares too dear to find leisure for frivolous speculations'.⁹⁹ Rousseau thought that the flourishing of the Arts eroded virtue, undermined civic duty, and left individuals too preoccupied with frivolities to develop the strength, discipline, and desire necessary to defend their state.

⁹⁵ Rousseau, J-J., 1752, 100-101.

⁹⁶ Rousseau, J-J., 1752, 100.

⁹⁷ Rousseau, J-J., 1750, 21.

⁹⁸ Rousseau, J-J., 1752, 100.

⁹⁹ Rousseau, J-J., 1752, 99.

In sum, Rousseau's argument is that the development of the Arts causes a desire for luxury that allows people to crave distinction amongst their peers. This craving causes people to shun the virtues that they ought to desire and corrupts their attention to focus on superfluous endeavours. Because people no longer pursue desirable virtues, they morph into a weaker, more cowardly, and altogether more degenerate form.

Following a similar logic, Rousseau argued that progress in the Sciences causes idleness and idleness causes moral and political degeneration. Rousseau laid out this process when he wrote that although 'sciences are vain as regards their aims, they are even more dangerous in their effects' because the sciences are '[b]orn in idleness' and 'feed it in turn'.¹⁰⁰ The Sciences aimed at and successfully brought about material prosperity. This material abundance fostered a spirit of indulgence that drew individuals towards comfort. The preference for indulgent comfort developed a disposition for idleness that caused the degeneration of mankind because in 'politics, as in morals, not to do good is a great evil, and every useless citizen may be looked upon as a pernicious man'.¹⁰¹ Idleness is pernicious because of the dulling effect it has on our character. Rousseau elaborated that 'the cultivation of the sciences is... even more [harmful] to the moral qualities' because when people become idle 'a senseless education adorns our mind and corrupts our judgement': This corrupted judgement entails that people will 'not know the meaning of the words magnanimity, equity, temperance, humanity, courage; the sweet name Fatherland will never strike their ear; and if they hear God spoken at all, it will be less to be in awe than to be in fear of him'.¹⁰² Therefore, as Rousseau made clear, Science 'is not made for men', because 'Sciences harm morals more than they benefit society'.¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ Rousseau, J-J., 1750, 17.

¹⁰¹ Rousseau, J-J., 1750, 17.

¹⁰² Rousseau, J-J., 1750, 22.

¹⁰³ Rousseau, J-J., 1751(a), 33-34.

In sum, Rousseau's argument is that the development of the Sciences causes an idleness that diverts people's attention away from fulfilling their duties and cultivating virtues.

In addition to luxury and idleness, Rousseau detailed another degenerative effect of the Arts and Sciences. For Rousseau, in the state of nature, people are independent and there is no perceptible inequality. However, as the Arts and Sciences developed, self-sufficiency became impossible because work and subsistence were no longer solitary pursuits. As Rousseau put it, 'bonds of servitude... formed solely by men's mutual dependence and the reciprocal needs that unite them'.¹⁰⁴ This subjugation became pervasive because 'man, who had previously been free and independent, is now... subjugated by a multitude of new needs to the whole of Nature, and especially to those of his kind whose slave he in a sense becomes even by becoming their master; rich, he needs their services; poor, he needs their help, and moderate means do not enable him to do without them'.¹⁰⁵ The effect of this subjugation can be observed in the impact it has on the psychological dispositions of mankind. Rousseau noted that relationships of subjugation corrupted the psychological disposition of *amour de soi-même* into the psychological disposition of *amour propre*. This *amour propre* generates a 'consuming ambition, the ardent desire to raise one's relative fortune less out of genuine need than in order to place oneself above others'. For Rousseau, this self-aggrandising disposition 'instils in all men a dark inclination to harm one another, a secret jealousy that is all the more dangerous as it often assumes the mask of benevolence in order to strike its blow in greater safety'.¹⁰⁶ However, as Nicholas Dent argues, the disposition of *amour propre* not only harms 'those who are despised, disregarded, or deprived' but also those who prosper. This is because the psychological disposition has 'handed over the meaning and value of their lives and themselves to the judgements of others' so

¹⁰⁴ Rousseau, J.-J., 1755(b), 162.

¹⁰⁵ Rousseau, J.-J., 1755(b), 175.

¹⁰⁶ Rousseau, J.-J., 1755(b), 175.

that they are 'ruled by the verdict of others upon them'.¹⁰⁷ As a consequence, *amour propre* creates a climate of envy that replaces authentic relations with self-serving ones driven by the desire for status and recognition. Therefore, mankind becomes disconnected because individuals are focused on personal advancement rather than collective well-being. This results in a society where cooperation and community are replaced by competition and rivalry. It is for this reason that Rousseau refers to metallurgy and agriculture as the inventions that 'civilised men and ruined Mankind'.¹⁰⁸

So Rousseau challenged the Enlightenment belief that progress in knowledge leads to the betterment of mankind and society. While Rousseau accepted that advancements in knowledge granted humanity power over nature, he argued that developments in the Arts and Sciences also corrupted mankind into a degenerate form. The Arts fostered a desire for luxury which weakens virtue and civil duty. The Sciences promoted idleness which dulls character and diverts individuals from their responsibilities. Furthermore, scientific and technological advancements create economic relationships of subjugation which fosters *amour propre* to fuel envy and distrust. Ultimately, Rousseau thought that, rather than elevating humanity, the advent of civilisation degrades mankind and society to an unkind, idle, selfish, unvirtuous, and torpid form.

Turning to Rousseau's positive prescriptions, he argued that to rectify these detrimental dispositions we must 'find a form of association that will defend and protect the person and the goods of each associate with the full common force, and by means of which each, uniting with all, nevertheless obeys only himself and remain as free as before'.¹⁰⁹ Crucially, Rousseau does not take this to mean that mankind can be free in the same sense as they were in the state of nature. Rather, mankind is as free as they were but in a different way; a way

¹⁰⁷ Dent, N., 2005, 40.

¹⁰⁸ Rousseau, J-J., 1755(b), 172.

¹⁰⁹ Rousseau, J-J., 1762, 51-52.

that enshrines their freedom within the conditions of civilised modernity. For Rousseau, this occurs when a political community is founded upon the general will. The establishment of a political community based on the general will reshapes the detrimental dispositions of mankind in two ways. First, because the general will does not just represent the common elements of each particular will but moulds each particular will towards a common purpose, it ensures that our individualistic psychological dispositions of luxury and idleness are redirected towards civic virtue and communal betterment.¹¹⁰ Second, because the political community reconciles modernity with equality through the social contract, it can undo the inequality and subjugation produced by the interdependent relations of mechanised industry. In turn, this redirects *amour propre* to more virtuous ends. Again, Neuhausser is illuminating on this point. Neuhausser makes clear that it is not possible to eradicate *amour propre* because ‘to eliminate *amour-propre* would be to eliminate the conditions of rationality, of love – of subjectivity itself’. Instead, the ultimate aim of Rousseau is ‘to find a way of forming *amour-propre* so that it continues to motivate human beings without resulting in the evils it tends to produce in its uneducated form’.¹¹¹ In the civilised state of society ‘where there is no artificial intervention into the social world’ the disposition of *amour propre* degenerates ‘into unconstrained, social injurious quests for superior standing’ and cannot ‘assume a benign rather than a destructive form’.¹¹² However, Neuhausser argues that ‘what is not necessary can in principle be transformed into something different, and working out how this is possible is precisely the aim of the *Social Contract*’.¹¹³ In a political community founded on the general will, individuals seek distinction in ways that serve the common good rather than in ways that foster domination, vanity, and envy. The citizens of such a community come to see that their personal interests align with the general will and so gain esteem through public service and civil contribution. Therefore, according to Rousseau, the general will can reshape *amour propre* into a virtuous

¹¹⁰ Cf. Taylor, C., 2015, 76-77.

¹¹¹ Neuhausser, F., 2012, 380.

¹¹² Neuhausser, F., 2014, 211.

¹¹³ Neuhausser, F., 2012, 386.

and civic-minded disposition that undoes the degenerative impacts of its unconstrained form. Taken together, Rousseau asserted that the formation of a political community founded on the general will has the power to reshape the dispositions of luxury and idleness into dispositions of civic virtue and communal betterment and redirect the disposition of *amour propre* into one of civic-minded public service.

In addition, Rousseau highlighted the importance of the Lawgiver in reversing the degeneration of mankind. For Rousseau, the Lawgiver is the instigator of the social contract. The Lawgiver designs the constitution and sets up the institutions that allow the community to come into existence and be governed by the people in accordance with the general will. However, whilst the Lawgiver plays the role of the prime mover, Rousseau does not believe they should hold legislative authority. As Rousseau put it, the Lawgiver 'is the mechanic who invents the machine' and not the one 'who assembles and operates it'. Rousseau is clear that 'he who has command over men ought not to have command over the laws' because it is a condition of the political community that authority resides with the members of that community.¹¹⁴ So, in contrast to classical ideas, Rousseau thought that power ought not to be concentrated in one figure but dispersed among all of those who form part of the political community. Nevertheless, without the initial input of the Lawgiver founding the constitution and establishing institutions the political community could not come into being. In this case, mankind would continue along the path of degeneration. In addition, the Lawgiver frames the fundamental principles of the political community by shaping customs, civic values, and public spirit in a way that conditions citizens to think appropriately about the political community and social life. So the Lawgiver can impact the members of the political community by making them

¹¹⁴ Rousseau, J-J., 1762, 71.

suitable for the social contract.¹¹⁵ As Rick Matthews and David Ingersoll put it, the Lawgiver becomes a 'leader-therapist' who must 'devise psychic cures for a society of patients who do not know they are ill, but nevertheless despair of a cure'.¹¹⁶ Therefore, through the Lawgiver, Rousseau demonstrated that specific individuals who intentionally perform actions directed towards a normative end can bring about an all-things-considered better state of affairs that would not have occurred without their agential input. If no-one takes up the position of the Lawgiver, then the social contract, general will, and political community will not come into being. For Rousseau, the Lawgiver was able to stop the degeneration of mankind and bring about normatively desirable improvement to the moral and political reality.

Yet, while the Lawgiver is able to reverse moral-political degeneration by founding a political community upon the general will, Rousseau emphasised that it is extremely challenging for anyone to fulfil this role. Rousseau wrote that the 'Lawgiver is in every respect an extraordinary man in the State'¹¹⁷. To succeed in this role, the Lawgiver must possess an almost paradoxical set of qualities. The Lawgiver must be able to understand human nature without sharing its flaws and be able to shape people without being affected by them. The extraordinary nature of the Lawgiver suggests that escaping the degenerative consequences of civilisation is not a simple course of action; achieving it is likely to be rare as it is immensely difficult to do.

Nevertheless, despite its rarity, Rousseau showed that instead of moral-political progress being a necessity that is predetermined to result from the

¹¹⁵ Rousseau, J-J., 1762, the Lawgiver ought to 'feel capable of... changing human nature; of transforming each individual who by himself is a perfect and solitary whole into part of a greater whole from which that individual as it were receives his life and his being; of adulterating man's constitution in order to strengthen it; of substituting a partial and moral existence for the independent and physical existence we have all received from nature. In a word, he must take from man his own forces in order to give him forces that are foreign to him and which he cannot use without the help of others', 71.

¹¹⁶ Matthews, R., Ingersoll, D., 1980, 94.

¹¹⁷ Rousseau, J-J., 1762, 71.

pursuit of knowledge, moral-political progress is contingent upon intentional actions that are aimed at altering moral practices and political institutions.

This exposition of Rousseau allows us to observe the shortcomings of the causal-agential and historical elements of the Enlightenment conception of progress. In turn, this reveals the more plausible form that the causal-agential and historical elements ought to take.

The Causal-Agential Element – Conceptual Conclusions

Four conclusions can be drawn regarding the causal-agential element.

With regard to the indirect aspect, Rousseau argued that Enlightenment theorists of progress erred in endorsing the causal link between scientific and technological development and moral-political progress because techno-scientific advances can have regressive implications for the moral-political condition of mankind. The strength of this critique does not depend on how convincing each step is in Rousseau's counter-Enlightenment argument. The important point is that Rousseau demonstrated how advancements in knowledge and techno-scientific ability do not necessarily lead to desirable moral-political change.¹¹⁸

However, we need not accept Rousseau's additional claim that scientific and technological developments lead to moral-political degeneration. Just as knowledge and techno-scientific ability do not necessarily cause moral-political progress they also do not necessarily cause moral-political regress. Therefore, a causal entailment between advancements in knowledge and techno-scientific

¹¹⁸ This conclusion should not be over-interpreted. Rousseau has not demonstrated that all indirect causal mechanisms ought to be rejected, only that the causal link between gains in knowledge techno-scientific development and moral-political progress ought to be severed. It remains an open question whether a different form of the indirect causal mechanism could be endorsed.

ability and either moral-political progress or moral-political regress ought to be rejected. Instead, it is more appropriate to understand technological and scientific developments in normatively-neutral terms.¹¹⁹ This is because techno-scientific developments open up new possibilities in which moral-political progress or regress can occur but do not themselves determine the normative outcome. For example, consider the scientific and technological advances that transitioned humanity into the digital age. These innovations opened up new possibilities for how humanity communicates, accesses information, and interacts with the world. When we consider the normative implications of these changes, two possibilities emerge. On the one hand, these innovations could be utilised to develop our moral dispositions by exposing us to new normative perspectives, connect and empower those who strive to achieve normatively desirable change, and resist the concentration and abuse of political power. On the other hand, these innovations could be utilised to ensure that humanity becomes morally insensitive and hostile to other possibilities, identify and persecute those who desire normatively desirable change, and strengthen the concentration of political power by covering up its abuse through the spread of misinformation and propaganda. Of course, these alternatives are not mutually exclusive; they may occur to varying extents at the same time. Nevertheless, the point is that scientific and technological development is not what determines the normative outcome. The normative implication of a technological advance depends upon how it is used. Depending on its use, scientific and technological advances could facilitate different forms of moral-political change. Therefore, this form of non-normative development can open up new possibilities for moral-political change but necessitates neither progression nor regression in our moral-political reality.

In addition, the claim that scientific and technological development does not determine moral-political outcomes is perfectly compatible with the claim that a certain level of techno-scientific ability is a necessary condition for entering

¹¹⁹ The extent to which techno-scientific advances can be regarded as normatively neutral will be explored further in the Bridge section.

into a certain stage of history or achieving a certain normative outcome. Consider, for example, a stadial account of history that included at one end a stage of a hunter-gatherer social order and at the other end a stage resembling modern liberal democracy. It is implausible to suggest that a transition from the former stage to the latter could occur with the level of basic scientific and technological development staying the same. The idea that scientific and technological knowledge could remain at such a basic level without impinging on the ability to transition through all stages of history is nonsensical. Therefore, the idea that scientific and technological development is irrelevant to the normative outcome ought also to be rejected. Instead, whilst retaining the insight that scientific and technological development does not have a causal relationship with moral-political progress, we can assert that it has a pre-conditional one. A certain level of scientific and technological development is required for a certain level of moral-political progress to be attained.

With regard to the type of causal agency, in contrast to the catalytic account of causal agency entailed by the necessary account of causation adopted by the Enlightenment conception of progress, Rousseau showed that a contingent account of causation entails a creative account of causal agency. Since a contingent account of causation takes normatively significant changes to be contingent upon certain actions taking place, moral-political progress is not a predetermined inevitability in which human action can only accelerate the time at which progressive developments occur. On the contrary, the course of moral-political progress can be altered by specific individuals and their actions. Therefore, a contingent account of causation supports a creative interpretation of human agency where individuals are the creators of moral-political progress and are able to do more than merely speed up a progressive transition that is already predetermined to occur.

With regard to the intentionality aspect, Rousseau puts forward a simple argument in support of locating the intentionality of moral-political progress in the intended consequences of normative actions. As Rousseau set out, actions aimed at what will either stop moral-political degeneration or cause moral-political progress can bring about a more desirable state of affairs. Of course, it remains to be determined whether normative actions have additional unintended consequences that affect the intended consequences of normative actions account of causation.

With regard to the agential aspect, Rousseau made clear that thinkers are not the agents of progress. If the causal entailment between progress in knowledge and moral-political progress is severed, then knowledge-producing thinkers cannot be considered the agents of progress. More positively, Rousseau demonstrated that if a direct and contingent account of causation is adopted, then the agents of progress are those individuals capable of performing the actions that directly cause moral-political progress. However, outside of the Lawgiver, it is unclear who Rousseau thought those agents of progress should be. As such, it remains to be determined who the agents of progress are according to a direct and contingent account of causation.

Taken together, Rousseau firmly challenged the Enlightenment account of causation and provided an alternative set of conceptual elements in its place.

The Historical Element – Conceptual Conclusions

Two conclusions can be drawn regarding the historical element.

First, as a result of critiquing the indirect and necessary account of causation adopted by the Enlightenment conception of progress, Rousseau implicitly revealed that an account of history adopted by a conception of moral-

political progress with a contingent account of causation struggles to make sense of the apparent directionality to historical change, explain the relatively stable rate of improvement, and justify the presumption against the reversibility of progressive change. On the account of history adopted by the Enlightenment conception of progress, even though there can be temporary intra-stage moments of stagnation and decline, it is not possible to stop the ceaseless movement through the stages of history and revert to a prior stage of moral-political advance. The Enlightenment theorists of progress justify this position through their faith in the constant advance of knowledge and their belief that the transitions between the stages of history are caused by irreversible developments in science and technology. Since Rousseau demonstrated that we ought to divorce scientific and technological developments from moral-political progress, the irreversibility of moral-political progress cannot be justified on those grounds. In addition, Rousseau showed that moral-political progress depends upon actions taking place that enable a normatively desirable change to occur and that in the absence of those actions or in the presence of countervailing actions, a normative undesirable change can occur. As a result, Rousseau made clear that an account of history adopted by a conception of progress with a direct and contingent account of causation faces the challenge of explaining how historical change reliably moves in a positive direction and is not susceptible to regressive reversals. Therefore, it remains to be determined how a conception of moral-political progress that retains a direct and contingent account of causation can outline a sufficient and plausible account of history.

In addition to the conceptual conclusions that can be drawn from Rousseau's critique, analysing the Enlightenment conception of moral-political progress reveals that a stadial account of history entails a developmental logic with a rigid hierarchy. For the Enlightenment conception of moral-political progress, the stages of history are defined according to the levels of techno-scientific ability that determine the moral-political condition of the society. As

Nathanial Wolloch puts it, 'Enlightenment stadialism claimed that human societies universally developed according to a generally fixed stadial pattern' and that 'it was the changing modes of utilising natural resources for acquiring material sustenance and comfort which constituted the heart of stadial theorising'.¹²⁰ According to the stadial account of history, all societies are on the same developmental path but at different points along it.¹²¹ This has two problematic implications. On the one hand, such a stadial account of history reinforces a Eurocentric account of history in which the final stage and ultimate goal of progressive development resembles the model of socio-economic organisation adopted by eighteenth-century European nation-states. On the other hand, such a stadial account enables the societies and their forms of socio-economic order to be ranked hierarchically. As a result, non-European societies are considered to be 'primitive' on the grounds that they either currently occupy or are permanently limited to a less advanced stage of development. Consequently, stadial theorising gives rise to a pernicious form of societal supremacy. Europeans in a more advanced stage of development have a justification for viewing non-European peoples in a less advanced stage as 'backwards' and inferior. In turn, this supports either the imperial fantasy of a civilising mission in order to catch a society up to the more advanced stage of development or the colonial idea of occupying territory from peoples who are unable to reach the heights of civilisational development. As Hannah Hodacs and Mathias Persson elaborate, 'the savages of stadial theory can be seen as a mental corollary of Europe's eighteenth-century globalisation and colonial expansion' which in turn provides 'an adaptable rationale for conceiving of other peoples as inferior human brutes with limited rights of ownership of the land they inhabited'. To provide an example, Hodacs and Persson argue that 'Africans were cast as pre-civilised versions of Europeans and attributed an ingrained inertia that gave rise to ignorance, idleness, lack of development, and

¹²⁰ Wolloch, N., 2011, 253.

¹²¹ The claim is not that every society recapitulates European history exactly, but that each society is placed on a single developmental trajectory with its position determined by its degree of scientific and technological ability.

susceptibility to lower passions, characteristics that simultaneously pertained to savages in general'.¹²² So the development logic ingrained in stadial accounts of history gave rise to a pernicious idea of civilisational supremacy that led to ideologies of imperialism and colonialism. As a result, stadial accounts of history no longer appear plausible and an alternative account of history ought to be adopted instead.

Taken together, the analysis demonstrates that the stadial account of history is untenable and a conception of progress that adopts a direct and contingent account of causation needs to explain how history reliably moves in a positive direction and is not susceptible to regressive reversals.

Conclusion: Causal and Historical Ideal Desiderata

The *geistesgeschichte* analysis began by reconstructing the Enlightenment conception of progress. It detailed how this conception of progress consists of a universal and definitive telos that envisaged the perfection of mankind and society, an indirect and necessary account of causation alongside an intended consequences of non-normative action account of agency, and a stadial account of history. The analysis then turned to the contribution of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The crude regression theorist interpretation of Rousseau was rejected on the grounds that he offered avenues for reversing moral-political degeneration. However, the proposals are hard to realise and are likely to be inapplicable to the majority of societies. As a result, the nuance and complexity of Rousseau's thought have to be acknowledged as he is simultaneously aware of the possibility of progress but alert to the challenges that inhibit it. Therefore, Rousseau is more appropriately understood as a cautious and conditional optimist. Nevertheless, Rousseau firmly challenged the indirect and necessary aspects of the Enlightenment account of causation. In turn, this critique demonstrated that the

¹²² Hodacs, H., Persson, M., 2019, 102.

causal and historical elements of a thick conception of progress need not adhere to the ideational constraints of the Enlightenment conception. As such, a broader enquiry into the normative-teleological, causal-agential, and historical elements that ought to form the ideal desiderata for a thick conception of progress must be conducted.

This thesis proceeds by turning to the conception of progress advanced by Immanuel Kant. Kant was deeply influenced by the Enlightenment conception of progress and also Rousseau's implicit criticism of it. Kant fundamentally rejected the idea that progress was about the accumulation of knowledge and material advancements. Instead, Kant moralised progress such that the conception was orientated towards the development of human autonomy, justice, and peace. Kant recognised the contingency and struggle involved in moral-political progress but retained the Enlightenment optimism that humanity will move towards a better world. So Kant attempted to reconcile the optimism of the Enlightenment conception of progress with the scepticism of Rousseau. As a result, Kant re-orientated the conception of progress away from a mechanistic intellectual process towards a thoroughly moral and political one. It is for this reason that it is appropriate for the *geistesgeschichte* analysis to turn to the Kantian conception of moral-political progress.

Chapter Two: The Kantian Conception of Progress

The Kantian conception of moral-political progress is worth analysing for two reasons.

First, it represents a paradigm shift in theorising about progress. Kant responded to the criticisms raised by Jean-Jacques Rousseau against the Enlightenment conception of progress. On the one hand, Kant accepted Rousseau's critique of the idea that moral-political progress was indirectly caused by gains in knowledge and techno-scientific ability. Echoing Rousseau, Kant thought that increases in knowledge and power over nature do not necessarily lead to moral-political progress. For Kant, these non-normative advances pushed people away from an authentic existence towards a life driven by material pleasures and superficial concerns.¹ Kant thought that gains in knowledge and the scientific and technological advances they engendered had a detrimental effect on moral and intellectual depth which gave rise to an artificial existence that undermines true well-being.² As a result, Kant followed Rousseau and considered how moral-political progress could be achieved given the irreversibility of civilised modernity. On the other hand, Kant rejected Rousseau's account of human nature and the way in which moral-political progress occurs. Kant acknowledged that Rousseau shaped his approach to theorising about progress. Kant wrote that Rousseau 'set me right' and re-oriented him to 'respect human nature'.³ However, Kant rejected Rousseau's account of human nature. Kant thought that Rousseau 'assumed that the human being is good by *nature*... but good in a negative way; that is, he is not evil of his own accord and on purpose, but only in danger of being infected and ruined by

¹ Vaki, F., 2014, 199.

² Stoner, S. A., Wilford, P. T., 2021, argue that for Kant, 'man's presumed authority over nature leads to misery' because 'all simplicity [was] lost in pseudosophistication [and] all depth sacrificed to superficial concerns and fleeting pleasures', 10-11.

³ Kant, I., 1764, 96 [20:44] 'honour human beings'; 'respect human nature' quoted in Cassirer, E., 1945, 2.

evil or inept leaders and examples'.⁴ Kant took a different approach and stated that whereas Rousseau 'proceeds synthetically and begins from the natural human being; I proceed analytically, beginning from the civilised human being'.⁵ From observing mankind in civilised society, Kant located an 'evil tendency in our species'.⁶ Kant thought that people are predisposed to prioritise self-interest over moral duty. However, Kant does not take this to mean that people are inescapably evil. Kant also took humanity to have a capacity for moral reasoning and an ability to choose to act according to the moral law. So, in contrast to Rousseau's idea that humans are naturally good but corrupted by civilised society, Kant thought that humans are susceptible to moral failure but also capable of overcoming this through reason and moral effort. As such, Kant rejected Rousseau's 'preference for the state of savagery'.⁷ Kant understood that Rousseau used the state of nature as a hypothetical tool of comparison but thought that looking back to mankind in an uncivilised state relied on a false account of natural goodness.⁸ So, whereas Rousseau considered how to rediscover the natural goodness of mankind, Kant turned to the question of how to reconcile human evil with the hope for a better future. Kant attempted to accommodate our inclination towards moral failure with the prospect of moral-political progress by re-orientating progress away from a mechanistic intellectual process and towards a moral-political one that, whilst attempting to find a place for individual moral effort, maintained that progress would result from inevitable social processes. Therefore, Kant attempted to reconcile Rousseau with the Enlightenment theorists and the resultant conception of progress represents a paradigm shift in theorising about moral-political change.

Second, it incorporated a novel combination of elements from the conceptual taxonomy. With regard to the normative-teleological element, Kant

⁴ Kant, I., 1798(b), 422 [7:327].

⁵ Kant, I., 1764, 3 [2:207-208].

⁶ Kant, I., 1798(b), 424 [7:328-329].

⁷ Kant, I., 1784, 49 [8:26].

⁸ Kant, I., 1798(b), 'Rousseau did not really want the human being to go back to the state of nature, but rather to look back at it from the stage where he now stands', 422 [7:327].

projected into the future a universal and definitive telos that envisioned mankind fully developing their predispositions for reason in a moral and just society.⁹ With regard to the causal-agential element, Kant appears to have made contradictory statements. On the one hand, Kant seems to say that progress is predetermined and brought about by inevitable social forces. I call this the *deterministic* position because it takes progress to be a necessity and considers the causal force of moral-political progress to reside in the individually self-interested desire for economic and political gain.¹⁰ On the other hand, Kant seems to have been more historically engaged, open to contingency, and appreciative of the role individual moral agents and their intentional actions play in the causal mechanism. I call this the *intentionalist* position because it emphasises contingency and points to intentional normative actions as the causal force of moral-political progress.¹¹ To make sense of the apparent inconsistency, one approach argues that a rupture occurred in Kant's thought before the *Critique of the Power of Judgement*.¹² Advocates of this approach use the rupture to argue that the deterministic position belongs to Kant's early work and, as such, represents an underdeveloped version of his thought. Instead, the intentionalist position is said to reflect Kant's actual thought because it is found in his later, more mature works. An alternative approach acknowledges the apparent inconsistencies in Kant's thought but declines to treat him as a ruptured thinker. This approach argues that despite the apparent discontinuities there is a strong deterministic through-line in Kant's work that should not be overlooked. Therefore, rather than treating Kant as either entirely consistent or completely ruptured, this strategy adopts a less binary approach. Kant is taken to have retained a deterministic position but also thought about the implications of that position and reflected upon how, if progress is ultimately predetermined, individuals can understand

⁹ Formosa, P., Goldman, A., Patrone, 2014, 1.

¹⁰ For variations of the deterministic interpretation, see: Wagner P. (2016); Allen, A. (2016); Patrone, T. (2014); Caranti, L. (2014); Koselleck, R. (2002); Nisbet, R. (1980); Nisbet, R. (1969); Pollard, S. (1968); Bury, J. B. (1932).

¹¹ For variations of the intentionalist interpretation, see: Goldman, J. (2023); Fisher, N. (2021); Ypi, L. (2024/2014/2010).

¹² Ypi, L., 2014.

their actions as morally significant and capable of contributing to that progress. I adopt this approach and, where tensions appear, I reflect on what these reveal about the concerns Kant had about his commitments and analyse whether those concerns were sufficiently addressed. With regard to the historical element, I argue that Kant adopted a continuous account of history that took moral-political progress to occur in a linear manner. As a result, I argue that according to the Kantian conception of progress: (a) the telos of progress is universal and definitive and envisaged as the establishment of a moral world in which our rational faculties are fully developed (this occurs when a federation of republics creates the conditions in which each person can attain rational autonomy and act in accordance with the principles of morality); (b) the account of causation is indirect and necessary insofar as non-normative actions change the moral-political reality (the mechanisms of unsocial sociability and mutual antagonism ensure that moral-political progress is the unintended consequence of self-interested economic and political actions); (c) a continuous account of history (history is understood as a long continuum without clear-cut breaks, progressive transitions occur in an incremental manner, and any moment of stagnation or regress does not hinder the long-run trend of progressive development).

This chapter proceeds by examining the conceptual elements of the Kantian conception of progress. I begin by analysing Kant's normative-teleological framework and assess the viability of his constructivist account of normativity and the universal and definitive telos he envisioned. Following this, I turn to the causal-agential element and evaluate Kant's reliance on unsocial sociability and mutual antagonism as the mechanisms that drive moral-political progress and question the implication of his indirect and necessary account of causation for human agency. Finally, I assess Kant's continuous account of history and interrogate its compatibility with historical reality. As I move through the analysis of each element, I critically evaluate which aspects remain theoretically compelling and which are no longer tenable. This enables

conclusions to be drawn about the strengths and limitations of Kant's approach to theorising about progress.

The Normative-Teleological Element – Constructivist, Universal, Definitive

The concept of freedom is central to the Kantian account of progress. Although negative freedom (the capacity to act in the absence of external constraint) remains important, Kant placed an emphasis on positive freedom (the capacity to govern oneself according to moral principles). According to Kant, positive freedom requires moral agents to have autonomy (the capacity to govern oneself according to moral principles that have been freely chosen and are followed out of duty). Crucially, a moral agent can only discern these moral principles when their cognitive faculties are rationally developed.¹³ This is because reason is 'directed only to what is moral' and is required to discern the maxims that accord with the categorical imperative (a principle which requires moral agents to act only in accordance with maxims that can be universally generalised).¹⁴ Kant argued that the moral principles which accord with the categorical imperative are universal because they are unconditional principles of reason that any rational agent would desire to become a universal law.¹⁵ Kant thought that when moral agents employ their rational cognitive faculties and act in accordance with the categorical imperative, positive moral freedom is realised. When moral freedom is universally realised, Kant claimed that a 'moral world' is created and we would see 'the world as it would be if it were in conformity with all moral laws'.¹⁶ Although the human propensity for evil is not eradicated in the moral world, it is addressed through the process of moral transformation

¹³ Kleingeld, P., 1999, makes clear that on the Kantian account of teleology 'it is not reason that develops, but rather the *pre-dispositions for the use of reason*', 62. This clarification is important because it is only if 'Kant conceives of rational development as the strengthening and improvement of rational faculties that are the same for all humans, [can] his developmental theory be squared with the universal validity of the moral law', 64.

¹⁴ Kant, I., 1781/1787, 675 [A801/B829].

¹⁵ Kleingeld, P., 1999, 'the moral law is universally normatively valid – at all times, in all places, for every rational being', 62.

¹⁶ Kant, I., 1781/1787, 678 [A808/B836].

that realises positive freedom. In the moral world, individuals freely subordinate their inclinations to the moral law and neutralise evil by governing themselves according to universal principles. For Kant, the creation of this moral world is the end goal of progressive development.

Kant thought that the development of our rational faculties and the realisation of the moral world depended on the establishment of a certain type of political community. In Kant's early work, especially in *Idea for a Universal History With Cosmopolitan Purpose*, he envisioned a global federation in which all states are part of a single authoritative jurisdiction.¹⁷ Here Kant described a 'federation of peoples in which every state, even the smallest, could expect to derive its security and rights not from its own power or its own legal judgement, but solely from this great federation [*Völkerbunde*], from united power and the law-governed decisions of a united will'.¹⁸ However, in Kant's later work, especially in *Perpetual Peace*, he advocated for a looser arrangement in which individual states voluntarily form part of a league of nations with no central authority. Here Kant argued that the 'negative substitute' for a universal federation should be an 'enduring and gradually expanding federation [*Bundes*]' of republics bound into an alliance of peace.¹⁹²⁰²¹²² Kant moved away from his early position for two reasons. First, Kant thought that should the universal republic fall into despotism then the entire world would be forced into tyranny. Second, Kant thought that a universal federation might force member states to enter and not receive them

¹⁷ Blomme, H., 2020, 262.

¹⁸ Kant, I., 1784, 47 [8:24].

¹⁹ Kant, I., 1795, 105 [8:357].

²⁰ Kleingeld, P., 2009, contests this point and argues that the looser federation is only an interim step on the path to a global federation, 178-179.

²¹ Nisbet, R., 1980, although Kant did not see any existing state as an exemplar he maintained that the establishment of such a state is a practical, not purely theoretical, possibility, 223.

²² The terms '*Bunde*' and '*Völkerbunde*' are both translated as 'federation'. However, each term has a nuanced meaning. *Völkerbunde* refers to a 'league of nations' (*Völker* meaning 'peoples' or 'nations'). Kant used it as a specific term to refer to an organised union that upholds peace through an explicit international framework. *Bunde* refers to a 'league' or 'alliance' and is used by Kant in a broader sense to describe a confederation of states that come together for mutual security. It refers to any form of confederation that has a practical, conflict-preventing function. So when Kant refers to a *Bund* as a negative substitute for a *Völkerbunde*, he is acknowledging that a looser alliance is a practical alternative to a completely unified global political order.

through voluntary consent. Therefore, Kant changed his position and came to describe this voluntary loose federation of republics as the 'Platonic *ideal*, which is not an empty figment of the imagination, but the eternal norm for all civilised constitutions'.²³ Kant argued that such a loose federation of republics creates the stable political order necessary for our rational faculties to develop. As Kant put it, the 'universal *cosmopolitan existence*, will at last be realised as the matrix within which all the original capacities of the human race may develop'.²⁴ Kant thought that the development of our rational faculties and the realisation of the moral world depended on the establishment of this loose federation of republics because the peaceful, law-based international order enables the intellectual and moral potential of mankind to fully develop. For Kant, the absence of this political arrangement means that people and nations are driven more by self-preservation against immediate threats than by reason or morality. Kant thought that just as individuals must form a state to escape the lawless state of nature, nations must enter a federation of states to escape the constant threat of war and destruction. Once this occurs, Kant thought that individuals would be able to choose to follow the moral law and realise the moral world.

This account of normative teleology can be deconstructed into a constructivist account of normativity and a universal and definitive account of teleology.

A constructivist account of normativity takes values, moral principles, and political norms to be constructed through the exercise of rational agency. Rather than treating normative commitments as objective moral facts that exist independent of moral agents, constructivism takes their objectivity and authority to arise from their generation through rational reflection. On this view, normative commitments are determined by their capacity to be endorsed by all rational agents under the conditions of universalizability. Therefore, the account of

²³ Kant, I., 1798(a), 187 [7:91].

²⁴ Kant, I., 1784, 51 [8:28].

normativity is grounded in reason itself.²⁵ The Kantian account of normativity is constructivist because it takes values, moral principles, and political norms to be grounded in the nature of rationality and revealed by rational reflection. This entails that the account of normativity is fixed and not contingent upon empirical observations, cultural customs, social conventions, or historical developments. This approach extends beyond moral principles and also underpins Kant's views on the constitution of the state and international right. For Kant, the moral law provides the foundation for the political order. This entails that political legitimacy is determined by the ability of a state to conform to rational principles rather than as a result of historical social factors. Similarly, Kant's account of international right is grounded in rational principles. Kant's vision of a federation of republics is derived from universal imperatives. Like the constitutional state, the principles of international right are not shaped by contingent political realities of individual states or a changing international political context. Rather, they are grounded in the rational conditions necessary for peace and cooperation. Therefore, according to Kant, domestic and international political arrangements are constructed in a way that is consistent with rational universal principles. As such, Kant's approach to moral and political normativity is systematically rational and not subject to historical or cultural variation.

There are three problems with such an account of normativity.

First, the Kantian account of normativity disregards contextual factors and historical specificity. According to Kant, cultural, social, religious, and political factors, as well as historical inequalities and injustices, do not affect the account of normativity. As such, Kant's account of normativity is abstract insofar as it ignores contingent facts about certain circumstances, ahistorical insofar as it

²⁵ Constructivism has played a prominent role in contemporary normative political theorising. Notably, John Rawls (2005, 1999, 1980) extended the constructivist approach to normativity. Additionally, Rainer Forst (2011), Onora O'Neill (2002), and Brian Barry (1995) explored this approach. These constructivist approaches reinforce the idea that rational agency and autonomy play a central role in grounding an account of normativity.

overlooks the histories of particular contexts, and trans-contextual insofar as it fails to consider particular cultural, social, or political factors. The problem is that it is unclear whether an abstract, ahistorical, and trans-contextual account of normativity can apply to particular contexts, each shaped by its own unique historical realities. For example, consider societies characterised by unique class struggles, deep-rooted religious practices, tribal allegiances, or indigenous traditions. In such contexts, historically embedded ways of life and communal identities may not fit neatly within universal normative categories. Procedural rationality does not ensure that normative commitments resonate with the customs and institutions of a particular context. Even in more familiar contexts, abstract, ahistorical, and trans-contextual principles may fail to relate to the local histories, social practices, and institutional variations that exist. As a result, the disconnect between rationally constructed normative commitments and lived realities means that although the normative commitments are rational in theory, they may be alien and irrelevant in practice. Therefore, Kant's account of normativity faces the challenge of explaining how values, moral principles, and political norms that are constructed solely through rational reflection can be applicable to and meaningful within contexts shaped by particular ways of life.

Second, the Kantian account of normativity is static. Kant argued that values, moral principles, and political norms are grounded in the rational nature of human beings and so are not able to transform over time. This critique is particularly pertinent to the account of moral law, which does not vary as it is grounded in the unchanging nature of rationality. However, the critique also applies to Kant's political principles which are similarly derived from a rational construction that is independent of historical or cultural contingencies. This entails a static vision of the state, in which the appropriate form of government (a republic integrated into a broader federation) represents the singular, final form of political order. The endorsed form is inflexible and unable to adapt in response to different political contexts. In addition, the political principles that

govern international right are also static. For Kant, although the federation of republics is to be achieved through political development, the political goal itself is fixed. The vision of a future cosmopolitan order is closed to revision and unable to accommodate new or alternative forms of political organisation. Therefore, the Kantian account of normativity, both in its moral and political dimensions, faces the criticism of being too static to adequately capture the dynamic and changing nature of human societies. In contexts where social structures, techno-scientific possibilities, and ways of life evolve, it may not be sufficient to simply apply fixed normative commitments to the new reality. Instead, novel situations may call for a change in the normative commitments themselves. Without space for the normative account to adapt in substance, not just application, Kant's account of normativity risks being unresponsive to the moral-political, social, and techno-scientific transformations that occur over time.

The third problem relates to the nature of rationality. Kant denied that rationality can be affected by contextual factors. However, rationality appears to be shaped by the language, concepts, and cultural practices of a context. For example, consider a rational moral agent embedded in a context influenced by Confucian thought. This moral agent might be rational but conduct their rational deliberation in a way that primarily pays attention to their network of social relationships. The Confucian moral agent does not reason as a detached and isolated individual but as a ruler, a subject, a parent, a child, a husband, a wife, a sibling, or a friend. If a dilemma arose that permitted the moral agent to either obey the categorical imperative or protect their parent from punishment, a Kantian moral agent and a Confucian moral agent could be equally rational but come to opposing conclusions. The Kantian moral agent would reason that moral duty requires law-abiding behaviour irrespective of personal relationships. The Confucian moral agent would reason that filial piety justifies prioritising the familial relationship over impersonal law. This suggests that rationality, rather than being a universal and abstract faculty, is affected by the embeddedness of

moral agents. This calls into question the feasibility of a framework in which disassociated rationality is employed to determine the account of normativity. If rationality is shaped by the culture or social structures in which an individual is embedded, then it becomes difficult to claim that universal values, moral principles, and political norms could be derived from rational enquiry alone. Kant assumed that reason could transcend contingencies. However, if rationality is linked to the conditions of particular contexts, then the claim that it can produce universal normative principles appears to be false.

Ultimately, the Kantian account of normativity no longer appears tenable as it struggles to account for the factors that shape values, moral principles, and political norms.

The teleological aspect of Kant's conception retains a universal and definitive part.

The Kantian account of teleology is universal because it concerns the progression of humanity as a whole. Kant stated that 'we are not dealing with any *specific* conception of mankind, but with the *whole* of humanity, united in earthly society and distributed in national grounds'.²⁶ As such, the subject of his concern is 'the human *race*' and the end state of moral-political development is applicable to all people in all possible contexts. Although Kant's belief in racial hierarchies demonstrates he was an inconsistent universalist, he was always concerned with the progression of humanity as a single unit.^{27,28} Consequently, the end goal of moral-political progress applies universally. For Kant, the moral-political telos envisions a world where every moral agent acts in accordance with

²⁶ Kant, I., 1798(a), 179 [479].

²⁷ Krogh, M. L., 2022, challenges this claim on the grounds that Kant's classification of racial hierarchies demonstrates he was neither an inconsistent nor consistent universalist, 43.

²⁸ For a discussion of the problematic implications of Kant's account of normative teleology, see: Krogh, M. L. (2022); Marwah, I. S. (2022); Lu-Adler, H. (2022); Eberl, O. (2019); Mensch, J. (2017); Allais, L. (2016); Kleingeld, P. (2007); Hill, T. E., Boxill, B. (2000); Wood, A. W. (1991).

the categorical imperative and each state takes a republican form that has entered into a loosely federated political arrangement.

The problem with the universal aspect is that it runs roughshod over the diversity of perspectives regarding what constitutes moral-political progress. The universal telos assumes that what appears progressive from one perspective must be progressive for all. Of course, Kant acknowledged cultural diversity. The problem is that when one perspective is exported as universally significant, different perspectives and forms of social organisation have no impact on the normative telos. Since Kant maintained that the telos with universal applicability reflects the values, moral practices, and political norms that emerged in eighteenth-century European nation-states, there is an inescapably Eurocentric nature to his universal account of teleology.

Therefore, a universal account of teleology appears untenable because it fails to account for the traditions, political arrangements, and experiences that affect non-European societies.

The Kantian account of teleology is definitive in the sense that the factors that prohibited moral and political development abate once the fixed end point of progress is reached. For example, Kant stated that once a community of republics is founded '*war*, the greatest obstacle to morality and the invariable enemy of progress first becomes gradually more humane, then infrequent, and finally disappears completely as a mode of aggression'.²⁹ Once this occurred, each republic will have 'enter[ed] into a constitution based on genuine principles of right, which is by its very nature capable of constant progress and improvement'.³¹ However, progress is not illimitable. Once a universal community has been established, it would 'preserve and secure the freedom of

²⁹ Kant, I., 1798(a), 189 [7:93].

³⁰ Kant, I., 1795, in a republican constitution the consent of the citizens is required to go to war and they will be hesitant to embark on such a dangerous enterprise, 100 [8:350].

³¹ Kant, I., 1798(a), 189 [7:93].

each state in itself'. For Kant, this meant that 'a violation of rights in *one* part of the world is felt *everywhere*'.³² This sentiment takes the form of a cosmopolitan right and becomes a 'universal right of humanity'. In turn, this universal right enables humanity to achieve 'perpetual peace'.³³ This perpetual peace ensures that once the moral world comes into existence it will remain in place and moral-political progress will plateau. Therefore, cosmopolitan right and perpetual peace ensure that moral-political progress will end once the end goal of the moral world is realised.

Three problems are associated with the idea that progressive development will conclude and mankind will remain in a stationary state.

The first problem is that a definitive account of teleology deprives mankind of hope. If mankind has entered into a stationary state, then hope for a better future is prevented because the prospect of improvement in their moral-political condition has been removed. Of course, Kant does not detail when the realisation of the definitive telos will come about. So it could be the case that it is actually a regulative ideal; an aspiration that is not supposed to be achieved. However, Kant's concluding remarks in *Perpetual Peace* suggest that he does not hold this view. Kant wrote that 'it is not just an empty idea that *perpetual peace* will eventually replace what have hitherto been wrongly called peace treaties (which are actually only truces)... it is a task which, as solutions are gradually found, constantly draws nearer fulfilment, for we may hope that the periods within which equal amounts of progress are made will become progressively shorter'.³⁴ The implication is that the normative telos is not a regulative ideal but an approaching moral-political reality. However, it could be the case that the realisation of the definitive telos is impossible to detect. In this case, even if the end state was realised, individuals would not be aware of the finality of their

³² Kant, I., 1795, 104 [8:356].

³³ Kant, I., 1795, 108 [8:360].

³⁴ Kant, I., 1795, 130 [8:386].

moral-political condition and so would be able to retain hope for a better future. The problem with this position is that hope depends on the belief that a better future is possible. In the case where the definitive telos is impossible to detect, individuals are nevertheless aware of what the end of moral-political development looks like. The issue is not that they lack knowledge of the telos but that they cannot determine whether or not it has already been realised. If people suspect that they have already arrived at the moral-political end state, then the prospect of further moral-political progress is denied. Even if people are unsure whether they have actually realised the moral-political end state, they are aware that they must be close and, once it is reached, no further moral-political progress will be possible. Therefore, either way, people are unable to retain the belief that a better moral-political reality lies in front of them. Even if individuals retain hope for minor improvements, they are nevertheless denied the deeper form of hope that rests on the possibility of a meaningfully better moral-political future. As such, the definitive telos erodes the possibility of hoping for a substantially better future.

The second problem is that a definitive account of teleology denies the prospect of radical social innovations that might upend the vision of what the end of moral-political progress looks like. Although the Kantian account views societies as evolving entities that undergo an ongoing progress of transformation, the definitive aspect of the account of teleology ensures that, after a point, no further reimagining of the moral practices and political institutions can take place. Therefore, the problem with the definitive account is that it entrenches a certain vision of moral-political progress which prohibits the possibility that subsequent generations might develop radically new moral perspectives or consider novel types of institutional arrangement.

The third problem is that a definitive account of teleology rests on an extraordinary faith in our epistemic infallibility. If we are sure of the definitive

telos, then we must know at this present time what the ultimate end of progressive development is for all time. However, given that the course of history has unfolded in complex and unpredictable ways, it is naïve to assert that we can know what the final end of progressive development is. It is more appropriate to retain a sense of epistemic humility and assert that whilst we can know what the telos of progress is for us now, that telos might not be the conclusive end of progress. Once that telos is realised, in the fullness of time, subsequent teloi might appear that enable the continuation of the progressive journey. So the definitive account of teleology has to justify its epistemic infallibility and defend its vision of what the eternal end-state of history looks like.

Therefore, the definitive part of the Kantian account of teleology appears untenable as it undermines hope, ignores the possibility of transformative moral-political innovations, and relies on an unjustified faith in our ability to know the end state of moral-political progress.

However, there is one feature of Kantian teleology that is valuable and should not be overlooked. The Kantian conception of progress posits a forward-looking moral-political goal towards which mankind and society can strive. The forward-looking orientation of the normative telos serves two functions. First, the forward-looking normative telos provides a clear standard for evaluating moral practices and political institutions. This enables criticism to be made of the moral and political status quo on the grounds that it falls short of the normative telos. Second, the forward-looking orientation offers an aspiration that guides moral action and political reform. Notwithstanding the implication of a soon-to-be-realised definitive telos or deterministic and unintended consequences of non-normative action account of causation, having a forward-looking normative telos can give individuals and societies something to strive towards. In providing a vision of a more desirable world, the forward-looking normative telos can motivate action to bring about individual moral improvement and institutional

political transformations. Therefore, the normative-teleological element of the Kantian conception of progress demonstrates that a forward-looking normative telos can provide a benchmark against which the current moral practices and political institutions can be judged and a vision that motivates ongoing moral-political advancement.

So even though the constructivist account of normativity and the universal and definitive parts of the account of teleology no longer appear plausible, Kant's conception of progress demonstrates the utility of retaining a forward-looking normative telos.

The Causal-Agential Element – Deterministic vs. Intentional

Kant appears to have made contradictory statements regarding whether moral-political progress is necessary or whether it is contingent upon moral agents bringing it about. On the one hand, the unsocial sociability of mankind and the predisposition to mutual antagonism are said to ensure that progress will be brought about by the unintended consequence of self-interested action. If moral-political progress results from the unintended consequences of non-normative actions, then it appears to depend neither on moral agents understanding the moral-political end nor on their intention to bring it about. As Kant wrote in *On the Common Saying: 'This May Be True in Theory, But It Does Not Apply in Practice'*, 'if we now ask by what means there are of maintaining and indeed accelerating this constant progress towards a better state, we soon realise that the success of this immeasurably long undertaking will depend not so much upon what *we* do... and upon what methods *we* use to further it; it will rather depend upon what human *nature* may do in and through us, to compel us to follow a course which we would not readily adopt by choice'.³⁵ On the other hand, the realisation of the moral world is said to depend upon moral agents

³⁵ Kant, I., 1793, 90 [8:310].

fulfilling their duty to bring it about. As Kant wrote in *Perpetual Peace*, although the 'idea [of the end] is indeed far-fetched in *theory*, it does possess dogmatic validity and has a very real foundation in *practice*, as with the concept of *perpetual peace*, which makes it our duty to promote it'.³⁶ The disagreement turns on whether Kant takes moral-political progress to be necessary and the unintentional result of non-normative action or contingent and the intentional result of normative actions that moral agents have a duty to perform.

To determine whether Kant was simply inconsistent or whether the deterministic and intentionalist positions can be reconciled, it is useful to turn to *The Conflict of Faculties* and reflect on Kant's argument for why history cannot be determined through empirical extrapolation. Kant maintained that '[e]ven if it were found that the human race as a whole had been moving forward and progressing for an indefinitely long time, no-one could guarantee that its era of decline was not beginning at that very moment'. Inverting that logic, Kant claimed that 'if [the human race] is regressing and deteriorating at an accelerating pace, there are no grounds for giving up hope that we are just about to reach the turning point at which our affairs will take a turn for the better'.³⁷ Kant thought it was not possible to extrapolate out of an empirical reading of history the direction of history and even if we could it would not be possible to discern our place within that journey. Therefore, according to Kant, we can only understand the arc of history by means of *a priori* reasoning.

To this end, Kant outlined the three possibilities by which history could be understood. According to Kant, history can either be regressive, at a standstill, or progressive. The regressive position is labelled 'moral terrorism [*moralischen Terrorismus*]' and dismissed on the grounds that the decline into a worsening condition cannot be constant as it would reach a point of exhaustion which would

³⁶ Kant, I., 1795, 109 [8:362].

³⁷ Kant, I., 1798(a), 180 [4:83].

prevent further decline.³⁸ The standstill position is labelled ‘moral abderitism [*Abderitismus*]’ and attributed to Moses Mendelssohn given his argument that ‘we do see the human race in its totality slightly oscillate; it never took a few steps forward without soon afterwards, and with redoubled speed, sliding back to its previous positions’³⁹⁴⁰. Kant offered two criticisms against moral abderitism. First, if it were true, it would render human existence an ‘empty activity of backward and forward motion, with good and evil continually alternating’.⁴¹ In the long run, Kant argued that this would ‘render all human action a farce’.⁴² Second, Kant stressed that if moral abderitism were true then we would be forced to abandon the purposive principle that our natural capacities are destined to be ultimately developed. As a result, Kant claimed that we would be ‘faced not with a law-governed nature, but with an aimless, random process, and the dismal reign of chance replaces the guiding principle of reason’.⁴³ Therefore, Kant dismissed moral abderitism on the grounds that the truth of moral abderitism would demean all human activity and understand the course of history to be mere chance. In its place, Kant defended ‘moral chiliasm [*Chiliasmus*]’ as a progressive understanding of history.⁴⁴⁴⁵

For Kant, the notion of purposiveness motivates the progressive understanding of history. Kant reasoned *a priori* from the premises that everything in nature has a purpose, that every capacity and power is ‘destined sooner or later to be developed completely and in conformity with their end’, and that humanity is uniquely endowed with the faculty of reason, to the conclusion that our natural capacity for reason will become fully developed.⁴⁶ As a result,

³⁸ Kant, I., 1798(a), 178 [4:81].

³⁹ Kant, I., 1798(a), 178 [4:81].

⁴⁰ Mendelssohn, M., 1783, 96.

⁴¹ Kant, I., 1798(a), 180 [4:83].

⁴² Kant, I., 1793, 88 [8:308].

⁴³ Kant, I., 1784, 42 [8:18].

⁴⁴ Kant, I., 1798(a), 178 [4:81].

⁴⁵ Guyer, P., 2020, claims that both Mendelssohn’s moral abderitism and Kant’s moral chiliasm argue for the logical possibility of progress and so the difference between them is ‘more rhetorical than anything else’, 336.

⁴⁶ Kant, I., 1784, 42, [8:18].

Kant stated that in the fullness of time, the cognitive faculties of mankind are predetermined to become entirely rational and, thus, fully developed.⁴⁷

This is why Kant thought that although individual human actions and historical events often appear chaotic and lack rational direction there is a deeper purpose and direction to historical events. Kant claimed that it falls to the philosopher to make sense of the deeper purpose and explain the direction that underlies historical events. According to Kant, 'the philosopher, since he cannot assume that mankind follows any rational *purpose of its own* in its collective actions, [it] is for him to attempt to discover a *purpose in nature* behind this senseless course of human events'.⁴⁸ The purpose Kant discerned is the establishment of the political constitution that enables humanity to fully develop their rational capacities. As Kant put it, '[t]he history of the human race as a whole can be regarded as the realisation of a hidden plan of nature to bring about... [a] perfect political constitution as the only possible state within which all natural capacities of mankind can be developed completely'.⁴⁹

According to Kant, nature operates through contradictory tendencies within humanity to establish the perfect political community and develop our rational faculties. Kant argued that since humans have a 'tendency to come together in society', people naturally coalesce and form political communities.⁵⁰ However, Kant observed that once the political community is established people have an equally strong unsocial tendency to resist constraints imposed by others. This reclusive disposition fuels a 'continual resistance which constantly threatens to break this society up'.⁵¹ Nevertheless, society is said to endure because of the

⁴⁷ Dean, R., 2014, argues that this position is developed 'most thoroughly in the third *Critique*' but also in 'Kant's essays and his lectures on ethics and on education. For example... In Collins's notes on Kant's lectures on ethics, Kant is recorded as saying 'The final destiny of the human race is moral perfection' and 'The universal end of mankind is the highest moral perfection' (27:470), 230.

⁴⁸ Kant, I., 1784, 42 [8:18].

⁴⁹ Kant, I., 1784, 50 [8:27].

⁵⁰ Kant, I., 1784, 44 [8:21].

⁵¹ Kant, I., 1784, 44 [8:21].

mutual antagonism that emerges between members of the political community. Kant argued that once a person has left social solitude and entered into the political community they develop a 'desire for honour, power, or property, and 'status among his fellows'.⁵² Drawing from Rousseau, Kant claimed that the emergence of *amour propre* within the political community leads moral agents to develop 'social incompatibility, enviously competitive vanity, and insatiable desires for possession or even power'.⁵³⁵⁴ However, Kant took these self-interested dispositions to develop the rational faculties of mankind. According to Kant, '[w]ithout these desires, all man's excellent natural capacities would never be roused to develop' and mankind would be trapped in an 'Arcadian, pastoral existence.. [where] all human talents would remain hidden forever in a dormant state'.⁵⁵⁵⁶ So alongside our inherent sociability, it is the self-interested desire for personal gain and the conflicts this creates that pulled humanity out of its pastoral state and formed the political community necessary for the development of rational faculties.

Once a political community is established, Kant thought that mutual antagonism amongst its members leads the community to transition into a republic. The instability and suffering caused by individuals and groups seeking advantage over one another compels people to adopt legal and political structures capable of curbing these tendencies. As Kant put it, the republican constitution puts 'an end to outbreaks of lawless proclivities' and the republican form of political order that is established 'makes it much easier for the moral capacities of men to develop into an immediate respect for right'.⁵⁷ However,

⁵² Kant, I., 1784, 44 [8:21].

⁵³ Kant, I., 1784, 45 [8:21].

⁵⁴ Cf. Rousseau, J-J., 1755(b), 175.

⁵⁵ Kant, I., 1784, 45 [8:21].

⁵⁶ Cassirer, E., 1945, 40-41; Kant's deviation from Rousseau is evident in the criticism of the idealised pastoral Arcady. Even though Kant maintained a purely theoretical conception of the state of nature, he rejected a nostalgic presentation of it. Kant favourably endorsed the tumult and conflict of civilised social existence and dismisses the siren call of the pre-civilisation idyll when he writes that '[p]ain is the incentive of activity, and in this, above all, we feel our life; without pain lifelessness would set in', (Kant, I., 1798(b), 334 [7:231]).

⁵⁷ Kant, I., 1795, 121 [8:376].

Kant observed that whilst republican government was capable of curbing internal conflict, antagonism continues between states. Just as a person strives to gain status over another, states will seek to dominate their rivals. Kant argued that the 'inevitable antagonism' between states leads to 'wars, [with] tense and unremitting military preparations'.⁵⁸ The problem Kant observed is that war and the preparations for war prohibit the development of rational faculties. Kant explained that the 'full development of natural capacities is here likewise held up by the expenditure of each commonwealth's whole resources on armaments against the others, and by the depredations caused by war (but most of all by the necessity of constantly remaining in readiness for war)'.⁵⁹ However, Kant also observed that inter-state antagonism and the constant threat of war compels states to establish an international political order that ensures domestic security. Kant argued that 'the resultant evils [of war] still have a beneficial effect. For they compel our species to discover a law of equilibrium to regulate the essentially healthy hostility which prevails among the states... [and] introduces a system of united power, hence a cosmopolitan system of general political security'.⁶⁰ As such, Kant viewed war as 'an indispensable means' of progress because the threat of conflict forces political communities to unite into a federation as a means of self-protection.⁶¹ In turn, Kant thought that the federated political order ensues that 'war, the source of all evils and moral corruption, can be prevented'.⁶² Therefore, Kant thought that mutual antagonism is the driving force of progress and works in a two-step process. First, it drives the transition from lawlessness to republicanism within states. Second, the self-interested desire to secure military domination over rival states has the unintended implication of

⁵⁸ Kant, I., 1784, 47 [8:24].

⁵⁹ Kant, I., 1784, 49 [8:26].

⁶⁰ Kant, I., 1784, 49 [8:26].

⁶¹ Kant, I., 1786(a), 232 [8:121].

⁶² Kant, I., 1798(a), 183 [7:86].

establishing a perpetual peace that, in turn, enables rational faculties to fully develop.⁶³

Following the establishment of a loosely federated international order, Kant thought that individuals and states pursued their self-interest through commercial activity. The unintended implication of commercial competition was a tempering of the desire to dominate through military means and the fostering of an interdependence between states. For Kant, interconnectedness and cooperation promote peaceful engagement and mutual understanding. In turn, trade facilitates economic interdependence which further inhibits the breakout of conflict. Furthermore, commerce develops honesty and integrity that further entrench peace. As Kant described it, 'nature wisely separates the nations... by force or by cunning... [whilst] nature also unites nations which the concept of cosmopolitan right would not have protected from violence and war, and does so by means of their mutual self-interest. For the spirit of commerce sooner or later takes hold of every people, and it cannot exist side by side with war... Thus states find themselves compelled to promote the noble cause of peace, though not exactly from motives of morality'.⁶⁴ So, once again, it is the actions that pursue personal gain cause moral-political progress. It is an unintended consequence of self-interested actions that a peaceful international order made up of states with perfect political constitutions is established.⁶⁵

This reveals how Kant responded to Rousseau. Rousseau was concerned that the pursuit of wealth and social status led individuals to become preoccupied with their private interests. As Stoner and Wilford note, Rousseau's

⁶³ This optimistic prediction did not align with the political realities of Kant's later years. Most strikingly, the Partitions of Poland, in which Prussia, Austria, and Russia systematically dismantled and annexed the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth through military aggression, stood in stark contrast to Kant's theoretical vision of an expanding federal international political order. Kant never addressed the contradiction between his theoretical positions and the reality of the actions of the powers (including his native Prussia) that defied them.

⁶⁴ Kant, L, 1795, 114 [8:368].

⁶⁵ Patrone, T., 2014, points out that whilst Kant explains how the causal mechanism leads to the establishment of a political community and a loose federation of states, the further claim that a perfect civil constitution will arise out of this mechanism is not justified, 133-135.

assault on the idea of *doux commerce* argued that rather than ‘curing destructive prejudices, as Montesquieu had hoped for, modern commercial society so exacerbates human vanity... [such that] mankind is destined to live forever outside himself, variously ambitious and anxious, never content with his lot, and afflicted by an ineliminable inquietude’.⁶⁶ However, as Rachel Zuckert puts it, Kant responded to ‘the regressive history narrated by Jean-Jacques Rousseau’ through the ‘focus on nonmoral agency’ to state that self-interested pursuits ‘ultimately produce good outcomes’.⁶⁷ As a direct response to Rousseau, Kant argued that ‘the very impulses which are blamed as the causes of vice are good in themselves, fulfilling their function as abilities implanted by nature’.⁶⁸ This enabled Kant to reconcile the inherent evil in human nature with the certainty of a better future by maintaining that even our non-moral dispositions and self-interested actions have normatively desirable implications. Therefore, the Kantian account of causation takes moral-political progress to be guaranteed because the unintended consequences of our self-interested pursuits bring about progressive ends.⁶⁹

As a result of unpacking Kant’s causal mechanism, the three central aspects of the account of causation become clear.

First, Kant advanced an indirect account of causation. Kant’s account of causation offers an alternative indirect causal mechanism to Turgot and Condorcet’s view that scientific and technological knowledge leads to moral-political progress. In contrast to that view, Kant thought that actions driven by

⁶⁶ Stoner, S. A., P. T. Wilford, 2021, 10.

⁶⁷ Zuckert, R., 2021, 70.

⁶⁸ Kant, I., 1786(b), 228 [8:117-118].

⁶⁹ This interpretation has precedent in Kantian scholarship. Marie Louise Krogh argues that ‘war and commerce [and] the ‘unsocial sociability’ of humankind, are central as the dynamic of conflictual forces in a universal world history toward cosmopolitanism’ (Krogh, M. L., 2022, 52). Naomi Fisher claims that ‘Kant does not attribute progress to human beings acting according to the moral law, but instead primarily to human beings acting egoistically or antagonistically through unsocial sociability’ (Fisher, N., 2021, 86). Richard Dean states that, according to Kant, it is ‘not only that nature has a plan and final end of perfecting human rationality and morality, but also that nature carries out this plan more in spite of than because of human intentions’ (Dean, R., 2014, 233).

economic and political self-interest had desirable moral-political consequences. Through the mechanisms of unsocial sociability and mutual antagonism, individuals and states are said to pursue their own advantage and, in doing so, contribute to the development of the moral world and a just international political order. Therefore, for Kant, moral-political progress is not caused by direct attempts to change moral practices and political institutions but indirectly through actions that are aimed at economic and political enrichment.

Second, Kant advanced a necessary account of causation. The necessary account of causation states that moral-political progress is predetermined to unfold along a pre-set trajectory. Kant's statement that 'nature does not work without a plan and purposeful end, even amidst the arbitrary play of human freedom' shows that he thought progress does not rely on any specific use of our human freedom to realise its purposive conclusion.⁷⁰ This entails that moral-political progress is a certainty and, therefore, that human agency takes a catalytic form since the progress-causing actions only bring about changes that were always going to occur.

Third, Kant made clear that progress occurs contrary to the intentions of moral agents. Kant thought that the unintended implication of merchants self-interestedly seeking economic gain and statesmen self-interestedly pursuing political domination establish the perpetual peace that, in turn, facilitates the development of the rational faculties of mankind. As a result, Kant thought that the unintended consequences of the self-interested actions of merchants and statesmen bring about moral-political progress. This aspect of the Kantian account of causation has often been misinterpreted. For example, Sasha Golob argues that because progress unfolds according to the 'hidden plan of nature', Kant adopted the Cunning of Reason account of causation often attributed to Hegel. Golob defines such a causal account as one where 'morally problematic

⁷⁰ Kant, I., 1784, 52 [8:29].

behaviour in aggregate and over time will produce morally desirable outcomes'.⁷¹ However, this incorrectly defines Cunning of Reason accounts of causation. The core component of a Cunning of Reason account of causation is that the unintended consequences of human actions (morally problematic or not) bring about progressive change. As such, there is a distinction to be made between an unintended consequence of *non-normative* action and an unintended consequence of *normative* action account of causation. On the former, the account adopted by Kant, moral-political progress is a result of the unintended consequences of actions that are not directed towards moral-political progress but towards self-interested ends. On the latter, the account adopted by Hegel, moral-political progress is the consequence of actions directed towards moral-political progress but the outcome is not what was intended. So whilst the common element of a Cunning of Reason account of causation is that the normatively desirable change is an unintended consequence, the difference between the two accounts is whether the unintended progress-causing actions are aimed at a non-normative or a normative end.

Taken together, Kant adopted an indirect, necessary, and unintended consequences of non-normative actions account of causation.

There are two problems with this interpretation of Kant's account of causation. First, such a causal mechanism no longer appears plausible.⁷²⁷³ In an era marked by inequality, climate change, political polarisation, and the re-emergence of interstate warfare, the notion that moral-political progress is inevitable and the result of self-interested actions, commerce, and war seems at best, overly simplistic, or worse, entirely detached from reality. Second, the

⁷¹ Golob, S., 2021, 980.

⁷² Formosa, P., Goldman, A., Patrone, T., 2014, argue that such a causal mechanism is 'seen as based on an outdated... mode of thinking which conceives of nature as a purposive system designed by God', 2.

⁷³ Fiegle, T., 2014, asks if we 'can still accept [Kant's] idea of historical progress' and says, '[t]he answer clearly seems to be negative... it is certainly no longer possible to accept the same concept of historical progress', 163.

deterministic causal mechanism and catalytic account of causal agency appear to overlook statements Kant made on the duty moral agents have to work towards positive social change.

One strategy to rescue the account of causation from these charges is to argue that following a rupture in Kant's thought, he came to reject the deterministic unintended consequences of non-normative action account of causation. Lea Ypi pursues this strategy and argues that the rupture marks a turning point at which Kant came to reject the deterministic position and instead adopt an account of causation that foregrounded intentional normative action and the duty moral agents have to bring about moral-political progress. Ypi attributes to early Kant, especially in *Idea for a Universal History With Cosmopolitan Purpose*, the idea of inevitable progress caused by the unintended consequences of non-normative action. Alongside the personification of Nature, Ypi notes the determinism of this text in the First Proposition, where Kant wrote that '[a]ll the natural capacities of a creature are destined sooner or later to be developed completely and in conformity with their end'⁷⁴. In contrast, Ypi suggests that there is an emphasis on intentional action in Kant's later work. According to Ypi, in *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, published the year after the French Revolution began, 'Nature... is no longer in itself teleologically oriented' and instead 'systematic emphasis is placed on the role of agents' reflecting on their positions in human history.⁷⁶ As a result, Ypi argues that in Kant's later work the realisation of our ends is determined not by the invisible mechanics of Nature but by the causal agency ascribed to the intentional actions of human beings. Ypi references Kant's statement that as 'the sole being on earth who has reason, and thus a capacity to set voluntary ends for himself... it is his vocation to be the ultimate end of nature'.⁷⁷ In addition, the understanding of these ends is 'always

⁷⁴ Kant, I., 1784, 42 [8:18].

⁷⁵ Møller, S., 2021, argues that personified non-human forces 'give the impression that Nature and Progress determine the historical development, thereby undercutting free action', 133.

⁷⁶ Ypi, L., 2014, 113, 105.

⁷⁷ Kant, I., 1790, 298 [5:431].

only conditionally, that is, subject to the condition that he has the understanding and the will to give to nature and to himself a relation to an end that can be sufficient for itself independently of nature, which can thus be a final end, which, however, must not be sought in nature at all'.⁷⁸ Therefore, Ypi claims that because moral agents possess the capacity for reason they are able to determine their ends for themselves. According to this interpretation, Kant came to place the telos of history outside of Nature but inside the cognitive faculties of mankind. As such, Ypi concludes that following the rupture, Kant no longer thought that the invisible hand of Nature would guide humanity to its end of ultimate development and turned to focus on intentional human actions instead.

The problem with the rupture interpretation is that deterministic passages persist in Kant's later work. In particular, there is perhaps the most forthright statement of the deterministic position in *Perpetual Peace*. Here Kant wrote that peace within a federation of republics is 'guaranteed by no less an authority than the great artist of Nature herself'.⁷⁹ To emphasise the point, Kant included a quotation from the Roman poet Lucretius '*natura daedala rerum*', translated as 'Nature the contriver of things'.⁸⁰ Such a strong sense of determination seems to run counter to the supposed anti-teleological shift. Ypi responds by distinguishing between negative and positive guarantees of causation. Ypi declares that 'because history is not just the work of nature but also of freedom, there can be no guarantee in a positive sense'.⁸¹ This response leads Ypi to conclude that the guarantee in *Perpetual Peace* should not be read as a deterministic force of Nature acting against the will of moral agents. Instead, according to Ypi, the passage ought to be read as saying 'future human progress ultimately depends on what individuals do, politically and collectively, to promote the quality of their relations [which] is not the same as saying that they

⁷⁸ Kant, I., 1790, 298 [5:431].

⁷⁹ Kant, I., 1795, 108 [8:360].

⁸⁰ Kant, I., 1795, 108 [8:360].

⁸¹ Ypi, L., 2010, 142.

will never succeed'.⁸² However, the distinction between negative and positive guarantees in Kant's account appears strained. Kant's language in *Perpetual Peace* remains strongly deterministic. The claim that peace is 'guaranteed' by Nature suggests an ongoing commitment to the idea that moral-political progress unfolds through non-normative mechanisms, not merely as a contingent possibility dependent on the intentional actions of moral agents. If Kant had abandoned his earlier deterministic stance, a clearer rejection of Nature's role rather than another assertion of its guiding influence would have been expected. Therefore, Ypi's appeal to a rupture in Kant's thought in order to reframe the deterministic elements as merely setting the conditions of progress, rather than ensuring it, seems like a stretched attempt to force Kant into a contingent and intentionalist framework.

Since it is not plausible to appeal to a rupture in Kant's thought as a means of dismissing the deterministic reading in favour of an intentionalist one, two options remain. The first option is to assume that Kant was inconsistent and failed to appreciate the conflicting facets of his thought. The second option is to reflect on whether the intentionalist passages can be made sense of within the broader deterministic framework of Kant's account of causation. Instead of taking Kant as an inconsistent thinker and disregarding the deterministic passages, I attempt to make sense of the intentionalist sentiments within the deterministic framework. To this end, I argue that the intentionalist passages should be understood as Kant's attempt to address the problem of agential nihilism (the sense that moral action loses meaning when it cannot influence historical change, leading to a form of moral or existential despair) by adopting the first-person perspective of practical reason. When read in this way, the intentionalist passages can be made intelligible without challenging the deterministic framework that constitutes Kant's necessary and unintended consequences of non-normative action account of causation.

⁸² Ypi, L., 2010, 142.

Kant observed the problem of agential nihilism in Rousseau's regressive history. For if history follows a path of inevitable decay then the force of historical inevitability renders intentional moral action meaningless. As moral agents come to realise that their actions have no impact on the predetermined degenerative trajectory they would succumb to a sense of futility since intentional moral action has been rendered redundant. However, the same logic applies to the chiliastic account of history. For if the course of history is orientated towards progress, then there would be no reason why our actions would hold any meaning. Inevitability of either a regressive or progressive kind questions moral agency. Therefore, the progressive reading of history faces the same problem. If moral agents realise that their actions are futile and incapable of contributing to or altering the trajectory of moral-political change, then the motivation for moral action collapses as they come to believe that their intentional moral actions are ultimately meaningless.

Kant's recognition that the chiliastic account of history also leads to agential nihilism motivated the consideration of the philosophy of history for prospective moral agents from the standpoint of practical reason. Kantian scholars highlight the influence of Rousseau on Kant's practical, first-person perspective. Stoner and Wilford claim that the influence of Rousseau led to a 'new philosophical path... [that was] guided by [the] intimation of the priority of the practical'.⁸³ Loren Goldman develops this point and argues that Kant's reading of Rousseau in the early 1760s ensured that he 'prioritises the subject's first-person perspective over the detached, third-person stance'.⁸⁴ As such, Goldman argues that although from a 'third-person, observing perspective... passages can look deterministic' when viewed from a first-person perspective Kant can be seen to be addressing 'prospective agents of reform'.⁸⁵ This makes

⁸³ Stoner, S. A., Wilford, P. T., 2021, 12.

⁸⁴ Goldman, L., 2023, 60.

⁸⁵ Goldman, L., 2023, 43-44.

clear that there are two strands to Kant's philosophy of history.⁸⁶ On the one hand, there was the third-person perspective which, from the standpoint of pure reason, took historical progress to be an inevitable process guided by social mechanisms. On the other hand, there was the first-person perspective which, from the standpoint of practical reason, aims to address the prospect of agential nihilism. This interpretation is strongly supported by contemporary Kantian scholars. For example, Fotini Vaki argues that the two strands of thought can be found in Kant's early works on the philosophy of history. Vaki argues that '[t]he term 'Idea' in the title of Kant's essay on history might be read in a twofold sense depending on the perspective from which history is approached. It might be read both in the technical sense of a regulative idea of reason outlined in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, and in the sense of a postulate of practical reason as a motivating force for the struggle to realise the highest good in history'. As Vaki puts it, '[t]he former is the perspective of the historian, while the latter is the perspective of the historical agent'.⁸⁷ Emphasising the consistency of this position through Kant's work, Zuckert argues that Kant's philosophy of history is 'not only focused upon morally significant subject matter and oriented towards the morally envisioned future, but also justified because it provides a consolatory vision of history that can combat the moral agent's despair'.⁸⁸ As these contributions highlight, Kant's philosophy of history is not only concerned with a theoretical explanation of historical development but also with countering agential nihilism by considering the first-person perspective of the moral agent.

From this perspective, Kant argued that moral agents derive from the idea of progressive history a duty to act in ways that promote the realisation of the desired moral-political end. As Kant put it in the Eighth Proposition of *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim*, an end's 'fulfilment can be hastened, if only indirectly, by a knowledge of the idea they are based on' and that 'our own

⁸⁶ The interpretive challenge is so acute because Kant frequently wove together these two stands without clearly indicating which perspective was under consideration.

⁸⁷ Vaki, F., 2014, 206.

⁸⁸ Zuckert, R., 2021, 68.

rational projects might accelerate the coming of this [end]'.⁸⁹ The notion that an idea of the end of progressive history can be instrumental in encouraging moral agents to act in support of it is referred to as an account of prophetic history. As Kant put it, prophetic history is where 'the prophet himself occasions and *produces* the events he predicts'.⁹⁰ Zachary Biondi highlights the effect of a prophetic account of history on moral agents by noting that 'the mere idea of something can be instrumental in causing it'.⁹¹ Having an idea of the end of history is said to instil a practical belief in moral agents that their actions can be causally efficacious in realising that end.⁹² Emphasising the importance of such a practical belief, Goldman writes that a 'practical belief is the first-person stance of holding fictions to be true for the sake of action' and so long as moral agents do not 'mistake even Kant's most prima facie determinist historical claims for dogmatism' individual action can be taken to affect the realisation of the ultimately desirable state of affairs.⁹³ Kant made clear that holding such a first-person practical belief to be true gives moral agents a duty to work towards bringing about the prophesied end. Kant wrote that 'nature guarantees perpetual peace by the actual mechanism of human inclinations. And while the likelihood of its being attained is not sufficient to enable us to *prophesy* the future theoretically, it is enough for practical purposes. It makes it our duty to work our way towards this goal, which is more than an empty chimaera'.⁹⁴ For Kant, the practical belief ensures that moral agents have a duty to work towards the realisation of this highest good instead of idly waiting for it to be brought about. This duty is taken to give meaning and purpose to the actions of moral agents. Vaki reinforces this view and argues that '[f]rom the perspective of the historical agent, the idea of a universal history endowed with meaning alleviates the despair and resignation occurred by the nonsensical spectacle of folly interwoven

⁸⁹ Kant, I., 1784, 50 [8:27].

⁹⁰ Kant, I., 1798(a), 177 [4:80].

⁹¹ Biondi, Z., 2020, 82.

⁹² Herman, B., 2006, refers to this as the 'proleptic effect', 154.

⁹³ Goldman, L., 2023, 44; refers to the practical beliefs held to be true for the purpose of motivating intentional normative action as a 'heuristic fiction', 51.

⁹⁴ Kant, I., 1795, 114 [8:368].

with vanity and malice by becoming the impetus for a better world'. Instead, Vaki claims that the 'belief that history is moving toward the realisation of reason serves as a compass, orienting our everyday social and political practices and as food for hope'.⁹⁵ Vaki highlights how framing progress as a regulative idea rather than a predetermined inevitability actively engages moral agents in shaping the future. In turn, this functions to sustain a sense of meaning in agential action. The prophetic account of history and the practical belief that it generates encourages moral agents to act *as if* they can influence the progressive course of history, thus, making history not a passive unfolding of events but an active collective endeavour.

This makes clear how the intentionalist sentiments can be incorporated into Kant's deterministic account of causation. Although from the third-person perspective of pure reason history is taken to unfold according to a necessary causal mechanism that takes progress to result from the unintended consequences of non-normative actions, the first-person perspective of practical reason provides moral agents with the practical belief that their actions can affect the course of progress. For example, consider Kant's account of the moral politician outlined in the *Appendix to Perpetual Peace*. Kant wrote that 'the *moral politician*, for whom it is a *moral* task... [is] to bring about perpetual peace, which is desirable... as a state of affairs which must arise out of recognising one's duty'.⁹⁶ For Kant, the moral politician gains from their practical belief in perpetual peace the duty to not passively await its realisation as an inevitable development but to actively work towards this end through principled action. The moral politician demonstrates that by acting *as if* progress is possible and history is moving towards its end, moral agents can resist the cynicism and nihilism that arise from a theoretical understanding of historical determinism that views history as an automatic progression towards its end.

⁹⁵ Vaki, F., 2014, 206.

⁹⁶ Kant, I., 1795, 122 [8:377].

However, the problem is that this approach does not sufficiently prevent nihilism. Although moral agents hold the belief that their intentional normative actions can affect the course and trajectory of progress for the purpose of providing meaning to their actions, it is ultimately a fiction. Fundamentally, moral-political progress is a predetermined necessity that does not rely on intentional normative actions. As Kant stated in *Perpetual Peace*, ‘if I say that nature *wills* that this or that should happen, this does not mean that nature imposes on us a *duty* to do it, for duties can only be imposed by practical reason, acting without any external constraint. On the contrary, nature does it herself, whether we are willing or not’.⁹⁷ So whilst the fiction of a practical belief allows moral agents to believe that they can be causally efficacious, in reality, the practical belief only installs a mirage of meaningful agency. This means that avoiding nihilism relies on moral agents being gullible enough to buy into the duplicity. However, given that Kant is concerned with rational moral agents, it is unclear why individuals would not see through the fiction of practical belief. Therefore, Kant’s appeal to the first-person perspective of practical reason does not demonstrate that intentional normative action is meaningful enough for moral agents not to succumb to a nihilist outlook.

One response to this argument is that, although Kant regarded social mechanisms as the ultimate cause of moral-political progress, he believed that intentional normative action could speed up the rate at which it occurs. If this were the case, then moral agents could derive meaning from their catalytic ability. To defend this position, Luigi Caranti points to the Eighth Proposition of *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim* and draws attention to the statement that intentional normative actions are said to be able to ‘hasten’ and ‘accelerate’ progress.⁹⁸ From these statements, Caranti concludes that ‘rational (i.e. freely chosen) plans can accelerate the coming of a ‘period’ that would

⁹⁷ Kant, I., 1795, 112 [8:365].

⁹⁸ Kant, I., 1784, 50 [8:27].

certainly be – no matter what – the final destination of human affairs’.⁹⁹ In this way, Caranti emphasises the *catalytic* agency implied by the deterministic account of causation. For even if the final goal of progressive development is predetermined it may still be the case that when moral agents intentionally act upon their practical belief they are able to speed up the realisation of the progressive change. This argument suggests that whilst catalytic agency downgrades the causal ability of moral agents, individuals can still derive meaning from their ability to affect the rate of progressive change.

However, this argument overlooks the fact that Kant advanced both a necessary account of causation (thus, a catalytic account of causal agency) and an unintended consequences of *non-normative* action account of causal agency. Agential nihilism is such a potent problem for the Kantian account of causation because it makes all intentional *normative* actions redundant. As Elisabeth Ellis put it, the Kantian account of causation ‘preclude[s] meaningful voluntary action’.¹⁰⁰ This is because if a moral agent attempted to establish closer ties or peace treaties with foreign states, their actions would not have the intended effects. Rather, perpetual peace comes from individuals and states pursuing their self-interest and arriving at this outcome as an unintentional result. Tatiana Patrone astutely defends this point. Patrone argues that since it is ‘our morally suspect actions that (at least up till now) have been contributing to the morally desirable end of progress, it is not clear how we are to aid nature (or providence) in bringing about perfectly just civil unions and a cosmopolitan state’. Patrone notes that moral agents can either ‘choose to strive toward a perfectly just union (i.e. adopt a moral motive), or we can strive for some end that goes contrary to promoting a just society (i.e. adopt a selfish motive...)’ and concludes that ‘it is not clear that adopting a moral motive would be a more efficient road toward such progress or that it would even aid our progress rather than hamper it’.¹⁰¹

⁹⁹ Caranti, L., 2014, 159.

¹⁰⁰ Ellis, E., 2005, 68.

¹⁰¹ Patrone, T., 2014, 140.

Because progress is caused by the unintended consequences of non-normative actions, the intentional normative actions of moral agents will not be able to affect even the rate of progressive change. Kant appeared to accept this point in 'On the Common Saying: 'This May Be True in Theory, But It Does Not Apply in Practice''. Here, Kant stated that '[w]e must look to nature alone, or rather to *providence*... for a successful outcome' because 'men... begin with the parts, and frequently get no further than them [because] the whole is too great for men to encompass; while they can reach it with their ideas, they cannot actively influence it, especially since their schemes conflict with one another to such an extent that they could hardly reach agreement of their own free volition'.¹⁰² Moral agents struggle to comprehend progress and even if they could their normative actions are unable to affect it. Since moral-political progress occurs as an unintended consequence of non-normative actions, it would be hard for moral agents not to feel as though they had been robbed of purpose and meaning.

To illustrate this point, consider Kant's example of the freedom of marriage.¹⁰³ On the one hand, each moral agent has the freedom to choose to marry whom they wish. On the other hand, it can be predicted that a certain percentage of the population will marry. So whilst individual action is free from a first-person perspective, the fact that such an outcome will occur can nonetheless be predicted from a third-person perspective. As Patrone puts it, 'people might have all sorts of reasons for getting married but regardless of these reasons and quite unrelated to them, a statistician might reach some general... conclusions concerning marriage trends in a given society'. However, whenever an individual moral agent decides to get married they 'presumably are not setting the end of achieving the results of these trends for themselves'.¹⁰⁴ Similarly, while moral agents act according to their own moral motivations the overarching course of progress unfolds independent of their intentional actions.

¹⁰² Kant, I., 1793, 90 [8:310].

¹⁰³ Kant, I., 1784, 41 [8:17].

¹⁰⁴ Patrone, T., 2014, 136.

Their choices contribute to a larger historical process but not in a way that grants their intentional normative actions meaningful causal agency over the direction and pace of progressive change. If we return to the example of the moral politician, it becomes clear that moral politicians neither create nor speed up progress through normative action but rather their actions align with the broader trajectory of historical necessity. Moral politicians do not alter history's trajectory or speed up the rate at which progress occurs but merely act in a way that is consistent with it. Since progress occurs independent of normative action, moral agents cannot influence the direction or speed of progressive change. As such, Kant ultimately fails to resolve the problem. Moral agents may be *motivated* to act by the practical belief in progress but, since their actions cannot *actually* affect it, they will ultimately be susceptible to the nihilism Kant sought to overcome.

Kant's causal mechanism demonstrates that the problem of agential nihilism arises for a necessary account of causation where history progresses according to an inevitable sequence of events and becomes particularly acute for a catalytic account of causal agency that takes progress to result from the unintended consequences of non-normative actions. Such an account of causation goes beyond constraining moral agents to a catalytic form of causal agency to render their normative actions entirely redundant. This suggests that attention should be turned to the plausibility of alternative accounts of causation that either grant a meaningful role to normative action or provide a more defensible account of how the unintended consequences of normative action result in moral-political progress.

The Historical Element – A Continuous Account of History

Kant's account of history presents moral-political progress as a continuous process in which mankind and society gradually move towards the ultimate end of perpetual peace and the realisation of the moral world. Instead of

conceptualising history as a series of stages that build cumulatively upon one another, Kant thought that history unfolds incrementally along one long continuum. Kant variously referred to 'steadily advancing but slow development', a 'regular progression', and a 'perfectly regular process' to emphasise the continuous nature of history.¹⁰⁵ Kant reiterated this continuous view when he wrote that 'the course of human affairs as a whole... develops gradually from worst to the better'.¹⁰⁶ In addition, Kant thought that movement along the continuum occurs without ruptures that mark radical normative shifts. When Kant described the process that brought about a 'transition from the savage life of the hunter to the former [pastoral] state, and from sporadic digging for roots or gathering of fruit to the second [agricultural] state', he claimed that those changes represent gradual transformations rather than sudden shifts.¹⁰⁷ Finally, Kant took periods of stagnation and regression to be minor interruptions that are subsumed within the broader trajectory of moral-political advance. As Kant wrote, 'the human race has made considerable moral progress, and short-term hindrances prove nothing to the contrary'.¹⁰⁸ So whilst events may not always reflect an immediate progressive development they either contribute to or are at least not an impediment to the long-run trajectory of progressive change. As a result, Kant claimed that 'I can predict from the aspects and signs of our times that the human race will... progressively improve without any more total reversals'.¹⁰⁹ Therefore, Kant's continuous account of history views progress as an uninterrupted process which may be uneven but nevertheless remains constantly directed towards the ultimate moral-political end.

This interpretation of Kant's account of history has been challenged. Opponents of the interpretation claim that a continuous account of history relies upon a notion of linear progress and argue that since Kant envisioned moments

¹⁰⁵ Kant, I., 1784, 41, 48.

¹⁰⁶ Kant, I., 1786(a), 234.

¹⁰⁷ Kant, I., 1786(a), 229.

¹⁰⁸ Kant, I., 1793, 88 [8:308].

¹⁰⁹ Kant, I., 1798(a), 184.

of stagnation and decline his account cannot be considered as linear. For example, Sofie Møller rejects the characterisation of Kant's account of history as a slow, inexorable, and incremental movement towards the highest good.¹¹⁰ Møller argues that Kant adopted a non-linear account of history because he took stagnations and regressions to be an unavoidable part of the historical record.¹¹¹ Møller claims that an 'understanding of progress as non-linear would still be compatible with the claim that decline is merely temporary'.¹¹² According to Møller, Kant adopted a non-linear account of history because he envisioned moments of stagnation and regression to be capable of interrupting but not derailing the progressive trajectory of history. In support of Møller's argument, Christoph Horn stresses that Kant does not 'defend a linear development in the course of history' because there are events which 'run counter to the overall historical process'.¹¹³ Horn claims that the vast majority of events will be at least indifferent with respect to progressive development. Therefore, Horn concludes that Kant cannot be considered a linear theorist since he did not maintain that every moment advances humanity towards the moral-political end. The logic employed by Møller and Horn is identical. Both claim that because Kant does not depict a moment-on-moment sequence of progressive development his account of history cannot be linear. As a result, it is said that Kant did not advance a continuous account of history.

The problem with this position is that it interprets the idea of linearity far too narrowly. For a conception of progress to be linear, it does not require that every moment is an all-things-considered improvement upon the last. This is far too rigid a definition of linearity to be intelligible. Accounts of history are not concerned with moment-by-moment fluctuations or the fine-grained detail of historical events. Rather, an account of history seeks to discern broad patterns, trajectories, or underlying principles that govern the long-term development of

¹¹⁰ Cf. Allen, A. (2016); Koselleck, R. (2002).

¹¹¹ Møller, S., 2021, 127.

¹¹² Møller, S., 2021, 129.

¹¹³ Horn, C., 2018, 60.

mankind and society. While individual events may appear chaotic, an account of history looks for coherence over time to show that, despite short-term disruptions, history unfolds in a certain way. Therefore, linearity must be considered in terms of the long-term development of moral practices and political institutions and taken to refer to the patterns, trajectories, or underlying principles that govern this process.¹¹⁴ In this vein, linearity is the idea that in the long run moral-political progress has a smooth trajectory towards realising its goal. The smooth trajectory means that progressive transitions do not come about by drastic collapses or overthrows of the status quo but are, over the long run, incremental advancements in a progressive direction.

When set out in this way, it is evident that the Kantian account of history is linear. Kant understands history in terms of one long continuum without clear-cut periods or breaks. For Kant, the movement through this continuum is an incremental process. Stagnations and regressions are treated as temporary interruptions that do not derail the overarching trajectory of progress. History is said to unfold along a single path whose direction, however uneven, is ultimately orientated towards the moral-political goal. As Kant insisted, moral-political progress 'may at times be *interrupted* but never *broken off*'.¹¹⁵ So what makes Kant's view linear is not the absence of setbacks but the idea that in the long run progress proceeds incrementally in a forward-moving direction. This linear structure is precisely what underpins Kant's continuous account of history. Kant does not consider history to emerge through ruptures and breaks nor does he frame history as episodic and fragmented. So unlike stadial accounts which divide history into discrete stages defined by qualitatively distinct modes of life, Kant envisioned a continuum of moral-political development over a long-run process without clear-cut distinctions between different periods of history.

¹¹⁴ Van Doren, C., 1967, linearity is a 'pattern of change that is... in the long run, irreversible in direction; and its direction is toward an ultimate increase or advance in value – toward that which is better... the inclusion of the words "in the long run" means that the change need not be continuously or unwaveringly in one direction', 6.

¹¹⁵ Kant, I., 1793, 88 [8:308].

However, when tested against historical reality, the plausibility of Kant's continuous account of history begins to unravel. Whilst the idea of steady, incremental moral-political advancement may provide an appealing narrative of human development it fails to account for the complex and discontinuous nature of progressive change. Progress often proceeds through ruptures and sudden shifts rather than smooth transitions. History is not gradually unfolding but is frequently marked by long periods in which social and political structures appear static only for latent contradictions and pressures to erupt in transformative moments of change. For example, the French Revolution was not a process of steady, incremental liberal reform but a radical upheaval that overturned centuries of monarchical and aristocratic political order. Similarly, the collapse of the Soviet Union did not result from an incremental liberalising trajectory but from the sudden political and economic crises that had been simmering under the surface for decades. Likewise, the Arab Spring represented a moment of transformative change that erupted out of long-standing grievances and deep-rooted discontents. So too the decolonisation of Africa and Asia unfolded not through gradual reform but through abrupt withdrawals, mass mobilisation, and anti-colonial revolutions that challenged the legitimacy of imperial rule. In such cases, progress does not result from gradual change but from sudden moments of upheaval that overhaul the moral-political status quo. Of course, in these cases, what appears to be static continuity until the point of rupture conceals long-run processes that build up over time. However, this is a very different conceptualisation of history from one that takes the progress itself to be incremental. In contrast to the continuous understanding of history, long-run tensions within the moral-political status quo build up and eventually result in a precipitous break with the moral-political status quo. In addition, the assumption that regressions are merely temporary interruptions underestimates the extent to which reactionary forces can entrench themselves and shape the direction of history over extended periods of time. For example, the rise of fascism in the interwar period, the endurance of Jim Crow segregation long after the abolition

of slavery, and the persistence of global inequality despite formal political decolonisation all reveal that progress is not only marked by temporary disruptions. Even if an overarching trajectory can be discerned retrospectively, the unpredictability and non-linear nature of these developments cast doubt on the coherence of a continuous account of history. Therefore, Kant's framework appears overly idealised and insensitive to the messiness, contingency, and ruptures that characterise historical reality.

Given these shortcomings, a plausible account of history must look beyond the Kantian model to accommodate non-linear, ruptured, and regressive dynamics. In particular, a more plausible model will acknowledge the role that radical transformations and prolonged periods of stagnation and regress play in the trajectory of moral-political progress.

Conclusion: Normative, Causal, and Historical Ideal Desiderata

This chapter critically examined Kant's conception of moral-political progress. Essentially, Kant's account attempted to rescue the Enlightenment vision of moral-political progress from Rousseau's critique. While Rousseau exposed the costs of civilisational development, Kant sought to preserve the hope for a better future by grounding it not in scientific or technological advancement but in a purposively structured history. The force of Kant's conception was to affirm that even in a world marked by self-interest and moral corruption, mankind and society will experience moral-political progress as an unintended consequence of self-interested action. Through the mechanisms of unsocial sociability and mutual antagonism, when individuals and states pursue their own ends they inadvertently bring about moral-political progress. In this way, Kant sought to reconcile Rousseau's critique with Enlightenment optimism. However, the problems with the normative-teleological, causal-agential, and historical elements of Kant's conception of moral-political progress show that he

ultimately fails to sustain that vision. The normative-teleological element grounded the normative aspect in rationality itself to underpin a universal and definitive vision of perpetual peace and the realisation of the moral world. Whilst this normative-teleological framework has the considerable virtue of projecting a clear, future-oriented vision of what progress ought to achieve, its plausibility falters on the grounds that it ignores the historically- and socially-situated nature of both rationality and moral-political reality. The causal-agential element retained a deterministic structure that takes progress to be an inevitable outcome of social processes. The catalytic account of causal agency had the space for meaningful action entirely eroded because progress is said to be the unintended consequence of self-interested actions that are oriented towards economic and political gain. As a result, a sense of nihilism would be expected in moral agents since moral-political progress does not result from actions aimed at improving the moral-political reality. The historical element adopted a continuous account of history. The problem with such an account is that it pays insufficient attention to the ruptures, regressions, and plateaus that punctuate the historical record. It mistakenly assumes that all interruptions are temporary and ultimately subsumed by a forward-moving trajectory. However, this overlooks the possibility that such disruptions are not merely aberrations but constitutive elements of progressive change. Taken together, these shortcomings reveal the limits of the Kantian model and call for an alternative conception of moral-political progress, one that historicises normativity, reconfigures causal agency to foreground contingency and intentional action, and embraces a non-linear account of historical development.

In seeking such an account, the *geistesgeschichte* analysis turns to G. W. F. Hegel, whose approach to theorising about progress is indebted to, but also fundamentally critical of, Kant's moral-political project. Hegel sought to retain Kant's insight that reason and freedom must be central to historical development but rejected its abstract, ahistorical, and trans-contextual grounding. Instead,

Hegel offered a historicised conception of moral-political progress that located the normative-teleological element within the immanent logic of ethical life. His causal-agential framework drew from Kant the idea that the outcome does not correspond to the intentions of moral agents but foregrounded contingency and the importance of intentional normative action. Hegel rejected the Kantian view of history and offered an account in which ruptures and non-temporary periods of stagnation or regress are constitutive features of historical progress. Therefore, the Hegelian conception of moral-political progress represents a fruitful example for the *geistesgeschichte* analysis to consider.

Chapter Three: The Hegelian Conception of Progress

The conception of progress articulated by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel contains a complex combination of elements from the conceptual taxonomy. However, there are two opposing interpretations of Hegel's political philosophy and the conceptual conclusions depend upon the interpretation adopted. On the one hand, there is the ontological interpretation.¹ The ontological interpretation claims that normativity is rooted in ontology and that the normative telos is self-determining in that it necessitates its own actualisation. The normative telos is understood to result from a quasi-divine cosmic entity whose purpose is the realisation of freedom in the real world. History is taken to be the dialectical process of this self-actualisation. On the other hand, there is the self-consciousness interpretation.² The self-consciousness interpretation claims that normativity is rooted in the self-conscious reflection upon our status as free human beings. The end of progress is the realisation that we are all free human beings and the actualisation of that freedom through shared institutions. History is taken to be the dialectical process through which consciousness is liberated and freedom is institutionalised. For the purpose of drawing conceptual conclusions for a thick conception of moral-political progress, I analyse the self-consciousness interpretation of Hegel's political philosophy. Inevitably, the charge could be levelled that in opting to draw from this interpretation the analysis is more eisegesis than exegesis; that without providing an interpretive justification for why the self-consciousness interpretation should be preferred I am reading into Hegel what I want to read out of him. However, the decision to endorse the self-consciousness interpretation is not an arbitrary choice of eisegetical self-interest. I demonstrate that the self-consciousness interpretation is defensible in its own

¹ For proponents of the ontological interpretation (also referred to as the neo-Aristotelian or rationalist interpretation), see: Seddone, G. (2023); Alznauer, M. (2021, 2016); Pinkard, T. (2018); Stern, R. (2017); McDowell J. (2017); Taylor, C. (2015, 2008); Beiser, F. (2005).

² For proponents of the self-consciousness interpretation (also referred to as the neo-Kantian or subjectivist interpretation), see: Bourke, R. (2023, 2022); Lumsden, S. (2021, 2017); Miettinen, R. (2020); Väyrynen, K. (2018); Honneth, A. (2017); Menke, C. (2017); Brandom R. B. (2009); Pippin, R. (2008(a), 2008(b)).

right and evaluate whether its conceptual elements can be retained as part of the reappraised conception of moral-political progress.

In doing so, I show how Hegel was influenced by Kant and also how Hegel's conception of progress sought to overcome the deficiencies of the Kantian approach. In one respect, Hegel retained Kant's insight that reason and freedom are central to historical development. However, Hegel rejected the abstract, ahistorical, and trans-contextual structure.³ Instead, Hegel embedded the normative telos within historical forms of life and took progress to be the retrospective recognition of how freedom has actualised through institutions. On this view, the account of normative teleology is context-sensitive and only fully intelligible in hindsight. In another respect, Hegel followed Kant in recognising that progressive change does not correspond to the intentions of moral agents. However, Hegel explained the discordance between intention and outcome by emphasising contingency, creative agency, and the unintended consequences of normative actions. In a final respect, Hegel starkly deviated from Kant by rejecting the naïve optimism of the continuous account of history. Instead, Hegel advanced an epochal account that was marked by rupture, dialectical transitions, and the possibility of intra-epochal regression. As such, I argue that according to the Hegelian conception of progress: (a) the normative telos refers to an idea of freedom that is self-consciously realised and actualised through institutions shaped by contextual particularities (the account is retrospective because the particular and provisional goals that mark advances in our self-conscious understanding of freedom can only be fully understood in hindsight); (b) a direct and contingent account of causation where world-historical agents have a creative agency to bring about progress through the unintended consequences of their normative actions (agents of progress attempt to cause a desirable change but their actions have other progressive consequences); (c) an epochal account of history in which each parochial and incoherent conception of freedom collapses

³ Inwood, M. J., 1992, 191.

under the weight of its own contradictions until a fully liberated understanding of freedom has emerged (even after the full liberation of self-consciousness has occurred, its practical actualisation can be contested and reversed).

This chapter proceeds by analysing the conceptual elements of the Hegelian conception of progress. I begin with the normative-teleological element and analyse how it takes freedom to be a contextually embedded and socially actualised ideal. I examine whether this approach avoids cultural relativism and Eurocentrism and question whether a provisional yet definitive account of teleology can guide future progress. I also reflect on the limitations of an account that can only interpret the normative telos in hindsight. I then turn to the causal-agential element and analyse Hegel's account of direct and contingent causation where progress is caused by the unintended consequences that result from the normative actions of world-historical individuals. Finally, I analyse the historical element and evaluate the epochal account's emphasis on ruptured transition, its ability to reflect on the suffering involved in those ruptures, and its capacity to accommodate intra- but not inter-epochal regress. Taken together, I reflect on which aspects of Hegel's account remain plausible and can form part of a robust and defensible conception of moral-political progress.

The Normative-Teleological Element – Embedded, Particular, Provisional

For Hegel, as with Kant, freedom is central to the account of normative teleology. According to Hegel, the realisation of freedom is the goal of progress. In *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, Hegel set out three forms of freedom; personal, moral, and, social.⁴

Hegel's idea of *personal freedom* (abstract right) is akin to negative freedom. According to Hegel, personal freedom is rooted in individual will and

⁴ Hegel, G. W. F., 1821, Abstract Right, §34-53; Morality, §105-141; Ethical Life, §142-360.

understood as the absence of constraint. Hegel takes personal freedom to refer to individuals as bearers of rights who are free to pursue their own ends as long as they do not infringe on the rights of others.⁵

Hegel's idea of *moral freedom* is akin to the Kantian notion of autonomy. Hegel refers to this as *Moralität* and takes it to relate to moral subjectivity and the internal disposition to act according to what is right.⁶ For Hegel, moral freedom is grounded in subjective judgement and understood as the pursuit of personal moral good, expressed through the agent's intention, conscience, sense of responsibility, and guided by an inner conviction of the good.⁷

Hegel found the first and second conceptions of freedom to be insufficient on the grounds that personal freedom is too abstract and moral freedom risks becoming disconnected from the normative commitments that give life meaning. Instead, Hegel articulated a third conception of freedom.⁸ Hegel argued that *social freedom* (or *concrete freedom*) is the experience of autonomy within a just social order; it is where individuals not only act freely but also recognise themselves and become recognised by others as free. According to Hegel, social freedom becomes possible only when individuals recognise that their freedom is actualised through mutual recognition of shared normative commitments and through collective participation in the institutions of the state; i.e., the family, civil society, and the political state.^{9,10} This is what Hegel referred to as ethical life

⁵ Hegel, G. W. F., 1821, 69 [§36].

⁶ Inwood, M. J., 1992, defines *Moralität* as 'individual morality arrived at by one's own reason, conscience or feelings' and claims that it 'stresses the inner will and intention of the agent, in contrast to his outer conduct and its consequences', 92, 192.

⁷ Hegel, G. W. F., 1821, 135 [§106].

⁸ Honneth, A., 2017, from 'the defects of these two concepts of freedom, Hegel developed a synthetic view, according to which the complete idea of individual freedom would only be achieved if the self-positing resolutions of the will can be thought of as furthered or "willed" in, or even by, reality', 184-185.

⁹ Hegel, G. W. F., 1821, 282 [§260].

¹⁰ Hegel, G. W. F., 1821, distinguished between the 'state' (*der Staat*) and the 'political state' (*der politische Staat*). The former is defined as an ethical community in the broadest sense and includes the family, civil society, and the political state. The latter, the 'political state proper', is defined more narrowly and refers to the institutions of government such as the monarchy, the executive, and the legislature, 288 [§267].

(*Sittlichkeit*).¹¹² For Hegel, ethical life is the institutional and normative framework that makes social freedom possible. As Hegel explained, ethical life creates the conditions for social freedom because the '*right of individuals to their subjective determination to freedom is fulfilled in so far as they belong to ethical actuality; for their certainty of their own freedom has its truth in such objectivity, and it is in the ethical realm that they actually possess their own essence and their inner universality*'.¹³ As a consequence, social freedom comes to have an objective side and a subjective side. The objective side relates to the institutions that provide the structures within which freedom can be actualised. The subjective side refers to the individual's recognition and endorsement of the ethical code and institutions that govern social life. When both dimensions of social freedom are aligned, institutions are no longer experienced by an individual as external constraints but as the realised expression of their will. Hegel thought that it was a consequence of ethical life that the subjective and objective become one and the same, one neither collapsing into nor taking over the other. Hegel stated that 'in ethical life as a whole, both objective and subjective moments are present, but these are merely its forms. Its substance is the good, that is, the fulfilment of the objective [united] with subjectivity'.¹⁴ Therefore, for Hegel, 'the identity – which is accordingly concrete – of the good and the subjective will, the truth of them both, is *ethical life*'.¹⁵ On this account, ethical life ensures that subjectivity remains intact but is united with the universal. When this occurs, individuals rightly come to see the institutions of the state as a necessary condition of their freedom, integrate themselves into them, and affirm the shared ethical norms that they

¹¹ Hegel, G. W. F., 1821, 'Ethical life is the *Idea of freedom* as the living good which has its knowledge and volition in self-consciousness, and its actuality through self-conscious action... Ethical life is accordingly the *concept of freedom which has become the existing world and the nature of self-consciousness*', 189 [§142].

¹² Inwood, M. J., 1992, defines *Sittlichkeit* as 'the ethical norms embodied in the customs and institutions of one's society' and details the etymology of the term. According to Inwood, '*Sittlichkeit*, usually translated in Hegel's works as 'ethical life', but occasionally as '(social or customary) morality', etc., derives from *Sitte*, the native German for 'custom', a mode of conflict habitually practiced by a social group such as a nation, a class, or a family, and regarded as a norm of decent behaviour', 91-92.

¹³ Hegel, G. W. F., 1821, 196 [§153].

¹⁴ Hegel, G. W. F., 1821, 189 [§144].

¹⁵ Hegel, G. W. F., 1821, 185 [§141].

sustain.¹⁶ As a result, Hegel argued that normative commitments ‘are not something *alien* to the subject’ but are authentically willed by the subject themselves because ‘the subject bears *spiritual witness* to them as to its *own essence*, in which it has its self-awareness and lives as in its element which is not distinct from itself – a relationship which is immediate and closer to identity than even [a relationship of] *faith* or *trust*’.¹⁷ Social freedom does not require the subordination of individual subjectivity to external normative commitments but the cultivation of a reality in which those normative commitments are experienced as the subject’s own. In this way, Hegel demonstrated that freedom lies not in detachment from social norms but in recognising oneself in them.

With this in mind, the justification for the self-consciousness interpretation of Hegel’s political philosophy becomes clear. Social freedom is not just the actualisation of freedom but the conscious realisation that our freedom can be actualised through the institutions of the state. In other words, freedom is not just liberation but the liberation of our consciousness to comprehend freedom. As Hegel wrote, ethical life is where ‘my substantial and particular interest is preserved and contained in the interest and end of an other... this other immediately ceases to be an other for me, and in my *consciousness* of this, I am free’.¹⁸ Hegel referred to the development of self-consciousness as Spirit (*Geist*) and makes clear that ‘the essence of Spirit is freedom [that is, in its self-determination]’.¹⁹ The importance of the liberation of self-consciousness is reiterated in Hegel’s statement that ‘*world history* – takes place in the realm of Spirit’ and that ‘Spirit, and the process of its development, [are] the substance of history’.²⁰ So it is not only the actualisation of freedom but the development of our conscious appreciation of freedom that is relevant. Hegel made clear that ‘[w]orld history... presents the development of consciousness, the development

¹⁶ Miettinen, R., 2020, 362-363.

¹⁷ Hegel, G. W. F., 1821, 191 [§147].

¹⁸ Hegel, G. W. F., 1821, 288 [§268] [emphasis added].

¹⁹ Hegel, G. W. F., 1840, 20.

²⁰ Hegel, G. W. F., 1840, 19.

of Spirit's consciousness of its freedom, and the actualisation that is produced by that consciousness'.²¹ As history progresses, the liberation of consciousness continues until it arrives at the realisation that all ought to be free and that freedom is actualised through shared institutions.

This makes clear that Hegel took freedom not to be a matter of external conditions or individual choice but the development of collective self-consciousness throughout history. According to Hegel, freedom emerges not when the right institutions are in place but when individuals self-consciously come to understand those institutions as the rational expression of their will. This means that freedom depends on being embedded within a historical socio-cultural context in which an individual can come to recognise themselves in the values, moral principles, and political norms that affect collective life. For Hegel, this is not automatic but requires a process of moral education (*Bildung*). Through this process, individuals internalise the normative commitments of ethical life and consciously appreciate that their freedom is realised through the shared ethical code and their common institutions. Hegel stated that '[e]ducation is the art of making human beings ethical: it considers them as natural beings and shows them how they can be reborn, and how their original nature can be transformed into a second, spiritual nature so that this spirituality becomes *habitual* to them'.²² Hegel took moral education to be the process of transforming an individual's instinctive nature into a 'second, spiritual nature' that comes to identity with the ethical code of their context. This makes identification with the ethical code 'habitual' because they become inclined to act in accordance with it and approach the institutions that embody it as a reflection of their freedom. As Hegel put it, '[i]n habit, the opposition between the natural and the subjective will disappears, and the resistance of the subject is broken'.²³

²¹ Hegel, G. W. F., 1840, 67.

²² Hegel, G. W. F., 1821, 195 [§151].

²³ Hegel, G. W. F., 1821, 195 [§151].

Hegel referred to the moment when individuals gain the habitual second nature as ethical substantiality. When this occurs, Hegel maintained that 'the self-will of the individual and his own conscience in its attempt to exist for itself and in opposition to the ethical substantiality, have disappeared, for the ethical character knows that the end which moves it is the universal which, though itself unmoved, has developed through its determinations into actual rationality, and it recognises that its own dignity and the whole continued existence of its particular ends are based upon and actualised within this universal'.²⁴ Here Hegel described the moment when the will of an individual and their self-conscious understanding of themselves is reconciled with the ethical code. According to Hegel, in doing so, the desire for the individual to assert themselves against the ethical code disappears. Instead, individuals consciously come to recognise that their goals are reflected in and realised through the universal ethical order. As a result, the individual no longer sees their will as separate from the common good but as in alignment with it. Individuals acknowledge that the universal remains unmoved but gain awareness of the fact that their freedom and purpose are actualised within the ethical code that governs them.

This explains why Hegel took the state to be the context in which freedom occurred. Hegel wrote that '[t]his essential being is itself the union of two wills: the subjective will and the rational will. This is an ethical totality, the *state*'.²⁵ According to Hegel, the state includes the family, civil society, and the political state. Hegel thought that the alignment of the subjective and the universal occurs in these institutions because they are the place where moral education takes place and the habitual nature of individuals is developed. Hegel stated that '*Bildung*... can emerge only in a state' so it is in the state where individuals cultivate 'the habit of acting in accord with the universal will'.²⁶ Crucially, Hegel made clear that when the alignment of the subjective and the universal occurs the state does

²⁴ Hegel, G. W. F., 1821, 195-196 [§152].

²⁵ Hegel, G. W. F., 1840, 41.

²⁶ Hegel, G. W. F., 1850, 76; cited in Lumsden, S., 2021, 452.

not erase subjectivity and impose the universal on the individual. On the contrary, the state functions as a unified ethical whole which is shaped by the individual wills that come into alignment. Hegel wrote, 'the state has a soul which animates it, and this animating soul is subjectivity, which creates distinctions on the one hand but preserves their unity on the other'.²⁷ According to Hegel, the subjective will is preserved even as it integrates with the universal will. As Hegel put it, the state 'allows the principle of subjectivity to attain fulfilment... while at the same time *bringing it back to substantial unity* and so preserving this unity in the principle of subjectivity itself'.²⁸

This demonstrates how, according to Hegel, values, moral principles, and political norms are not abstract ideals imposed from outside history but the expression of a society's self-understanding that has emerged from the particular religious, social, and cultural conditions that shape their way of life. As the self-conscious appreciation of freedom develops it does so through these contextual particularities. This gives rise to different forms of ethical life. So, according to Hegel, normative commitments gain their authority not from being timeless or context-independent but from being the rational expression of a contextually formed ethical code and from being rationally embraced. In addition, Hegel's account of normativity takes the institutions in which social freedom is actualised to be shaped by the particularities of the context. On Hegel's account, individuals come to understand and actualise their freedom through these institutions and, as a result, they internalise the values, moral principles, and political norms that have been shaped by contextual particularities. Therefore, since institutions reflect the historical and cultural particularities of a society, the normative commitments individuals come to adopt are themselves context-dependent.

²⁷ Hegel, G. W. F., 1821, 302-303 [§270].

²⁸ Hegel, G. W. F., 1821, 282 [§260].

The criticism levelled against such an account of normativity is that it collapses into a form of cultural relativism.²⁹ The criticism alleges that since the values, moral principles, and political norms are a product of their context they do not have objective authority. As a result, it is alleged that the normative account is nothing more than a statement of the preferences of the context in question. However, the account of normativity attains authority on the grounds that previous versions proved to be insufficient and collapsed under the weight of their parochialisms and contradictions. Of course, the justification for the contemporary account of normativity is only ever provisional. Whilst our account of normativity resolved the deficiencies of prior accounts, it may contain new parochialisms and contradictions that have yet not been seen. Nevertheless, the fact that the normative account is an improvement upon the last is grounds for justification. Therefore, the account of normativity gains an independent authority because it is the result of a process of development and that it is currently the most successful account of normativity at realising an inclusive vision of freedom.

Although the Hegelian account of normativity avoids the charge of cultural relativism, it faces two problems.

The first problem is that the account of normativity appears to be immune to critique. Since Hegel takes all normative commitments to be generated within a particular form of ethical life, it appears as though there is no standpoint outside of that form of ethical life from which it can be evaluated. As such, it seems as though it would not be possible to subject a set of values, moral principles, and political norms to an external form of critique. Any form of external critique would rely on a different set of historically embedded particularities and, therefore, would be no more objective or independent than any other. However, although Hegel rejected the possibility of external

²⁹ Pippin, R. B., 2008(b), addresses the concern that Hegel's account of normativity collapses into individual subject relativism. 22-23.

transhistorical standard, he did not reject the idea of a standard *tout court*. For Hegel, the concept of freedom itself functions as a normative criterion. A normative account can be judged according to the extent to which it fosters the mutual recognition and communal participation necessary to enable and sustain the actualisation of freedom. On this view, critique emerges from within the logic of ethical life by holding a form of life up to the standard of what it aspires to be; namely, a rational, inclusive, and freedom-actualising ethical order.

In this case, the problem becomes that whenever a normative account is able to actualise freedom it appears as though there are no grounds upon which it can be critiqued. For if a normative account is to enable the actualisation of freedom, it must have resolved parochiality (i.e., become inclusive) and removed internal contradictions (i.e., become internally coherent). However, since an immanent form of critique depends upon identifying tensions and inconsistencies that prevent a normative system from actualising freedom, an inclusive and coherent account would appear immune to this form of critique. Of course, the obvious response to this concern would be to question whether it is, in fact, problematic that an inclusive and coherent account of normativity is immune to critique. It seems as though the purpose of ethical life in Hegel's framework is to arrive at a normative account that has overcome parochial limitations and resolved internal inconsistencies in order to actualise freedom. If a set of values, moral principles, and political norms is inclusive and if it is free from internal contradictions, then it is not clear what kind of critique could or should be levelled against it. On this view, critique is not a perennial requirement but a provisional tool used to transform flawed normative accounts into inclusive and coherent ones capable of actualising freedom. Therefore, the fact that a normative system becomes resistant to critique once it has achieved inclusivity and coherence is not a problem but a sign of its success.

The problem with this response is that inclusive and coherent accounts of normativity may still be problematic. For example, Wayne Martin presents the case of an anorexic community.³⁰ In this community, the account of normativity is inclusive and coherent but nevertheless appears problematic. However, the issue is that on the Hegelian account of normativity there are no grounds upon which such a claim can be based. This suggests that immanent critique insufficiently safeguards against harmful or self-destructive forms of life and that the Hegelian account may lack the resources to identify and resist such perverse but freedom-actualising forms of ethical life. So it remains to be seen how an embedded account of normativity can overcome the concern that it lacks a critical ability to challenge accounts of normativity beyond an assessment of its inclusivity and internal coherence.

The second problem is that the Hegelian account of normativity appears to be Eurocentric. Although Hegel denied that there is an ahistorical standard by which normative accounts can be judged he nevertheless identified the realisation of social freedom with the family structure, form of civil society, and political apparatus that emerged in the 'Germanic World'.³¹ As such, Hegel elevated the European trajectory of historical development as the telos of moral-political development. This creates a hierarchical model of world history in which non-European societies and their ways of life are situated as early, 'immature' forms. Implicitly, this casts non-European societies and their forms of ethical life as deficient, incomplete, or irrational. In doing so, Hegel not only universalised a particular form of ethical life but also delegitimised alternative forms that do not conform to the European archetype. This has two implications. The first implication is that it excludes the possibility that non-European societies might develop equally valid or even superior forms of ethical life that could

³⁰ Martin, W., 2010, 290; cited in Stern, R., 2017, 105.

³¹ Hegel, G. W. F., 1857, uses 'Germanic World' to refer to the civilisation sphere of Western Christendom that emerged after the fall of the Roman Empire, encompassing primarily the Germanic peoples of central and northern Europe and the societies shaped by Protestant Christianity following the Reformation, 311-410.

realise and actualise freedom in ways that do not resemble the European model. The second implication is that it positions Europe as the normative centre of world history such that other contexts are required to approximate or assimilate to in order to be considered rational and actualise freedom. Therefore, the Hegelian framework reproduced a Eurocentric developmental logic that restricts the scope of legitimate normative life to one particular path. This not only undermines the purported pluralism of ethical life but reveals a tension between Hegel's commitment to embedded normativity and the universalist ambitions of his approach.

As such, the Hegelian account of normativity suggests how a set of values, moral principles, and political norms can be sensitive to contextual particularities. However, whilst it avoids the charge of cultural relativism by grounding normative authority in the historically developed ethical life, it appears to lack the resources for meaningful critique and remains problematically Eurocentric. Therefore, a plausible and viable account of normativity must be historically and culturally sensitive without collapsing into cultural relativism whilst remaining open to critical reflection and the possibility of a plurality of normative forms that extend beyond the European archetype.

This also makes clear how Hegel advanced an account of teleology that bridges the universal and the particular. According to Hegel, the goal for all people is to move from a reality where only one is free to one where all are free. As Hegel wrote, '[w]orld history begins with its universal goal: the fulfilment of the concept of Spirit – still only *implicit*, i.e. as its nature. The goal is the inner, indeed the innermost, unconscious drive; and the entire business of world history... is bringing it to consciousness'.³² However, this goal is more than just bringing about its conscious realisation; it is also its actualisation in practice. Because of this, Hegel stated that 'world history... [is] concerned with

³² Hegel, G. W. F., 1840, 28.

“individuals” that are nations, with wholes that are states’.³³ This is because the conscious realisation of our freedom and its actualisation has to be mediated through the institutions of the state. Therefore, the telos is particular because the normative telos details how to actualise the desired moral-political reality and it will only apply to the context in question. This aspect of the account remains tenable as it reflects the reality that while the aspiration to a certain normative goal may be shared across humanity its expression and actualisation must be shaped by the historical, cultural, and institutional context in which it unfolds. It is precisely this feature of Hegel’s account of teleology that makes it both normatively robust and flexible insofar as it allows for a common moral-political goal without collapsing into abstraction or ahistoricism. By grounding the realisation of freedom in particular forms of ethical life, Hegel’s account recognises that progress must take hold in the lived realities of communities. This makes it a powerful model for thinking about how universal goals can be actualised within diverse moral and political contexts.

In addition, Hegel advanced a provisional account of teleology. For an account of teleology to be provisional there must be a series of teloi such that once a telos is realised a subsequent telos appears and progress can continue towards it. Inevitably, on a provisional account of teleology, the sequence of teloi may either end with a definitive telos or continue *ad infinitum*. The Hegelian account of teleology is of the first kind. Consider Hegel’s statement that the ‘East knew (and knows) only that *One* person is free; the Greek and Roman world knew that *Some* are free; the Germanic world of Europe knows that *All* are free’.³⁴ In contexts where the self-conscious understanding of freedom is limited to the recognition that only one is free and where institutions allow a single figure of authority to operate without restriction, the internal contradictions of such a regime inevitably lead to its breakdown, creating the conditions for a new, more inclusive understanding of freedom to emerge. Once that new understanding of

³³ Hegel, G. W. F., 1840, 12.

³⁴ Hegel, G. W. F., 1840, 93; cf. 1840, 377.

freedom has emerged, a further, even more expansive understanding of freedom becomes possible. And so on, until the full liberation of self-consciousness has occurred and a completely inclusive understanding of freedom has been realised. This interpretation may be challenged on the grounds that there is no distinction between it and the definitive account of the Enlightenment conception of progress. However, on the Enlightenment account, there is a single definitive telos that details the perfection of mankind and society. The movement towards that telos takes place through a series of stages each of which is orientated towards the one end. In contrast, on the Hegelian account, the final telos relates to the full self-conscious realisation of freedom but the sequence of provisional teloi that lead up to it relate to distinct understandings of freedom that develop over time. As such, the telos itself changes once a prior goal has been achieved. This ensures that the applicable telos is not a distant ideal but an achievable goal that is germane to the context in question. In addition, it preserves a sense of ongoing progress as each realised telos leads to a new goal that is better suited to the circumstances of the society at that particular time. This demonstrates the virtues of a provisional account of teleology. In contrast to the definitive account, mankind can retain hope for a better future because even though a telos has been realised there will be a subsequent telos towards which moral-political progress can aim. The dynamic nature of society is respected because as society changes to reach a telos, a subsequent telos emerges that is sensitive to the particularities of that context. Similarly, epistemic humanity is preserved because the account of teleology does not claim that the current telos is valid for all time.

However, the challenges put to a definitive account of teleology re-emerge for a provisional account that ends in a definitive telos. Since the sequence of teloi concludes with a telos that reflects the realisation and actualisation that all are free, it represents a definitive end to progressive development.³⁵ The problem with the provisional yet definitive account of teleology is that it runs the risk of

³⁵ The definitive aspect of the account is what motivated the 'end of history' interpretation advanced by Alexandre Kojève (1980) and developed by Francis Fukuyama (1992).

undermining the virtues of the provisional account insofar as future progress is prevented, the changing nature of society is disregarded, and the fact that future conditions may call for new goals is ignored. Therefore, while Hegel's account offers a compelling framework, a more plausible account would be provisional and open-ended. In this way, the account would remain responsive to evolving conditions and leave open the possibility of further transformation.

Therefore, Hegel's account of normative teleology offers a compelling framework for understanding the relationship between values, moral principles, political norms and their historical context. The teleological account shows how goals appropriate for all of humanity can have particular resonance when they are actualised in practice and provides the blueprint for a dynamic approach to moral-political progress. However, the account is not without its limitations. The normative account lacks critical ability and retains a Eurocentric vision of the moral-political goal. The teleological account struggles to fully realise the virtues of an open-ended conception of progress.

Yet, perhaps the deepest limitation of Hegel's account is that, for all its explanatory richness, it is essentially retrospective. Hegel explained how normative commitments emerge from the historical development of ethical life, but he did so through a mode of philosophical understanding that comes after the fact. For Hegel, moral-political progress is something that is recognised *post-hoc* rather than conceptualised *ex-ante*. In this sense, philosophy is not a tool for prescribing the future but for understanding the changes that have occurred in the past. As Hegel wrote in the Preface to *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, 'philosophy... always comes too late to perform this function. As the *thought* of the world, it appears only at a time when actuality has gone through its formative process and attained its complete state'.³⁶ However, this does not mean that moral and political transformations cannot occur. Hegel made clear that dramatic

³⁶ Hegel, G. W. F., 1820 in 1821, 23.

instances of progressive change can and do take place. What Hegel emphasised is that the changes that occur can only be fully comprehended in retrospect. Hegel thought that it was not the job of philosophy to change the world but to understand the changes that have happened. This is what Hegel implied when he referenced the goddess of wisdom in the statement that ‘the owl of Minerva begins its flight only with the onset of dusk’.³⁷ For Hegel, philosophy is not required for progressive change but a *post-hoc* activity that attempts to understand what has unfolded. In this sense, although Hegel offers a powerful account of how freedom is actualised and recognised through the development of ethical life it comes at the cost of philosophical foresight. The problem with this is that if philosophical understanding is confined to retrospective reconstruction it cannot adequately engage with normative claims and possibilities that arise in the present. In contrast, a forward-looking orientation would enable critical assessment of proposed visions of the future as they are being articulated. Without this anticipatory function, philosophical engagement is unable to constructively participate in the unfolding moral-political change.

Therefore, to retain what is most powerful in Hegel’s conception whilst overcoming its most significant limitations, the account of normative teleology ought to preserve the historical and contextual sensitivity of Hegel’s view whilst allowing ongoing critical reflection, the consideration of non-European forms of life, the possibility of continual transformation, and the ability to engage with the forward-looking goal that can orientate and motivate moral-political change.

The Causal-Agential Element: Direct, Contingent, Unintended Consequences, and World-Historical Individuals

Hegel advanced a direct and contingent account of causation. The realisation and actualisation of a higher form of freedom is not a predetermined

³⁷ Hegel, G. W. F., 1820 in 1821, 23.

inevitability but contingent upon individuals bringing it about. However, Hegel's statement that '[j]ust as the germ of the plant carries within itself the entire nature of the tree, even the taste and shape of its fruit, so the first traces of Spirit virtually contain all history' is taken to contest this interpretation and to support the view that the entire course of progressive development is a predetermined inevitability.³⁸ That reading misinterprets Hegel's position. It is true that within the conception of freedom, Hegel observes a logic that leads from the assumption that only one is free to the realisation that all humans ought to be free. It is in this sense that the germ of the concept carries within itself the entire nature of its realisation. But this does not mean that there is a predetermined path that will lead to the realisation and actualisation of freedom. There is significant scope for contingency regarding how progress is brought about. The agents of progress could have acted otherwise and the implications of their actions could have been different such that the realisation and actualisation of freedom could have been something other than what it turned out to be. For Hegel, there is the appearance of necessity because history can only be understood retroactively. To understand the history of progressive development we must know the result in order to observe the sequence of causes that brought it about. As such, the record of history gives its causes the appearance of necessity. Nevertheless, the appearance of necessity does not negate the contingency of the cause.

As a result of the contingent account of causation, Hegel retained a creative account of causal agency. On this account, the course of progressive development is not pre-set and world-historical individuals are able to forge the path of progress through their actions.

In addition, Hegel thought that the unintended consequences of the actions of world-historical individuals had progressive effects. In this regard, Hegel advanced a Cunning of Reason account of causation.³⁹ In particular, Hegel

³⁸ Hegel, G. W. F., 1840, 21.

³⁹ Hegel, G. W. F., 1840, 35.

adopted an unintended consequences of *normative* action account of causal agency. For example, having admired Napoleon as he entered Jena in 1806, Hegel wrote, 'I saw the Emperor – this world-soul – riding out of the city on reconnaissance. It is indeed a wonderful sensation to see such an individual, who, concentrated here at a single point, astride a horse, reaches out over the world and masters it'.⁴⁰ For Hegel, Napoleon was striding out into the world and seeking to change the moral-political order. Unlike the Kantian account of causation where agents of progress pursue their own self-interest and bring about progressive change as an unintentional result, the Hegelian account of causation maintained that world-historical individuals sense that there is a contradiction in the present social order and inaugurate a transition to a preferable state of affairs.⁴¹ For Hegel, world-historical individuals have a sense that the current state of affairs is insufficient and attempt to usher in a transition to a new moral-political reality. Crucially, this sense gave them a practical grasp of what reason requires and not a philosophical understanding of the necessity of the new form of social order. Hegel emphasised that the 'heroic individuals, in fulfilling these aims of theirs... were practical and political men. Yet at the same time they were thoughtful men, with insight into what we needed and what was timely: their insight was the very truth of their time and their world – the next species... was already there in the inner course'. The unique insight of world-historical individuals meant that the new form of social order was 'theirs to know... the necessary next stage of their world – to make this their aim and to put their energy into it. The world-historical men, the heroes of an era, are therefore to be recognised as the insightful ones; their deeds and their worlds are the best of their time'.⁴² However, because world-historical individuals have only a practical sense of necessity, the progressive outcome can be other from what they intended. Their actions can have unintended consequences and the fact that they possess a practical sense of what reason requires does not enable them to

⁴⁰ Hegel, G. W. F., 13th October 1806, 114.

⁴¹ Hegel, G. W. F., 1840, 32-33

⁴² Hegel, G. W. F., 1840, 33.

perceive what the actual consequences of their actions will be.⁴³ Therefore, although Hegel shared with Kant the idea that progressive change is the result of unintended consequences, Hegel's account differs insofar as for him the progressive change is the result of world-historical individuals precipitating the collapse of the present social order and bringing about a transition to new moral-political reality. So when Hegel wrote that 'in world history the outcome of human actions is something other than what the agents aim at and actually achieve, something other than what they immediately know and will. They fulfil their own interests, but something further is thereby brought into being, something which is inwardly involved in what they do but which was not in their consciousness of part of their intention', he highlighted that although the normative action of world-historical individuals is what ushers in a new moral-political reality, the course of progressive development does not match the intentions of the world-historical individual.⁴⁴ Rather, the outcome of progressive development turns out to be something other than what the agent of progress intended.

It has been argued that there is an incoherence in Hegel's causal mechanism. Shlomo Avineri claims that there are inconsistencies regarding Hegel's account of world-historical individuals and their intention to bring about progressive change. According to Avineri, '[h]istory is the unfolding drama of man's coming into himself, and in this drama Hegel allots a central role to the works of 'great men'; but these appear as mere agents of a higher purpose which, unbeknownst to themselves, moves them towards goals of which they are rarely fully cognisant'. Because of this, Avineri claims that world-historical individuals 'occupy an ambivalent place in his scheme of history' because '[o]n the one hand, the world-historical individual has a central place in historical development as an agent of change, innovation and upheaval... [but] on the other, he is a mere instrument in the hands of superior forces and his own views or ideas are of little

⁴³ Hegel, G. W. F., 1820, 375.

⁴⁴ Hegel, G. W. F., 1840, 30.

importance'.⁴⁵ To justify this claim, Avineri points to three conflicting presentations of the agency of world-historical individuals and their causal ability. First, Avineri points to the statement that 'these men seem to create from within themselves, and their actions have produced a set of conditions and worldly relations which seem to be only *their* interest, and *their* work'.⁴⁶ Second, Avineri points to Hegel's claim that for Caesar it was 'not only the achievement of his personal victory; it was also an instinct that fulfilled what the time intrinsically required'.⁴⁷ Third, Avineri points to Hegel's assertion that the 'heroic individuals, in fulfilling these aims of theirs, had no consciousness of the Idea at all'.⁴⁸ From these statements, Avineri claims that in the space of a few short paragraphs in *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* we find Hegel 'describing the world-historical individual as, alternatively, (i) wholly conscious of the idea of history and its development, (ii) only instinctively conscious of it and (iii) totally unaware of it'. As a result, Avineri concludes that 'no adequate explanation can be given for what must in the last resort be viewed as a series of contradictory statements'. For Avineri, even though Hegel maintained that 'the progress of history is mediated through subjective motives wholly unrelated to the telos of history', the contradictory statements leave 'the crucial problem of how far the world-historical individuals are aware of the historical dimension of their deeds remains unsolved'.⁴⁹

The unintended consequences of normative action interpretation of Hegel's causal account suggests that these positions can be reconciled. For Hegel, world history is the development of *Geist*, understood as the self-conscious realisation and actualisation of freedom. This occurs when a world-historical individual liberates their perception of freedom from a particular restriction and works to actualise their enlarged understanding in the real world. However,

⁴⁵ Avineri, S., 1972, 230-232.

⁴⁶ Hegel, G. W. F., 1840, 33.

⁴⁷ Hegel, G. W. F., 1840, 32.

⁴⁸ Hegel, G. W. F., 1840, 33.

⁴⁹ Avineri, S., 1972, 233-234.

world-historical individuals cannot perceive the ultimate form of freedom. Since they embody their vision of the better social order and do not possess a philosophical ability to understand the unintended consequences of their attempt to actualise it, their actions can only be understood in retrospect. The world-historical individual is unable to comprehend how their attempt to actualise their vision of a new social order would impact the actualisation of freedom in the long term. This is why Hegel wrote that '*philosophy, too, is its own time comprehended in thoughts*'.⁵⁰ Although world-historical individuals are insightful and attempt to actualise the form of freedom they perceive, they are not philosophers. Rather, they have a practical sense of what reason requires and affect the course of progressive development in unintended and unforeseen ways.

To illustrate this point, consider the world-historical agency of Julius Caesar. Hegel made clear that Caesar was not acting purely out of self-interest. Instead, Caesar had a practical instinct that the present social order was insufficient and an impulse to bring about a change to the status quo. According to Hegel, '[i]t was not, then, his private gain merely, but an instinct that occasioned the accomplishment of that for which, in and for itself, the time was ripe'.⁵¹ Caesar observed that corruption and inefficiency had become pervasive throughout the institutions of the Roman Republic. In addition, these institutions were unable to protect the fringes of its territories so peripheral populations were effectively abandoned. Caesar had the impulse to end the factionalism of the Roman Republic and centralise the institutions of the state so that it could command authority over its territories. As Hegel wrote, 'since the power of his opponents included sovereignty over the provinces of the Roman empire, his victory secured for him the conquest of that entire empire'.⁵² As a result of Caesar's actions, the Roman Empire established institutions that created an

⁵⁰ Hegel, G. W. F., 1821, Preface, 21.

⁵¹ Hegel, G. W. F., 1857, 28.

⁵² Hegel, G. W. F., 1857, 27.

effective, centralised, and unified state. The question is whether the institutions of the Roman Empire established by Caesar represent a higher form of freedom than the Republic they replaced or if, in Hegel's view, the Empire represented a necessary backward step in the development of freedom. Hegel believed that while the Republic embodied a certain degree of freedom its fragmentation and inefficiency made it incapable of actualising freedom for all its citizens. Therefore, for Hegel, the centralisation of power in the Empire, though seemingly autocratic, was a necessary step to overcome the Republic's limitations. In this sense, Hegel saw the Empire not as a progression in the abstract ideal of freedom but as a necessary backward step that set the stage for the future realisation of freedom. It is, for this reason, Hegel claimed 'that which secured for him the execution of a design which in the first instances was of negative import – the autocracy of Rome – was, however, at the same time an independently necessary purpose in the history of Rome and of the world'.⁵³ Therefore, although the fall of the Roman Republic set in motion a sequence of events that led to the collapse of Rome, the foundation of the Roman Empire was instrumental in the long-term realisation and actualisation of freedom. Crucially, these were not the intended implications of Caesar's actions. Nevertheless, the unintended consequences of Caesar's intentional actions were to change the institutions of the state so that an ethical community could form out of a larger and more diverse population and to consolidate the state apparatus throughout the Roman Empire so that the Christianisation of Europe could later occur. For Hegel, this shows that Caesar had a practical grasp of what reason required and this unintentionally enabled future developments in the realisation and actualisation of freedom.

If we return to Avineri's either wholly aware, instinctively aware, or totally unaware options for the agency of world-historical individuals, it is clear that Caesar was simultaneously wholly aware of his intention to bring about a change in the social order, instinctively aware of the normative implications of

⁵³ Hegel, G. W. F., 1857, 27-28.

his actions, and unaware of the long-term progressive consequences of his agency. Charles Taylor sums up this characterisation of the agency of world-historical individuals and responds to the appearance of inconsistency when he writes that ‘with a little allowance for the unpolished nature of this text [*Lectures on the Philosophy of History*] which Hegel never prepared for publication, the texts can fairly easily be reconciled around the notion that world-historical individuals have a sense of the higher truth they serve, but they see it through a glass darkly’.⁵⁴ In other words, world-historical individuals have a clear practical perception of what they want to achieve but cannot philosophically perceive all the consequences of their actions. Therefore, normatively desirable change is a result of the unintended consequences of the normative action of world-historical individuals.

Hegel’s account of causation offers a compelling framework for understanding causal agency. The plausibility of the account resides in its ability to reconcile two seemingly opposed demands. First, there is the need for an account of causation to acknowledge that intentional normative actions are capable of initiating progressive change. Second, there is the need for an account of causation to recognise that progress is shaped by unintended consequences. Hegel’s account retains a causally significant place for intentional normative action while acknowledging that historical outcomes do not mirror agential intention. By locating causality in the tension between intentional agency and the unpredictable unfolding of events, the Hegelian model allows us to appreciate how progress can emerge from actions whose effects exceed the foresight of those who initiate them. Therefore, Hegel’s account reveals why a causal model that preserves contingency and the unintended consequences of normative action account is not only descriptively robust but conceptually desirable. Such an account captures the insight and initiative of the agents of progress without reducing history to the execution of their plan. In this way, Hegel’s account of

⁵⁴ Taylor, C., 2015, 97.

causation captures the fact that the agents of progress shape history not only through what they intend but also through what they cannot foresee.

In addition, Hegel's account of who the agents of progress are enables us to analyse the conditions of progressive agency. At first glance, it appears as though Hegel views military leadership as a prerequisite for world-historical agency since he located world-historical agency in Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, and Napoleon.⁵⁵ However, Hegel's account of agency is much richer and the criteria determining who can become a world-historical agent of progress is much more open than the militaristic interpretation suggests.

Richard Bourke is illuminating on this point. As Bourke notes, world-historical individuals 'remodel the cultural world around them' and have a 'philosophy bearing a new world within it'. Crucially, Bourke claims that any 'new mode of life depended on transformative thought and action as well as the means of translating between the two'.⁵⁶ However, I believe there are four prerequisites of progressive agency that underpin Hegel's account of world-historical individuals. These four prerequisites are that: (a) the individual has thought critically about their form of social order, (b) conceived of the change they want to bring about, (c) acted in such a way that brings this change about, and (d) acquired the means of ensuring that such action will be successful. Inevitably, if military leaders act to bring about their vision of a better social order they have the power to do so. However, unpacking the requirements of causal agency in this way points to non-military examples of world-historical agency. In particular, Bourke points to Socrates, Jesus Christ, and Martin Luther as examples of non-militaristic world-historical agents, according to Hegel. For Bourke, Socrates introduced a 'critical ethos' which entailed that the 'institutions of democratic city-states produced open, rational, enquiry';⁵⁷ Jesus Christ

⁵⁵ Hegel, G. W. F., 1840, 33.

⁵⁶ Bourke, R., 2023(a), 105.

⁵⁷ Bourke, R., 2023(a), 43.

'challenged prevailing Jewish values' in order to, as Hegel put it, 'restore to morality the freedom which is its essence';⁵⁸⁵⁹ and Martin Luther 'abolished the categorical distinction between laity and priesthood' so that there was a 'new-found emphasis on subjectivity, feeling and personal faith... in religion'.⁶⁰ These demonstrate that agents of progress can acquire the power to change the social order can be met with either the power they personally wield (as in the case with military world-historical individuals) or through the power they gain from a social movement they establish (as is the case with non-militaristic world-historical individuals). Of course, as the example of Martin Luther demonstrates, the actions of world-historical individuals and their attempt to gain power through social movements can have unintended effects that go beyond their intentions. These effects can comprehensively destabilise the existing social order and bring about periods of extreme violence as a result. However, although Martin Luther's actions precipitated the Reformation that eventually gave rise to the Wars of Religion, he retains his status as a non-militaristic world-historical individual because he did not wield military power himself nor seek to achieve his ends through violent means. Luther sought a transformation in the moral-political-religious consciousness of his time through thought and speech.⁶¹ The fact that his ideas later contributed to conflict demonstrates that the actions of world-historical individuals have unintended effects. Nevertheless, these outcomes do not alter the essentially non-militaristic character of Luther's progressive agency. The individuals and social movements that took up the mantle of Luther's vision of a better social order worked to bring about the normatively desirable change that had already been articulated. Their efforts resulted in violent forms of change that had not been intended. This makes clear that there is a distinction between agents of progress and those who work to bring about a vision for a better future that has already been outlined.

⁵⁸ Bourke, R., 2023(a), 43.

⁵⁹ Hegel, G. W. F., 1795, cited in Bourke, R., 2023(a), 84.

⁶⁰ Bourke, R., 2023(a), 43, 98, 99.

⁶¹ I accept that Martin Luther was no pacifist and, at times, condoned the use of force. Nevertheless, the violence was an unintended escalation of the tensions that Luther's intentional actions set in motion and not the intended outcome of his theological or moral vision.

The reconstruction of Hegel's account of causal agency offers a plausible model for thinking about the conditions under which individuals become agents of progress. In addition to the account detailing that world-historical individuals are those who have a practical grasp of what reason requires and are able to act in a way that attempts to bring that practical understanding about, another compelling aspect of this account is its capacity to expand the category of progressive agency beyond figures of conquest and military rule. By foregrounding intentional normative action and the way individuals can disrupt prevailing social orders in order to reconfigure them, Hegel showed that people can bring about moral-political progress not through the brute imposition of will but through other actions. The criteria that emerge offer a powerful framework for considering progressive agency.

The Historical Element – An Epochal Account of History

Hegel adopted an epochal account of history. In contrast to the stadial account of history (which understands history as one long sequence of development divided into a series of discrete stages), Hegel's epochal account divided history into four distinct periods, each defined by a different understanding of freedom. As Hegel wrote, 'the world-historical realms are four in number: the Oriental, the Greek, the Roman, and the Germanic'.⁶² The Oriental epoch is characterised by despotism where only one person is free and all others live in a state of servitude.⁶³ The Greek epoch is characterised by the expansion of freedom to a specific class; namely, citizens. However, whilst citizens experience freedom, that class of free persons excludes women, children, slaves, and foreign residents. The Roman epoch is characterised by universal legal freedom in which citizenship and rights are extended to all free individuals. However, even though formal freedom had been universalised, it remained

⁶² Hegel, G. W. F., 1821, 377 [§354].

⁶³ Hegel, G. W. F., 1857, thought contemporary states remained in the Oriental epoch. In a demonstration of his Eurocentric perspective, Hegel wrote that 'India, like China, is a phenomenon antique as well as modern; one which has remained stationary and fixed', 126.

abstract because it only granted formal equality under the law. The Germanic epoch is characterised by the realisation of our universal freedom and the actualisation of it through the institutions of the state. In the Germanic epoch, all are free not merely in law but also in actuality. Hegel thought that the French Revolution was the harbinger of the final epoch because it embodied the principle that all ought to be free on the basis of their shared humanity.⁶⁴

Although Hegel conceptualised a final epoch, he maintained that even once the final epoch had been entered, moral-political progress could continue as a result of the distinction between the realisation and actualisation of freedom. To illustrate this point, consider how the French Revolution marked a decisive rupture between hierarchical orders and the epoch defined by universal freedom. According to Hegel, the *ancien régime* collapsed under its own contradictions and gave rise to a more expansive understanding of freedom. However, although this transition inaugurated the Germanic epoch, the actualisation of that expansive realisation of freedom was not complete at its moment of inception. The actualisation of freedom must continue within the new epoch. For example, the extension of suffrage and the abolition of slavery were required to actualise the principle that all ought to be free. When these occurred, they did not represent a shift to a new epoch but a deeper actualisation of the new understanding of freedom. Therefore, although there will be no more *epochal* change, progress remains possible within the final epoch.

In a challenge to this interpretation, the charge has been levelled that Hegel took progress to end with the Prussian Monarchy. Karl Popper pioneered

⁶⁴ Hegel's views on the French Revolution evolved over time. In the early 1790s, Hegel thought the French Revolution transformed a feudal, hierarchical society to one based on universal rights and popular sovereignty. In *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), Hegel pointed to the overthrow of established orders as part of the progression of history towards freedom. However, after the Terror, Hegel grew critical of the persistent instability and violence. Hegel's disillusionment deepened as Napoleon's First French Empire undermined the original ideals of the French Revolution. By the time Hegel wrote *Philosophy of History* (1837, posthumously published), he had distanced himself from his earlier idealisation of the French Revolution and came to view it as an incomplete process that, while necessary for the destruction of the old order, failed to establish the institutions required to secure the actualisation of the expansive realisation of freedom.

this point of view and argued that, according to Hegel, 'Prussia is the 'highest peak', and the very stronghold of freedom... the goal... towards which humanity moves; and that its government preserves and keeps... the purest spirit of freedom'. For Popper, 'Hegel proves... that this present Prussia is the pinnacle and the stronghold and the goal of freedom'.⁶⁵ In effect, Popper claimed that Hegel took Prussia and its set of political institutions to be the apex of progressive development so that, once they are actualised, there can be no further moral-political improvement.

However, Popper's argument is fatally flawed. On the one hand, Hegel did not view the Prussian Monarchy in such terms. In the *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel set out the form that a political state must take in order to bring about social freedom. Hegel emphasised the importance of a rational political state that includes a division of powers, an independent judiciary, a constitutional monarchy constrained by law, and mechanics for civil society and political representation.⁶⁶ The Prussian Monarchy did not resemble this sort of political state. As such, Hegel could not have taken the Prussian Monarchy to represent the end of progressive development. It is for this reason that Charles Taylor rejects the 'myth of Hegel as apostle of 'Prussianism''.⁶⁷ On the other hand, although Hegel thought that freedom could be actualised in the Germanic world he did not believe that further progress was ruled out. The potential to develop in terms of extending rights, deepening representative structures, and addressing the contradictions that persist within institutions illustrates how the work of actualising freedom in practice ensures that progress remains possible within the final epoch of history. Even if, at a certain point, a fully unrestricted understanding of freedom has been actualised within a state, progress need not come to a conclusive end. Progress remains possible because the rationality of institutions is not fixed once and for all but must continually be reaffirmed,

⁶⁵ Popper, K., 1945, 261.

⁶⁶ Hegel, G. W. F., 1821, §257-320.

⁶⁷ Taylor, C., 2008, 452.

revised, or reconstructed in response to changing historical circumstances, internal contradictions, and new demands for recognition. On Hegel's account, the actualisation of freedom is never complete and will need to be reaffirmed in light of new conditions. As Hegel put it, '[t]he state is the actuality of the ethical Idea – the ethical spirit as substantial will, *manifest* and clear to itself, which thinks and knows itself and implements what it knows in so far as it knows it'.⁶⁸ This ensures that the actualisation of freedom can never be final because the gap between what the state *knows* and what it *could* know means that institutional rationality remains provisional and must be revised as conditions change over time.⁶⁹ It is for this reason that Ruben Alvarado rebukes the end-of-history interpretation of Hegel and argues that 'when Hegel speaks of a "last stage" of history, he speaks of just that, and not a termination of development. Within that final stage, all manner of development is still possible'.⁷⁰ Therefore, Hegel neither idolised the Prussian Monarchy nor thought that progress came to an end when the final epoch was entered.

The next aspect of Hegel's account of history concerns the nature of historical transitions. In contrast to the incremental transitions of the continuous account and the sequential transitions of the stadial account, Hegel's epochal account takes progress to unfold via a process marked by ruptures and transformations. According to Hegel, the contradictions within an understanding of freedom eventually come to be unsustainable. When this occurs, the antecedent understanding is said to collapse under the weight of its internal contradictions and result in a new, transformed understanding of freedom. This process continues until individuals come to realise a fully inclusive and coherent understanding of freedom.

⁶⁸ Hegel, G. W. F., 1821, §257, 275.

⁶⁹ Cf. Pippin, R., 2008(b), Part II, 121-179; Honneth, A., Part III, 121-374.

⁷⁰ Alvarado, R., 2011, ix.

For example, consider the account Hegel provides of the process that brought about the Germanic epoch. Hegel argued that although the French Revolution was the rupture that brought about this transition, the higher realisation and actualisation of freedom first took hold in Germany. Hegel claimed that although 'the French alone, and not the Germans, set about realising it [freedom]', it was '[f]rom France [that] it [the laws designated by reason] passed over to Germany, and created a new world of representations'.⁷¹ According to Hegel, the social and political condition of the *ancien régime* (in particular, the rife corruption and widespread injustice) provided the fertile ground within which a new understanding of freedom could emerge. It is as a result of these conditions and the institutional framework of the *ancien régime* that the new understanding of freedom was forced to erupt in a convulsive manner. This ensured that the French Revolution heralded a transformative shift in how freedom is conceptualised. However, after its emergence, the new understanding of freedom was unable to take root in France because the French state was unwilling to reform in a way to accommodate it. The vested interests of the court, clergy, nobility, and parliamentarians prevented the transformed understanding of freedom from taking hold and being actualised through the state and its institutions.⁷² In addition, Hegel thought that Catholicism divided an individual between a religious conscience and a secular conscience that is amenable to secular law. When our conscience is divided in this way, the religious conscience prevents the secular appreciation of the new understanding of freedom and prohibits its actualisation through the institutions of the state. Hegel explained that the 'Protestant religion does not admit of divided conscience, while in the Catholic world the holy stands on the one side while on the other stands abstraction opposed to religion, that is, to its superstition and to its truth'.⁷³ As such, the injustice and entrenched class interests of the *ancien régime* in addition to the Catholic division of conscience ensured that although the new

⁷¹ Hegel, G. W. F., 1857, 397-398.

⁷² Hegel, G. W. F., 1857, 400-401.

⁷³ Hegel, G. W. F., 1857, 399-400.

understanding of freedom would first emerge in France it could not actualise within the French state. Instead, Hegel thought that the new understanding of freedom would be actualised in a Protestant state that is able to integrate the emergent notions of legal equality and civic participation within a political framework that preserved order and coherence.⁷⁴ However, Hegel believed that Protestant states such as England were unable to embed the principles of the French Revolution because their entrenched class-based system of social stratification undermined the new understanding that all should be free.⁷⁵ Therefore, according to Hegel, the principles of the French Revolution became actualised in the Germanic states because they were the first Protestant states to move beyond an entrenched system of social stratification.⁷⁶ In this way, Hegel thought that the actualisation of the higher form of freedom would first occur in states that were able to internalise the spirit of the French Revolution without being consumed by its excesses.⁷⁷

This illustrates the dialectical nature of Hegel's account of history. The French Revolution marked the negation of the prior understanding of freedom and the initial attempt to actualise freedom in the Germanic states constitutes its sublation insofar as it preserved and elevated what was rational in the revolutionary impulse. A new epoch was entered not by smooth evolution but through the dramatic overcoming of contradiction and the establishment of a more inclusive and coherent understanding of freedom.

To understand why ruptures are a necessary part of the epochal account of history, it is important to recognise that they are the culmination of a slow,

⁷⁴ Hegel, G. W. F., 1857, 409.

⁷⁵ Hegel, G. W. F., 1857, 408-409.

⁷⁶ Hegel, G. W. F., 1821, made it clear that although civil society consists of social classes (estates) with varying levels of wealth and corporations that reinforce the economic interests of certain social classes, the various class privileges will be tempered by a universal recognition of legal equality and mitigated by the social and political institutions of the state, §201-208.

⁷⁷ Crucially, Hegel neither thought that the Germanic states fully corresponded with reason nor that other Germanic states could not actualise the higher form of freedom. The purpose of the schematic set out in the *Philosophy of Right* was to detail how states across the Germanic world could be rationally organised to comprehensively actualise the higher form of freedom.

long-term process that undermines the preceding epoch and creates the conditions for a new one to emerge. Richard Bourke is especially illuminating on this point. Bourke explains that even though the dawn of the epoch is characterised by a revolutionary event, there is a gradual process that leads up to it. Bourke argued that there is ‘no sudden leap’ but a sequence of ‘incremental change’ that resembles a ‘complex, cumulative process involving decline, breakdown, adaptation and reorientation’. Of course, certain moments represent ‘precipitous breaks’ and the French Revolution is one such instance of a ‘definitive leap’. However, Bourke argues that in such moments the ‘appearance of a clean break... was deceptive’ because ‘behind the sudden breach was a continuous development, and ahead lay a protracted stretch of maturation’.⁷⁸ Bourke points out that Hegel referred to the French Revolution as a ‘sunrise’.⁷⁹ When we consider such an event as a sunrise we can comprehend that we must differentiate between the ‘local symptoms and long-term causes’ and accept that the ‘origins of the [French] Revolution lay deep in history’. According to Bourke, the ‘sudden ‘sunrise’ [of the French Revolution] was merely an apparent rupture whose real meaning was to be found in a longer transformation’. Bourke states that for Hegel, ‘the most important change was the shifting role of nobilities throughout Europe’ which slowly caused the ‘rigidities of status to [have] abated’. This reduction of the rigidity of status entailed that the cause of the French Revolution ‘did not lie in the sudden collapse of the noblesse following the summoning of the Estates General, but in the reconstruction of the social orders over the course of the previous age’. In this sense, the ‘French Revolution was a product of a larger process – the long-term transformation of European society’.⁸⁰ So, the rupture is part of Hegel’s account of history because it brings to the surface the contradictions that have been gradually accumulating over time. For Hegel, the necessity of these ruptures lies in their capacity to serve as tipping points where long-standing contradictions can no longer be ignored.

⁷⁸ Bourke, R., 2023(b), 761-762.

⁷⁹ Hegel, G. W. F., 1831, 1562; cited in Bourke, R., 2023(b), 762.

⁸⁰ Bourke, R., 2023(b), 763-764.

At this point, it appears as though there might be a tension between the account of causal agency that foregrounds the creative capacity of world-historical individuals and the account of history that emphasises the long-term causes that bring about epochal transitions. However, long-term causes and the significance of intentional action can be reconciled by understanding that a world-historical individual is attuned to the contradictions and discontent of their society. These individuals have a practical feel for what reason requires and, through recognising the insufficiencies and tensions of the current epoch, work to bring these latent tensions to a head. Their agency channels the dissatisfactions of their time into a transformative moment that propels history forward. The example of Martin Luther illustrates this aspect of the Hegelian framework. Luther recognised the long-term contradictions within late medieval Christendom. Luther noticed that discontent with ecclesial corruption, the selling of indulgences, and the increasing alienation of laypeople from religious life had been developing for decades. At the same time, structural transformations, such as the rise of vernacular literacy and the spread of the printing press, had created fertile conditions for religious reform. Luther's decisive act, nailing the *Ninety-Five Theses* to the church door in Wittenburg in 1517, brought about a rupture that transformed latent discontent into an epochal break. In this sense, Luther articulated and acted upon long-term causes. His capacity to interpret and respond to the contradictions of his time is what marks him as a world-historical figure, according to the Hegelian framework. This illustrates that world-historical individuals sense contradictions, bring the long-term causes to a head through decisive action, and, in turn, bring about a transition to a new epoch.

As a result of the dialectical nature of historical transitions and the role world-historical individuals play in bringing long-term discontents to a head, Hegel's epochal account of history is faced with the justification of suffering problem. It seems as though the events that precipitated the collapse of the parochial and contradictory social order are justified insofar as they resulted in

the actualisation of a more desirable state of affairs. Hegel did not hide the fact that 'the process of development in the realm of Spirit is not the harmless and peaceful progress that it is in the realm of organic life. Rather, it is a severe and unwilling working against itself'.⁸¹ Hegel was clear that the '*final goal of the world...* is Spirit's consciousness of its freedom, and hence also the actualisation of that very freedom' and that 'this final goal – freedom – toward which all the world's history has been working... is the goal to which all the sacrifices have been brought upon the broad altar of the earth in the long flow of time'.⁸² Hegel referred to these sacrifices as the 'slaughter-bench, upon which the happiness of nations, the wisdom of states, and the virtues of individuals were sacrificed'.⁸³ In addition, Hegel thought that the agents of progress had to be 'so great a figure [that they] must necessarily trample on many an innocent flower, crushing much that gets in his way'.⁸⁴ These statements suggest that, for Hegel, the ends justify the means insofar as extreme violence is retrospectively justified by its progressive consequences. Fredrick Beiser reiterates this aspect of the problem when he asks 'whether any goal, and any amount of progress toward it, can redeem the suffering of the innocent'. In addition, Beiser argues that Hegel's account has the perverse implication of seeming 'to encourage acquiescence in the face of evil' and instead of 'demanding that people fight evil... [it] tranquilises [moral agents] into accepting it, because they become convinced of its necessity'.⁸⁵ So the charge is levelled that Hegel's account of history not only justifies suffering but also reconciles people to it as part of the process of history.

To push back against the justification of suffering concern, it ought to be acknowledged that although moments of rupture are a necessary part of historical development, the revolutions that bring about epochal transformations can take different forms. These revolutions can vary in terms of their pace, depth,

⁸¹ Hegel, G. W. F., 1840, 59.

⁸² Hegel, G. W., F., 1840, 22.

⁸³ Hegel, G. W. F., 1840, 24.

⁸⁴ Hegel, G. W. F., 1840, 35.

⁸⁵ Beiser, F., 2005, 275.

and level of violence. For example, the revolution that brought about Christianity through the agency of Jesus Christ demonstrates that not all revolutions need to take the same form as the French Revolution. In addition, Hegel made clear that a revolution can be criticised when it is only the antithesis of the antecedent stage and makes no attempt to bring about a resolution to the dialectic. Hegel criticised the French Revolution on the grounds that it became exclusively focused on tearing down the social order of the *ancien régime* and uninterested in actualising a higher form of freedom. Bourke refers to this as ‘an attitude of negation’ that was regarded by Hegel as a ‘feckless form of antagonism’.⁸⁶ Although a rupture is a necessary part of the progressive process, these ruptures need not be violent and must attempt to resolve the parochialisms and contradictions of the prior epoch and not simply to tear it down. So even though the French Revolution represented a sudden, deep, and violent break with the past, it does not necessarily follow that all historical transitions must be as tumultuous. Therefore, the retrospective understanding of a revolution and a recognition of the violence it caused should not be taken as a normative prescription for the future. In fact, Hegel’s recognition of past suffering could be interpreted as a cautionary reminder of the destructive excesses that accompanied earlier transitions in order to urge future progressive action to avoid such harm. However, it remains unclear whether certain circumstances necessitate violence and what level of violence can be retrospectively justified if it is deemed necessary to bring about an epochal transition. In this way, although Hegel demonstrated that epochal transitions need not always be violent and should not be violent to no constructive end, his epochal account still faces the concern that suffering can be retrospectively justified if it is deemed a necessary part of the progressive trajectory of history. As such, the question remains open as to what form a revolution should take in order to bring about an epochal shift and whether a normative prescription to minimise the harm and suffering that might arise during transitions between epochs can be incorporated into the epochal account.

⁸⁶ Bourke, R., 2022, 17; referencing Hegel, G. W. F., 1830, §80-81, 126-131.

The final aspect of Hegel's account of history considers periods of stagnation and regression.

With regard to stagnation, Hegel was clear that '[i]n world history there are many great periods that have passed, without any apparent notion of progressive development'.⁸⁷ Hegel justified this statement on the grounds that until a world-historical individual confronts the deep contradictions and insufficiencies of their epoch (overturning the hegemonic understanding of freedom in the process) it is not possible to realise or actualise a more inclusive and coherent conception of freedom. Of course, the actualisation of a given conception of freedom remains possible within an epoch. Nevertheless, Hegel maintained that the progress marked by an epochal transition requires the latent contradictions of an age to be recognised and resolved. Until this occurs, the historical unfolding of freedom is suspended.

With regard to regression, Hegel outlined two different types of undesirable change.

The first form could be called *complete* regression as it relates to the total destruction of a state and its cultural context. Hegel acknowledged that an external contingency (such as war, natural disaster, famine, plague, etc.) can eradicate a context. In such cases, Hegel wrote that the 'entire accumulation of culture was destroyed, so that everything has to be started again from the beginning'.⁸⁸ For Hegel, these moments reveal the underlying contingency of historical progress. If, for instance, an asteroid were to strike Earth or a plague were to decimate a society, progress would be undone. As Hegel put it, we 'must regard progress of this kind, or more especially the regression in it, as a series of disconnected and external contingencies'.⁸⁹ However, the possibility of

⁸⁷ Hegel, G. W. F., 1840, 59.

⁸⁸ Hegel, G. W. F., 1840, 59.

⁸⁹ Hegel, G. W. F., 1840, 59.

catastrophic regression does not undermine the idea of progress; rather, it highlights its vulnerability to external interruption. Hegel's point is not that history always progresses or that progressive gains are immutable but that progress in history is intelligible only when catastrophic external contingencies are bracketed. The annihilation of humanity obviously undoes progress. However, this does not, on its own, justify abandoning the notion altogether. Instead, Hegel showed that such events can be treated as exceptions to the progressive reading of history and not necessarily as a refutation of it. For this reason, this form of regression can be set aside so attention can be focused on the more philosophically significant form of regression.

The second form could be called *partial* regression as it refers to backward movements within a social order that undermine previous progressive gains. For Hegel, there are two features of this kind of regression. First, regression can occur within an epoch. Intra-epochal regression occurs when institutions increasingly fail to actualise freedom. Regression is marked by a growing disparity between how freedom is consciously understood and how it is actualised. Second, regression to a prior epoch cannot occur. According to Hegel, it is not possible to regress to a prior epoch because that would involve self-consciously understanding freedom in a more parochial and incoherent form. This is not possible because the rupture that brought about the transition to the new epoch discredited the prior understanding of freedom. Therefore, according to Hegel, although it is not possible to regress to a prior epoch, intra-epochal regression can occur. To illustrate these aspects of regression, consider two examples.

First, consider the collapse of the Roman Republic. While the Republic was marked by deep structural inequalities across class, gender, race, and religion, it nevertheless established a social order grounded in law, civic participation, and public governance. However, as Rome expanded, the institutions of the Roman Republic struggled to contain the contradictions generated by imperial conquest,

such as the concentration of power, the erosion of senatorial authority, and the militarisation of politics. The rise of Augustus and the establishment of the Principate signalled a regression from republican self-rule, as executive power was centralised in Augustus and checks on authority were undermined. However, this transformation did not mark a return to a pre-Republic epoch. Augustus' Principate did not abandon the understanding of freedom and normative commitments that defined the Roman form of social order. The Augustan regime maintained the forms of republican government (the Senate, consuls, magistracies) but altered the locus of power amongst them. More importantly, the legal traditions of the Republic were retained and developed during imperial rule. This illustrates that even in periods of regression that turn out to be part of the dialectical process of history, the defining understanding of freedom persists. The actualisation of freedom may be constrained or distorted, but the understanding of freedom that characterises an epoch cannot be reversed. Hegel's point is that history cannot revert to a prior stage because even amid degeneration, essential elements of an epoch's moral-political progress are persevered. Therefore, regression does not entail a circular historical repetition but a distorted development within the ongoing progressive trajectory of history.

Second, consider the French Revolution and the series of events that followed. The French Revolution overthrew the understanding of freedom that underpinned the *ancien régime* and attempted to actualise a more inclusive and coherent understanding of freedom in an egalitarian social order. If we go beyond Hegel and look at subsequent French history we see that, even during subsequent regressive periods, it was not possible to return to the understanding of freedom that underpinned the *ancien régime*. The French state endured a range of changes across the First Empire, the Bourbon Restoration, the July Monarchy, the Second Republic, the Second Empire, the Paris Commune, and the Third Republic. Some transformations, such as the Bourbon Restoration and the Second Empire, represented attempts to roll back the egalitarian ideals of the French

Revolution while others, such as the Second Republic or the Paris Commune, sought to deepen and expand the more inclusive conception of freedom. However, despite its uneven trajectory, the idea that all men ought to be free persisted. The self-conscious realisation of the more inclusive and coherent conception of freedom marked a decisive break from the restrictive conception of freedom that underpinned the *ancien régime*. As such, no instance of regression was able to bring about a transition back to the prior epoch.⁹⁰ Bourke affirms this view and argues that such an example illustrates how '[h]istory had arrived at the consummate realisation that each person by virtue of their humanity was free and, given this attainment, political judgement could best orientate itself by refusing to go backwards. This meant conceding that modern consciousness would never trade its emancipation for superannuated forms of enthrallment'.⁹¹ In other words, according to Hegel, the higher realisation of freedom that marks a transition to a new epoch cannot be undone.

These examples illustrate how, although it is possible for the actualisation of freedom to take forward as well as backward steps, it is not possible to return to a prior epoch and affirm what has come to be seen as a parochial and incoherent conception of freedom. Normatively undesirable change can occur within an epoch but reversing the revolution of self-consciousness that precipitated a higher realisation of freedom cannot occur because the understanding of freedom characteristic of the prior epoch has been irreversibly discredited by the rupture that took place. As such, a regression to a prior epoch is an impossibility. Therefore, the Hegelian account of history incorporates the idea that regression remains a possibility without abandoning the essentially progressive trajectory of historical change.

⁹⁰ The Bayonne Constitution (1808) also illustrates that attempts at regression cannot ignore the epochal transition that has occurred. Although the Bayonne Constitution sought to mimic aspects of the *ancien régime* by reinstating monarchical authority in Spain under French influence, it incorporated elements of legal equality and popular representation. This signals that the normative commitments brought about by the French Revolution could not be entirely erased.

⁹¹ Bourke, R., 2023(a), xv.

To reflect upon the plausibility of Hegel's account of history, it is clear that although the overarching framework offers a compelling lens through which to interpret historical development, there are several elements that require critical revision. Most notably, the idea of four fixed world-historical epochs is implausible. Not only is it an overly simplistic model that ignores the complexity of historical development, but it also rests on an uninformed characterisation of non-European societies as stalled in the early stages of development. As a result, this rigid periodisation must be rejected. However, the broader conceptual architecture, particularly the idea of history as structured by epochs defined by distinct normative commitments, retains plausibility. Considering epochs in terms of moral-political commitments and a society's self-conscious understanding of them is a powerful tool for interpreting change over time. This is especially compelling when we pair it with the notion of long-term underlying causes, such as growing discontent with existing social orders, which, coupled with the agency of world-historical individuals, bring about decisive historical breaks. This conceptualisation of history provides a coherent framework for understanding how societies progress over time and makes clear that moments of rupture and transformation correspond to changes in the normative account. Such a model captures the complex interaction between continuity and rupture that characterises historical development by understanding transformations as the product both of long-term dissatisfaction with prevailing normative commitments and the agential intervention by those capable of articulating and realising new normative horizons. Additionally, the idea that progress involves both forward and backward steps in terms of the actualisation of normative commitments is similarly plausible. History does not follow a linear trajectory because it is marked by potentially elongated periods of stagnation and regression. However, these periods do not erase progress; rather, they reflect the dialectical nature of historical development where progress is often uneven and contested. Finally, the idea that progress cannot fully regress to a prior epoch holds significant merit. The transformation of normative ideals, once achieved,

cannot be completely undone. While regressions may occur, they cannot fully erase the break in the moral-political understanding that has occurred. This retains the essentially progressive orientation to history whilst retaining the idea that regressions remain a real and concerning possibility.

Therefore, while the precise contours of Hegel's epochal framework require revision, the fundamental insight that history progresses through complex, dialectical shifts in normative ideals remains a powerful and plausible way of understanding historical change.

Conclusion: Normative, Causal, and Historical Ideal Desiderata

Hegel's conception of progress offers a sophisticated constellation of conceptual resources. In particular, its account of normative change, the role of contingency and agency, the dialectical structure of historical development, and a plausible explanation of regression, form a compelling framework for thinking about moral-political progress. In contrast to Kant's static and idealistic vision, Hegel grounds progress in the evolving self-understanding of normative commitments, the disruptive agency of historical actors, and the unfolding of limitations and contradictions within a social order. This opens up fertile ground for constructing a richer, more plausible conception of moral-political progress.

Yet, the analysis showed that there are conceptual tensions and omissions that need to be addressed. Bearing these in mind, it is now possible to draw together the collective insights of the *geistesgeschichte* analysis to construct the most plausible conception of progress. To this end, Hegel's approach to theorising about progress provides a rich framework within which a reconstruction of the conception of moral-political progress can take place.

Bridge: From *Geistesgeschichte* Analysis to Conceptual Analysis

As a result of the *geistesgeschichte* analysis the normative-teleological, causal-agential, and historical elements that constitute the most plausible conception of moral-political progress available at the high point of theorising about progress can be extracted. The *geistesgeschichte* analysis revealed that the most plausible conception of progress ought to abandon the naïve optimism of the Enlightenment approach and the rationalist determinism of Kant's approach in favour of a Hegelian approach that moves beyond the more reductive features of his account. In doing so, it ought to orientate change towards a provisional goal that is immanently grounded in the evolving collective understandings of a particular context, reconcile individual agency with contingency and the unintended consequences of normative actions, and understand history in epochal terms where ruptures mark the collapse of prior normative orders and inaugurate new ones from which a return is not possible. This account can be fleshed out to provide a plausible conceptual framework that can then be advanced in order for the conception of progress to respond to the conceptual concerns that subsequently emerged.

The Normative-Teleological Element

The normative-teleological element consists of two interrelated components: the normative aspect and the teleological aspect. The normative aspect specifies the values, moral principles, and political norms that provide the evaluative standard against which moral practices and political institutions can be judged. This aspect must be grounded in an account of normativity which may be either monistic or pluralistic. The teleological aspect details the goal towards which progress is directed. This telos functions both as a benchmark for evaluating change and as a guide for future development. Its scope may be either universal or particular and its status may be either definitive or provisional. A

further complexity arises when the normative telos itself changes. It needs to be determined how such a change can be considered desirable.

To determine how the account of normativity ought to be grounded, the analysis examined the plausibility of Kantian constructivism and Hegel's immanent approach. Kant constructed values, moral principles, and political norms through the abstract reasoning of rational agents. This approach faces significant challenges. First, the account struggled to be applicable because it is abstract, ahistorical, and trans-contextual. Second, the account is static and fails to explain how normative commitments can change over time. Third, the account presumes a form of universal rationality that disregards the extent to which reasoning is shaped by cultural, social, religious, and linguistic conditions. As a result, the account seems untenable as its normative commitments fail to engage with the particularities of specific contexts. In contrast, a Hegelian approach understands values, moral principles, and political norms to emerge from and be justified by the evolving self-understandings of a particular community. Since the immanent account of normativity takes rationality to be contextually embedded, it avoids the abstraction and rigidity of Kant's normative framework. As a result, the immanent approach to normativity allows for normative commitments to evolve alongside social and cultural transformations. However, as the analysis of Hegel's approach demonstrated, an immanent account of normativity must address three concerns. First, the account of normativity must not collapse into cultural relativism. Second, in the absence of a context-transcendent account of normativity that acts as an external standard, the account of normativity must be open to critique. Third, the account of normativity must overcome the Eurocentric orientation that arises when the history of European development is taken to be the model of progress. Therefore, whilst an immanent grounding of normativity overcomes the limitations of the constructivist approach, in order for it to be tenable today it must not collapse into cultural

relativism, foreclose critical reflection, or prohibit pluralism beyond the European archetype.

The question of whether the normative telos ought to be monistic or pluralist has not yet been directly addressed. The Enlightenment, Kantian, and Hegelian conceptions of progress advanced monistic accounts of normativity determined either by perfect human faculties, universal reason, or the concept of freedom as it unfolded throughout history. However, Hegel's account may allow for a kind of mediated pluralism whereby conflicting values are not eliminated but sublated within a more complex totality. On this interpretation, Hegel does not deny pluralism and conflict but reconciles it within a rational structure. However, in light of the rejection of value monism by Isaiah Berlin, it is not tenable to maintain that all normative goods can be harmonised into a single system without loss. Accordingly, any thick conception of moral-political progress must accept value pluralism. As a result, the conception of progress faces the twin problems of value incompatibility and value incommensurability. This poses a problem for a conception of progress as it seems to preclude determining whether a change is progressive when gains in one domain come at the expense of losses in another and the two cannot be ranked. Therefore, the challenge for a thick conception of moral-political progress is to articulate how change can be progressive according to a pluralistic framework. This remains an open question but one that must be addressed if pluralism is to be made compatible with the idea of moral-political progress.

Turning to the teleological aspect, the analysis made clear that a forward-looking normative telos is essential for a conception of moral-political progress. The Kantian account demonstrated the value of guiding moral and political development towards a future-oriented ideal. By offering a vision of what ought to be, the forward-looking telos plays a dual role; it provides a critical standard against which moral practices and political institutions can be judged and it

serves as a guide for transformative action.¹ In contrast, the Hegelian account revealed the limitations of a retrospective account of teleology. On the one hand, when a normative telos is only fully understood in retrospect it cannot function as a standard against which current moral practices and political institutions can be assessed because it comes to be known only after the change has taken place. As a result, the normative telos becomes descriptive rather than prescriptive; it explains how moral and political life changed but is unable to say how it ought to change moving forward. On the other hand, without a forward-looking orientation, it is not possible to critically assess (potentially competing) visions of change. A retrospective telos cannot effectively guide intentional action because its content is only revealed once the action has reshaped the moral-political reality. As such, philosophical engagement is deprived of its anticipatory function and it is prevented from constructively participating in moral-political change. Therefore, a conception of moral-political progress ought to retain the forward-looking orientation of the Kantian model while integrating Hegel's insights about historical development, contextual embeddedness, and the contingent nature of change. The challenge for a conception of moral-political progress is to determine how a forward-looking telos can be reconciled with an immanent account of normativity such that the normative standard can orientate moral practices and political institutions towards a more desirable future.

Another consideration of the teleological aspect is whether the normative telos should be universal or particular. The crude form of universalism found in the Enlightenment and Kantian conceptions of progress is unable to accommodate the diversity of moral and political perspectives. These conceptions of progress assumed a single, shared telos for all of humanity; one shaped by the values, moral practices, and political institutions that emerged in eighteenth-century European nation-states. As a result, these accounts not only impose a narrow vision of progress but universalise a perspective rooted in

¹ Assuming that the causal-agential element grants people a meaningful form of causal agency.

European history and discount the moral traditions and political arrangements of non-European contexts. In contrast, Hegel offered a more nuanced account of teleology. According to Hegel, the universal goal is not imposed from outside particular contexts but is instead acted through them. On this view, universal normative commitments are not actualised in an identical way across every society but take shape through the particular institutional conditions of each context. This demonstrates that when a telos takes a particular form it is able to safeguard pluralism, ensure contextual sensitivity, and allow for meaningful evaluation of moral and political change within specific societies. However, since an immanent account of normativity has been adopted, it remains an open question whether there are any universal normative commitments or, at least, shared normative commitments between similar contexts. The virtue of adopting a particular account of normativity that follows in the Hegelian mould is that it allows the space for that question to be held open. It enables us to maintain that even if certain normative commitments are universal or widely shared they would always be actualised differently across contexts. Therefore, a particular account of teleology inspired by Hegel's account is the most plausible option as it aligns with the embedded form of moral and political life, respects pluralism, and avoids the abstraction and erasure observed in crudely universal accounts of normative teleology. In addition, adopting a particularist framework does not preclude the existence of universal or widely shared normative commitments. Rather, it provides the conceptual resources to incorporate them by insisting that such commitments, if they exist, will always be mediated through and realised within particular contexts. In this way, a particular account of teleology offers both the normative depth and contextual flexibility to theorise about moral-political progress in a complex world.

The final dimension of the teleological aspect concerns whether the telos is definitive or provisional. As the analysis of the Kantian conception of progress demonstrated, a definitive account of teleology runs into a number of problems.

First, it deprives mankind of hope for continued moral-political improvement once the final telos is achieved and progress is presumed complete. Second, it fails to accommodate the dynamic nature of society and the prospect of radical social, political, and technological innovations that could give rise to entirely new normative possibilities. Third, it depends on an implausible assumption about our epistemic infallibility; that we can know, at this moment in history, what the ultimate moral-political end for all time must be. In contrast, the Hegelian conception of progress illustrated the value of a provisional account of teleology, one that allows for a sequence of teloi, each emerging in response to the specific conditions and aspirations of a given context. This account remains sensitive to change and it maintains epistemic humility by avoiding claims about a final end. However, as Hegel's model ultimately culminates in the realisation of reason, it reintroduces a definitive telos and, therefore, ultimately suffers the same limitations as the Kantian account. This demonstrates that the more compelling alternative is a fully provisional and open-ended account of teleology, one that recognises an immediate normative telos that is capable of orienting and motivating present moral-political development whilst also accepting that this telos may one day be surpassed. A plausible account of normative teleology must remain open to the possibility of future transformations that reshape our conception of the appropriate values, moral principles, and political norms.

Taken together, the normative-teleological element of moral-political progress must be grounded in a pluralistic, immanent account of normativity that is oriented towards a forward-looking, particular, and provisional telos. This is the most plausible account of normative teleology as it preserves the aspirational power of the normative telos whilst remaining responsive to contextual specificity.

The Causal-Agential Element

The causal-agential element of a conception of moral-political progress concerns how progress occurs and who brings it about. The causal-agential element has a causal aspect and an agential aspect. The causal aspect addresses the mechanisms of progressive change. On the one hand, it distinguishes between progress caused directly through actions that address moral practices and political institutions, or indirectly via non-normative developments in science, technology, or the economy. If progress is caused directly, the relationship between non-normative development and moral-political progress may be either irrelevant (moral-political progress can occur independent of non-normative development) or pre-conditional (moral-political progress requires certain thresholds of scientific, technological, or economic development before specific forms of moral-political progress can occur). On the other hand, it distinguishes between necessary and contingent accounts of causation. A necessary account holds that progress unfolds according to a pre-set trajectory and that actions merely accelerate what will happen in the fullness of time. A contingent account holds that progress is not guaranteed to occur; instead of being pre-set, the path and end of progress are determined by the actions taken in particular contexts. The agential aspect identifies the agents of progress and specifies the kind of causal agency they progress, whether that is a catalytic form (hastening a predetermined trajectory and end) or a creative form (forging a novel, non-inevitable path). The agential aspect also considers whether progress results from intended or unintended consequences of normative or non-normative actions. Where causal agency is located in normative actions, an account must explain what guides their progressive efforts.

The first question is whether moral-political progress is caused directly or indirectly. A direct account holds that moral-political progress is brought about by changes to moral practices and political institutions, whereas an indirect

account takes moral-political progress to be the result of developments in the scientific, technological, or economic domains. Turgot and Condorcet offered a paradigmatic version of the indirect account by arguing that gains in scientific and technological knowledge would produce corresponding improvements in mankind and society. Kant advanced a more nuanced indirect view that took moral-political progress to result from social processes oriented towards self-interested ends, such as the civilising effects of *doux commerce* and international competition. Despite their differences, both indirect accounts posit a causal relationship between non-normative development and moral-political progress. This assumption is precisely what Rousseau challenged. Rousseau revealed that techno-scientific or economic advancements do not necessarily yield normatively desirable outcomes. On the contrary, such developments can just as easily have regressive effects on mankind and society. As a result, Rousseau showed that the indirect approach to causality ought to be rejected and that a direct account of causation ought to be retained.

Subsequently, the question of what implications non-normative forms of development have on moral-political progress arises. Three points are relevant.

The first point is that scientific and technological developments open up new domains in which moral-political change becomes possible.²³

² Verbeek, P-P., 2011, illustrated how technologies open up new normative questions and domains of possibility. For example, Verbeek argued that although 'obstetric ultrasound was clearly not designed to help shape moral practices and decisions' it nevertheless 'mediates moral practices regarding abortion' by 'detecting reflected ultrasound and translating this into a visible image' (Verbeek, P-P., 2011, 148). Since ultrasound technology provides images and medical information about the condition of a foetus, it gave rise to new moral choices regarding abortion.

³ Current examples also illustrate this point. Innovations in digital technology redefined what is possible in terms of free speech and freedom of assembly but also surveillance and propaganda. Similarly, the development of artificial intelligence is introducing novel forms of governance, such as predictive policing and algorithmic decision-making, that raise new questions about accountability, transparency, and automated judgement. These examples underscore the extent to which non-normative developments generate new sites of normative contestation that expand the terrain upon which moral-political progress is pursued.

The second point is that the non-normative developments are normatively neutral. Scientific, technological, or economic advances do not in themselves determine whether moral-political progress or moral-political regress occurs.⁴ Rather, the implications of a non-normative development depend on how it is used for moral-political ends.⁵ Normative ends must be pursued directly and not deferred to the imagined benevolence of techno-scientific advancements.

The third point is that the rejection of an indirect account of causation does not entail the view that non-normative development is irrelevant to moral-political progress. Although non-normative development is not a sufficient condition for moral-political progress, it may be a necessary one. Instances of moral-political progress may only become possible once specific thresholds of scientific, technological, and economic development have been met.⁶

There has been a renewed interest in analysing the relationship between non-normative development and moral-political progress. For example, Aldo

⁴ A long-standing strain of thought challenges the claim of normative neutrality. Melvin Kranzberg's first law of technology stated that '[t]echnology is neither good nor bad; nor is it neutral' (Kranzberg, M., 1985, 545). By this Kranzberg meant that although techno-scientific developments are polypotent (they serve many functions) and polyvalent (they can have good or bad consequences) their effects are never just neutral. Rather, technologies interact with social, cultural, and political contexts in ways that shape their normative consequences. Shannon Vallor refers to this as technological affordance, defined as how 'technologies invite or *afford* specific patterns of thought, behaviour, and valuing' (Vallor, S., 2018, 2). To provide an example, Shannon argues that, although digital technologies may be value neutral in the abstract, because of their socio-cultural context they undermine democratic societies and threaten the well-being of young people. Therefore, techno-scientific developments are said not to be normatively neutral because their normative implications tend to lean towards a specific direction. However, the valent affordance of techno-scientific developments can be reconciled with their normative neutrality. This is because even if a technology leans one way rather than another in terms of its normative consequence the normative effect is still determined by how the technology is used. Although more effort will have to be exerted to ensure that a negatively afforded technology is used to desirable moral-political ends, it remains the case that the technology is essentially normatively neutral and that its moral-political impact is dependent on how human agents use it.

⁵ Acemoglu, D., Johnson, S., 2023, defend the view that non-normative developments do not necessarily lead to moral-political progress. They show that innovations often have short-term regressive consequences and argue that whether such developments contribute to moral-political progress depends on how the innovations are used. This reinforces the view that moral-political progress is not an inevitable consequence of non-normative development but a process that must use non-normative advancements towards normatively desirable ends.

⁶ For example, the development of agriculture made it possible for settled communities to emerge. Without the stability and organisational complexity enabled by agriculture, moral-political developments such as citizenship, property rights, and the rule of law would have been impossible.

Schiavone recently rearticulated the Marxist idea that non-normative advancements create new paradigms for thinking about moral-political progress.⁷ Schiavone argues that ‘without technological progress, human progress as a whole would be inconceivable’.⁸ However, Schiavone’s argument risks sliding back into an indirect account of causation. For example, when Schiavone argues that the invention of mechanised industry led to the abolition of slavery, it is unclear whether he is emphasising the pre-conditional or causal relationship between non-normative development and moral-political progress.⁹ It is one thing to say that scientific, technological, and economic developments *enable* new forms of moral-political progress and another to say that they *cause* it. If Schiavone were to advocate for the latter view, he would not be alone in returning to that position. The causal view has had a significant resurgence. For example, Jason Crawford and the Roots of Progress Institute promote a techno-optimistic vision in which moral-political progress flows from scientific, technological, and economic innovation.¹⁰ The reason it is important to be clear about whether the relationship is causal or pre-conditional is because the recent restatements of the causal relationship repeat the mistake of the Enlightenment account; namely, that it presumes a normatively desirable trajectory to non-normative development. Rousseau remains as relevant as ever here. There is no inherent tendency in non-normative development towards moral-political betterment. The possibilities it creates require normative action to ensure that they are utilised for desirable ends. As a result, the most plausible position is a direct and pre-conditional account of causation. This view retains a disaggregated view of progress (progress in a non-normative domain does not entail progress in the moral-political domain) while recognising that non-normative developments can serve as pre-conditions for moral-political advance.

⁷ Schiavone, A., 2020, scientific, technological, and economic progress ‘create the conditions – previously non-existent – that made possible a drastic change in the makeup of forms of conscience and moral paradigms’, 84.

⁸ Schiavone, A., 2020, 90.

⁹ Schiavone, A., 2020, 83.

¹⁰ Roots of Progress Institute, <<https://rootsofprogress.org/>>.

This affirms the autonomy of moral-political progress while acknowledging the complex interdependence it has with non-normative forms of progress.

The second question concerns how moral-political progress unfolds and the effect this has on causal agency. First, there is the consideration of whether the cause of moral-political progress is contingent or necessary. A necessary account holds that progress occurs according to a predetermined trajectory towards a set end; the relevant developments are bound to happen regardless of individual or collective intervention. While human action may influence the timing of such change, it cannot alter its direction or outcome. In contrast, a contingent account maintains that moral-political progress is not guaranteed; it depends on the actualisation of particular causes. On this account, history could have taken a different course and human agency shapes both the path and outcome of progressive development. Second, there is the corresponding consideration of whether the agents of progress have creative or catalytic causal agency. A necessary account of causation yields a catalytic account of agency. On this view, the agents of progress still cause progress but are only able to speed up a development that was already going to occur. So the necessary account of causation reduces the significance of human action by stripping agents of the capacity to create paths and ends of progressive development. In contrast, a contingent account of causation supports a creative conception of agency. On this account, the agents of progress are not simply the instruments of an inevitable outcome but the authors of progressive change. Had specific individuals not acted in particular ways, certain moral-political developments might never have occurred. The contingent account affirms the possibility of historical alternatives; things could have turned out otherwise and it is precisely through human agency that progress happened in the way that it did. This entails that agents not only hasten progress but also shape its form, direction, and end.

The dangers of the necessary-catalytic view are evidenced in Kant's conception of progress. Although Kant offers a more complex view from the necessary account advanced by Turgot and Condorcet, he nevertheless maintained that moral-political progress unfolds independent of human intention. However, as Kant recognised, this view introduces a form of agential nihilism. The realisation that their efforts lack causal force would ensure that agents confront the futility of their normative actions in the face of a mechanistic historical process. The problem is deepened in accounts that rely on the unintended consequences of non-normative action as the cause of progress. In such accounts, not only is progress inevitable, but it happens *in spite* of normative intent. Kant failed to explain how intentional normative action can retain meaning when it is disconnected from the course of progressive development.

A more plausible account of causal agency is found in Hegel's account of causation. According to Hegel, the agents of progress are practical people who sense a defect in the existing social order and are motivated to pursue what they perceive to be a normatively desirable change. These agents act intentionally to reshape moral practices and political institutions but their actions produce outcomes that differ from what they intended. Nevertheless, those actions remain normatively motivated. The trajectory of moral-political development is shaped by agents whose efforts are meaningful, even if the historical record diverges from their aims. In this way, Hegel reconciled the mismatch between intention and outcome without lapsing into a causal mechanism that leads to agential nihilism. This allows a conception of progress to be contingent and responsive to creative agency, all whilst acknowledging complexity and unpredictability.

This demonstrates that a conception of progress ought to adopt a contingent account of causation (thus, a creative form of causal agency) and a model in which moral-political progress can be affected by the unintended

consequences of direct action. This stands in contrast to the approaches of Turgot, Condorcet, and Kant that foregrounded non-normative causes and incorporates the insight of Rousseau that actions aimed at reforming moral practices and political institutions can bring about moral-political progress. In addition, by incorporating Hegel's notion that the causal power of normative agency extends beyond its conscious aims, it explains how, although the normative orientation of action ensures that it causes progress, the outcomes that were intended may not always be realised. This account retains the significance of human action and offers a more plausible picture of how moral-political progress unfolds; not through impersonal inevitabilities, but through the uncertain, purpose-driven actions of agents committed to moral and political transformation.

The final question addresses the identity of the agents of progress. Drawing on Hegel's analysis of world-historical individuals, four conditions of progressive agency can be discerned. On this account, the agent of progress must: (a) have thought critically about the moral-political condition of their society; (b) had a vision of the normative change they want to realise; (c) acted in ways that aim to bring this change about; and (d) acquired the means to ensure the success of their action. These four conditions constitute a robust standard for identifying the agents of progress and distinguishing them from those whose influence is merely incidental or whose actions lack normative intent. In conceptualising progressive agency in this way, the account resists the assumption that the agents of progress must be conquerors or military leaders. This framework makes clear that progressive agency can also be exercised through non-military means.¹¹ Of

¹¹ For example, consider Mahatma Gandhi and Lech Wałęsa. Mahatma Gandhi: (a) critiqued colonialism and injustice in India; (b) envisioned *swaraj* (self-rule) rooted in nonviolence and moral discipline; (c) mobilised civil disobedience and non-cooperation; (d) built a political movement that exerted transformative pressures on British colonial rule. Lech Wałęsa: (a) critiqued the oppressive and anti-democratic nature of Soviet communism in Poland; (b) sought democratic reform, civil liberties, and national self-determination; (c) led the *solidarność* movement and organised mass resistance; (d) mobilised domestic and international support and eventually held power to oversee the process of democratisation. These examples illustrate that non-military leaders can also meet the conditions of progressive agency.

course, the consequences of progressive agency may be unintended, even as they remain causally linked to the agent's normative action.

A further implication of this framework is that it enables a distinction to be made between agents of progress and moral-political activists. The former initiates and articulates a novel vision of the moral-political future. The latter works to actualise a vision that has already been outlined. Both play important roles in the broader process of progressive change, but only the former are agents of progress in the sense that they are the original source of moral-political progress. The agents of progress are not philosopher kings in the Platonic sense but practical people whose vision for a better future is fused with an ability to bring about meaningful action. Agents of progress disrupt prevailing social orders not through contemplative withdrawal but through their engagement with the world. The decisive criterion is that the agent of progress exercises intentional, normatively motivated, and causally effective action in service of what they perceive to be moral-political progress. By emphasising the role of conscious critique, visionary imagination, deliberate action, and the capacity to affect change, the four-part model provides a compelling framework for identifying the agents of moral-political progress.

The outstanding question is how to determine whether the vision articulated by the agent of progress and the change they seek constitutes an instance of moral-political progress. After all, the four-part model specifies the conditions for who *has the capacity* for progressive agency but does not, in itself, guarantee that the content of the vision brings about a desirable change. An individual may meet all the criteria of progressive agency and yet advocate a transformation that is, on substantive evaluation, regressive. To address this, the conception of progress will (a) have to offer an epistemic explanation of how agents of progress come to understand what constitutes a better future and normatively justify the vision of moral-political change, and (b) offer a critical

framework that is capable of assessing those visions and distinguishing between progressive and regressive prospectuses for change even when both emerge from agents who meet the criteria of progressive agency.

This account defends a direct and contingent model of moral-political progress in which change is brought about through intentional, normatively motivated action rather than impersonal forces or non-normative developments. While scientific, technological, and economic advancements create the conditions for progress, they are not causally determinate. Progress depends on agents who deliberately seek to transform moral practices and political institutions in light of a normative vision. This account acknowledges that while the outcomes of such actions may be unintended, they remain causally linked to the agent's normative intent. This affirms a creative account of agency that takes the agents of progress to not merely be instruments of progress but its original authors. A four-part model identifies progressive agency as involving critical reflection on existing conditions, a vision of normative change, purposeful action, and the capacity to realise that change. This model preserves the significance of human agency and accommodates the contingency of causation.

The Historical Element

The historical element of a conception of progress needs to make sense of the apparent directionality of historical change and the relatively stable rate of improvement, detail the form that progressive transitions take, and justify the presumption against the reversibility of progressive change. The analysis examined three accounts of history. The continuous account views history as a gradual, cumulative process where change unfolds smoothly and regressions are only temporary interruptions of the long-run progressive trajectory. The stadial account presents history as a series of discrete stages, progress is the sequential movement through the stages, and backsliding to an earlier stage is not

considered possible under normal conditions. The epochal account sees history as divided into distinct periods, each separated by a rupture that marks an irreversible transition to a new epoch.

The analysis of the Kantian conception of progress demonstrated that the continuous account of history takes moral-political progress to occur in a linear fashion. This model assumes that while temporary stagnations or regressions may occur, they do not disrupt the overall directionality of progress. However, such a view is no longer plausible. It struggles to account for the reality of historical rupture and the extended periods of stagnation or decline that mark the historical record. Far from being a smooth ascent, the history of moral-political development is shaped by long phases of apparent stagnation followed by sudden and transformative change. As such, the reality of the historical record is more consistent with discontinuity than linearity. In addition, the assumption that regressions are temporary underestimates the capacity of reactionary forces to shape historical trajectories for significant stretches of time. Even if a retrospective pattern of progress can be discerned, the non-linear and contingent nature of historical development renders the continuous account of history overly idealised and empirically naïve. The continuous account of history implausibly imposes a tidy narrative on a process that is, in reality, messy and unpredictable.

The analysis of the Enlightenment conception of progress demonstrated that the stadial account of history divides human development into discrete stages and positions societies along a fixed developmental path. The problem with the stadial account of history is that it entails a problematic logic of civilisational supremacy. By linking moral-political progress to the advancement of scientific, technological, and economic capabilities, stadial thinking constructs a rigid, universal model in which all societies are presumed to follow the same trajectory. However, societies are expected to move along these stages at different

rates. As a result, the stadial account introduces a developmental logic that ranks societies as 'primitive' or 'backward' as they are either temporarily behind or permanently incapable of attaining the same level of development. In turn, the stadial account of history justifies both the imposition of a 'civilising mission' and the expropriation of land on the basis of perceived developmental inferiority. Such a framework not only fails to account for the diversity of moral-political forms of organisation but legitimates imperialism under the pretence of progressive necessity.

In contrast, a revised epochal account offers the most plausible framework for the historical element. Hegel's epochal account is no longer plausible since it rigidly periodised history into a fixed sequence of four world-historical epochs. This account not only simplified the complexity of global historical experience but also marginalised non-European forms of political organisation and moral reasoning. However, the underlying structure of the epochal account remains compelling when stripped of its rigid periodisation. On this reformulated account, epochs are defined by the dominant moral-political ideals through which progress is understood. Historical change proceeds through transformative ruptures that replace one normative horizon with another. These ruptures do not occur arbitrarily but emerge from the long-run build-up of contradictions within the prevailing moral-political order. The transition to a new epoch occurs when these contradictions are brought to a head by an agent of progress who both recognises the limitations of the existing normative commitments and articulates a more compelling alternative. So although epochs are internally fragmented and contested, they are, nevertheless, spatially and temporally extended because they hold together as a shared collection of values, moral principles, and political norms.

This revised framework also captures the dialectical nature of progressive change since it recognises that historical change unfolds through a dynamic of

rupture, backlash, and reconciliation. Historical transitions begin with a rupture and the excesses of the revolution that follows provoke reactions that ultimately shape the emergence of a new, more developed normative horizon. These ruptures also explain how stagnations and regressions are part of the historical record because the backlash that follows a revolution contests the actualisation of new normative commitments. However, these setbacks do not negate the progressive orientation of historical development. The epochal model makes clear that once a transition to a new normative framework has occurred, it is not possible to regress to a prior one because the previous moral-political order has been discredited. While institutions may fail to fully actualise the new normative commitments (and may increasingly fail to do so as reactionary forces take hold), the fundamental normative breakthrough cannot be undone.¹² This entails that the possibility of intra-epochal regressions remains a feature of the account of history. Recognising this ensures that the account of history avoids teleological determinism. This makes space for genuine concern about regression and stagnation and places those concerns at the centre of any engagement with the historical dimensions of moral-political progress.

This account does not entail the view that ruptures must necessarily be violent or that suffering is retrospectively justified by the eventual outcome. On the contrary, it is consistent with this framework to adopt a prescriptive requirement to minimise suffering and to pursue progress through non-violent means wherever possible. The presence of ruptures does not demand brutality and necessitate harm; it signals the depth of discontent and the urgency of transformation. In this sense, the account retains space for responsibility and constraint in how progressive change is pursued while affirming the features of how progress unfolds.

¹² Zakaria, F., 2024, defends this position and argues that revolutionary advances are frequently followed by periods of conservative backlash. Zakaria emphasises that although these regressions do not derail the overarching progressive trajectory of historical change, we ought not to be complacent about the stability of institutions that actualise progressive gains. As a result, Zakaria suggests that progressive gains ought to be defended against and vigilance ought to be paid to the ongoing threat of reactionary forces.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the strength of this revised epochal account lies in its descriptive accuracy. It should be preferred because it tracks something true about human history; namely, that it is possible to distinguish between qualitatively different periods defined by distinct moral-political ideals. These are not merely surface-level changes but deep shifts in how the moral-political reality is conceived and organised. The epochal account captures the historical pattern of rupture and transformation, the persistence of periods of stagnation and backlash, and the distinctive structure of progress whereby normative breakthroughs are retained in the collective consciousness even when they are contested and imperfectly realised in practice. As a result, the account offers a historically grounded, conceptually rigorous, and ethically defensible framework for understanding moral-political progress as an uneven, contingent, but nevertheless intelligible process.

In this way, the epochal account provides a powerful and flexible framework for interpreting moral-political change over time. It avoids the problematic features of Hegel's account whilst remaining distinctly Hegelian insofar as it recognises the role of long-term discontent with the normative commitments of a given social order, the significance of ruptures that dismantle the old, and the imperative to actualise new normative commitments within particular historical contexts.

Conclusion – Looking Ahead to Section Two

As a result of this analysis, it becomes clear that many of the most plausible elements for a thick conception of moral-political progress can be found in a Hegelian framework. The task that follows is to refine this Hegelian inheritance to articulate a conception of progress that can address the conceptual challenges that prompt suspicion towards the idea itself.

To reiterate, there are five conceptual concerns. The empirical concern holds that the crises of our time prove that progress is neither inevitable nor possible. The political concern warns that the idea of a normative telos legitimises any course of action that is thought necessary to achieve it. The value pluralist concern challenges the coherence of progress given the incompatible and incommensurable nature of normative commitments. The Eurocentric concern holds that conceptions of progress cannot escape Western developmentalism, which marginalises non-European histories and presents the European model of social organisation as the singular archetype. The historicism concern objects that the concept of progress is bound up with a strong form of historical determinism that undermines human agency.

To reflect on how the reappraised conception of progress might respond to the conceptual concerns, Section Two evaluates how contemporary thick conceptions of progress respond. In particular, it examines the approaches inspired by philosophical pragmatism and the approach outlined by Amy Allen. Pragmatic and functionalist approaches seek to abandon normative teleology altogether and reconceptualise progress without reference to a normative end in order to overcome the conceptual concerns. Amy Allen's approach attempts to retain an immanent account of normativity that can nevertheless avoid collapsing into cultural relativism whilst also retaining a critical and non-Eurocentric perspective. This section critically assesses the extent to which each of these conceptions of progress succeeds in addressing the conceptual concerns. It will ask whether the rejection of normative teleology offers a viable path forward or whether a revised immanent account of normativity provides a more fruitful basis for conceptualising progress. In doing so, it considers how the plausible conception of progress ought to be developed to overcome the conceptual concerns.

Chapter Four: Pragmatic and Functionalist Conceptions of Progress

Conceptions of progress influenced by the tradition of philosophical pragmatism have come to occupy a prominent place in the resurgent literature on progress. These conceptions of progress abandon normative teleology and claim that progress should be understood as the overcoming of local problems instead of the movement towards a normative goal. Functionalist conceptions of progress go a step further and draw on recent research into the evolutionary roots of morality to argue that morality just is that which enables collective social action problems to be overcome.¹ Although these approaches to theorising about moral-political progress are in vogue, I believe there are significant deficiencies that should guide us away from the tradition of philosophical pragmatism. Nevertheless, it is fruitful to analyse pragmatic and functionalist conceptions of moral-political progress for two reasons.

First, pragmatic and functionalist conceptions of progress share the belief that a conception of moral-political progress is a useful tool for political theorists and political actors. Rahel Jaeggi, a contemporary pragmatist, refers to the concept of progress as an 'indispensable socio-philosophical tool for critiquing the contemporary era'.² Philip Kitcher, the pre-eminent functionalist, states that 'like the classical pragmatists, John Dewey in particular, I believe that the notion of social progress is indispensable'.³ So pragmatic and functionalist theorists reinforce the view that the concept of progress can be used to identify the defects of our social order, articulate a programme for progressive change, and recognise regressions that threaten previously secured progressive gains.

¹ For evolutionary accounts of morality, see: Flanagan, O. (2016); Tomasello, M. (2016); Boehm, C. (2012); Krebs, D. (2011); Smith, C. (2009); Joyce, R. (2007); Damasio, A. (2006); Waal, F. de (1996).

² Jaeggi, R., 2023.

³ Kitcher, P., 2017, 46.

Second, pragmatic and functionalist conceptions of progress attempt to address the conceptual concerns put to the concept of moral-political progress.⁴ Analysing how this approach responds to the empirical, political, value pluralism, Eurocentric, and historicism concerns will guide the form that the reappraised conception of moral-political progress will ultimately take.

This chapter begins by setting out the account of philosophical pragmatism put forward by John Dewey and Richard Rorty. I then conduct a non-critical exposition of Rahel Jaeggi's pragmatic conception of progress and Philip Kitcher's functionalist conception of progress, outlining how these conceptions of progress arise out of the tradition of philosophical pragmatism. From there, I detail how these conceptions of progress use the problem-solving approach to respond to the five conceptual concerns. I then show that the pragmatic approach results in incoherent conceptions of progress. To justify this position, I critically assess the normative-teleological element (or lack thereof), causal-agential element, and historical element of the pragmatic and functionalist conceptions of progress to detail their incoherence and insufficiency whilst also making clear what aspects are desirable and ought to be preserved. I conclude by arguing that the incoherence and insufficiency of the pragmatic and functionalist approaches to theorising about progress undermine both the conceptions themselves and their responses to the conceptual concerns.

Philosophical Pragmatism – The Foundations of Pragmatic and Functionalist Progress

Pragmatic and functionalist conceptions of progress trace their roots to the approach of philosophical pragmatism pioneered by John Dewey. For the purpose of analysing these conceptions of progress, we can take Deweyan pragmatism to make three claims.

⁴ Kitcher, P., 2015, acknowledges that the concept of progress has been critiqued for being 'committed to a form of perfectionism that has been exposed, since the days of the Enlightenment optimism, as a utopian fantasy' and for being a 'quixotic attempt to find some common measure for a wide variety of valuable properties that turn out to be incommensurable', 115-116.

First, we ought to accept evolutionary naturalism. For Dewey, human societies are susceptible to the forces of social Darwinism. Societies experience natural selection insofar as they face existential challenges and compete with one another so that only the strongest survive. To survive, societies are required to evolve. Human nature, ethical codes, and social institutions can adapt when they are forced to do so. Therefore, societies are dynamic entities that are required to change in order to survive.

Second, we ought to accept normative instrumentalism. According to Dewey, values, moral principles, and political norms are practical tools that are justified insofar as they enable moral practices and political institutions to take a form that solves a particular problem. As Dewey made clear, this entails that the goal of philosophy is not to uncover an eternal truth but to determine what form the account of normativity ought to take for the purpose of solving problems. For Dewey, 'philosophy is [not] in any sense whatever a form of knowledge... [but] a social hope reduced to a working program of action'.⁵

Third, we ought to reject normative teleology. Dewey argued that since the purpose of philosophy is to detail solutions to societal problems, there is no need for a goal to determine how a society ought to change. Dewey wrote that 'we do not... require a revelation of some supreme perfection to inform us whether or not we are making headway in present rectification' because '[w]e move on from the worse and into, not just towards, the better, which is authenticated not by comparison with the foreign but in what is indigenous'.⁶ The pragmatic idea is that overcoming social problems does not require a normative goal. Philosophical pragmatism argues that it is not necessary to have a vision of the desired end state in order to solve problems because the problem itself and the ills associated with it are enough to motivate rectificatory action

⁵ Dewey, J., 1918, 43.

⁶ Dewey, J., 1922, 195.

that can determine the desirable course of action.⁷ In this way, philosophical pragmatism rejects both the normative and teleological dimensions of a normative-teleological conception of moral-political progress. On the one hand, it claims that no antecedent account of normativity is required and that values, moral principles, and political norms emerge through the process of problem-solving itself. On the other hand, it claims that no external or predetermined goal is required to set out the path of progressive change. Therefore, according to philosophical pragmatism, progress is discovered in the activity of addressing a problem and the normative commitments are validated instrumentally by their practical successes.⁸

When the core claims of philosophical pragmatism are laid out in this way, the first-pass desirability of the approach becomes clear. As the *geistesgeschichte* analysis showed, the strength of the Hegelian approach is that it rejects foundationalism in favour of a historicism that takes our moral practices and political institutions to be the result of contextually specific historical development. However, the problem was that the Hegelian approach lacked a forward-looking perspective. The Hegelian conception of progress struggled to set out a vision of desirable change. It is precisely this problem that philosophical pragmatism sought to address; namely, squaring anti-foundationalism with a forward-looking programme for action. Richard Rorty takes up the mantle of philosophical pragmatism and addresses this point. Rorty finds in Dewey an attempt to move beyond the foundationalist approach to philosophy that he observes running from Plato to Kant. Instead, Rorty intends to pursue a distinctly Hegelian approach that is anti-foundationalist but nevertheless able to direct

⁷ Cf. Sen, A., 2010, for an approach that looks to remove identifiable wrongs to make things *better*, without defining what the *best* end-state looks like.

⁸ To be clear, philosophical pragmatism does not reject normativity altogether. Rather, philosophical pragmatism rejects accounts of normativity that aim to specify the normative standard in advance of practical action. Pragmatic normativity does not derive from pre-given rational structures or historically embedded conditions but through the process of addressing actual problems. On this view, normative commitments are not determined in advance (whether transcendently or immanently) but are discovered and justified within the practice of problem-solving. The force of these normative commitments is instrumental and tested by practical success, not deduced from prior principles or internal necessities.

progressive action. Rorty wrote that '[a]nti-foundationalist philosophy professors like myself... agree with Hegel's thesis that "philosophy is its time held in thought"'. Rorty took this statement to mean that 'human social practices in general, and political institutions in particular, are the product of concrete historical situations, and that they have to be judged by reference to the needs created by those situations'.⁹ When we understand our moral practices and political institutions as such, Rorty claimed that 'the way to think about the significance of the human adventure is to look forward rather than upward: to contrast a possible human future with the human past and present'.¹⁰ For Rorty, the forward-looking plan of action does that which brings about a resolution to a problem that afflicts a society. This is an ongoing programme of action since new problems emerge as old problems are solved. Each time, we identify the problem and then adapt our moral practices and political institutions to solve it. Importantly, Rorty emphasised that this does not mean that philosophical pragmatism aims to be predictive.¹¹ It restrains itself to only ever offer a guide that details how we ought to move forward from the present into a better future.

This makes clear how the approach of philosophical pragmatism can underpin a conception of progress. According to philosophical pragmatism, progress is an ongoing process of problem-solving that dispenses with a normative telos, the movement towards which defines progressive change.¹² Dewey lambasted the 'strange dream-world' we have created which fixates on a 'fixed ideal of a remote good... a vague conception of an unattainable perfection [that is] totally unlike our present world' in order to motivate and guide desirable change. Instead, Dewey argued that the evils we currently endure are sufficient

⁹ Rorty, R., 2007(a), 42.

¹⁰ Rorty, R., 1997(a), 19.

¹¹ Rorty, R., 1997(a), contrasts the lack of predictive capability of philosophical pragmatism with the predictive certainty of dialectical materialism; writing that 'Marx mistakenly thought that Hegel's dialectic could be used for predictive as well as inspirational purposes. This is the form of historicism which Karl Popper rightly criticised as impoverished' and that '[w]hereas Marx... claimed to know what was bound to happen... Dewey denied such knowledge in order to make room for pure, joyous hope', 19-20, 23.

¹² Rorty, 1997(a), 'we do not need to worry about the... grounding of normativity... [but can] just get on with trying to solve what Dewey called "the problems of men"', 97.

to ‘stimulate us to remedial action’ and that overcoming our collective problems is ‘the only progress conceivable or attainable by man’.¹³ Or, as Rorty put it, ‘[i]nstead of seeing progress as a matter of getting closer to something specifiable in advance... [it is] measured by the extent to which we have made ourselves better than we were in the past rather than by our increased proximity to a goal’.¹⁴ So, according to philosophical pragmatism, progress is solving problems and not the movement towards a normative goal.

With philosophical pragmatism laid out, I can now unpack Rahel Jaeggi’s pragmatic conception of progress and Philip Kitcher’s functionalist conception of progress. Following this two-part exposition, I set out how these conceptions of progress attempt to address the conceptual concerns and then critically evaluate the coherence of both conceptions of progress and the broader project of theorising about progress from a pragmatic perspective.

Rahel Jaeggi – A Pragmatic Conception of Progress

Rahel Jaeggi adopts the pragmatic idea that instead of conceptualising progress in terms of a movement towards a normative goal it should be understood as the solving of problems. However, Jaeggi builds upon these foundations to argue that the solving of problems cannot be interpreted as bringing about a change that makes our current social situation better. This is because the notion of ‘better’ requires a normative telos to determine that the change occurred in a desirable direction.¹⁵ Instead, Jaeggi argues that we should understand progress in terms of the processes that bring about the transformations that solve social crises.¹⁶ According to Jaeggi, a process that brings about a progressive transformation is one that results from a cumulative

¹³ Dewey, J., 1922, 195-196.

¹⁴ Rorty, R., 1997(a), 28.

¹⁵ Jaeggi, R., 2023.

¹⁶ The critical section of this chapter addresses the problem that the pragmatic approach cannot determine what counts as a social crisis in the absence of an adjacent account of normativity.

learning process. This process requires that lessons are learnt from the successes and failures of the past and carried forward into the transformations of the present.¹⁷ It is for this reason that Jaeggi's conception of progress is processual because it requires that we look into the processes through which solutions to crises come about.¹⁸ As César Ortega-Esquembre put it, Jaeggi's conception of progress is 'a processual notion and not a substantial one' because it is the process of transformation and not the ends that are achieved that determines whether a change is an instance of progress.¹⁹ Therefore, according to Jaeggi, progress is following a course of action that has learned the lessons of the past in order to bring about a transformation that will solve a social crisis in the present.

Jaeggi conceptualises regress as the inverse of progress insofar as it is the result of a process that has not learned the lessons of the past. As Jaeggi writes, 'failing or deficient learning processes also exist in which, although change occurs, the nature of the reaction nevertheless makes it appear doubtful that something has in fact been learned'.²⁰ Jaeggi reiterates that we need not fixate on the end that is achieved. All that is required for a social change to be regressive is that the process of social transformation takes a defective form.²¹ Jaeggi sums up this distinction when she writes that 'progress is a cumulative process of problem solving and experimentation, while regression is a systematic blocking of this process'.²² For Jaeggi, all that matters for whether a change is progressive or regressive is the process that brings a social transformation about.²³

¹⁷ The critical section of this chapter also addresses the problem that implicit normative notions are required to determine what lessons are learnt from the past.

¹⁸ Jaeggi, R., 2023.

¹⁹ Ortega-Esquembre, C., 2024, 994.

²⁰ Jaeggi, R., 2018, also sets out her account of stagnation, 'A case of a failed learning process is... one marked by stagnation rather than transformation, one in which problems are not recognised or a specific problem is not addressed. Here change as such is blocked', 230.

²¹ The critical section of this chapter also addresses the problem that an antecedent account of normativity is required to discriminate between a 'defective' and 'appropriate' learning process.

²² Jaeggi, R., 2023, 11.

²³ Ortega-Esquembre, C., 2024, 'Regression is defined as a blockage in the learning process and a deficient way of dealing with social crises... it thwarts learning processes that had already been achieved historically, and in this sense offers inadequate solutions to the problems or crises society is facing', 996.

There are three further components of Jaeggi's conception of progress.

First, Jaeggi believes that crises emerge from contradictions and dysfunctions within particular forms of life.²⁴ For Jaeggi, forms of life refer to the collective ways of organising and giving meaning to life that shape how people live together. These shared norms, practices, and institutions are historically contingent insofar as they are affected by the socio-cultural inheritances of the context and dynamic insofar as they have the ability to change when contradictions and dysfunctions arise.

Second, Jaeggi thinks that only collective actors are capable of responding to a crisis that has emerged within a particular form of life. For Jaeggi, a form of life is a collective phenomenon because it is constituted by shared norms, practices, and institutions. As such, the contradictions or dysfunctions that arise within it cannot be resolved through individual action alone. Instead, resolution requires the intervention of a collective agent that is embedded in, yet capable of critically reflecting on, the form of life. For Jaeggi, social movements exemplify this type of collective agent. Social movements are taken to be capable of challenging existing structures and bringing about alternative norms, practices, and institutions that can respond constructively to the current crisis. So, for Jaeggi, the agents of progress take a collective form.

Third, the change in the form of life would not be a revolutionary rupture in which the current form was abandoned and replaced with an entirely new one. On the contrary, Jaeggi maintains that when a contradiction or dysfunction arises, the historical learning process that has led to the current form of life should be allowed to continue in order to overcome the problem. For Jaeggi, progress is an evolutionary rather than revolutionary exercise in overcoming contradictions and dysfunctions. So although Jaeggi claims that 'progress occurs,

²⁴ Jaeggi, R., 2018.

in a Hegelian spirit, as a kind of continuity in discontinuity and discontinuity in continuity', the continuity ensures that the old form of life is built upon rather than overthrown when the crisis is overcome.²⁵ Therefore, for Jaeggi, progress does not do away with the current status quo but builds upon it by amending certain aspects of the current form of life in order to resolve its contradictions or dysfunctions.

These components round out how Jaeggi builds up the foundations of philosophical pragmatism to understand progress as an open process of social transformation that resolves a contradiction or dysfunction in the form of life. Collective actors affect the practices, norms, and institutions of the form of life by following an appropriate process of social transformation. The social transformation then enables the form of life to overcome its present deficiencies.

Jaeggi's account represents a paradigmatic expression of a pragmatic conception of progress insofar as it eschews foundational norms and teleological endpoints in favour of an iterative, historically situated process of problem-solving. Before offering a critical assessment of this account, it is useful to unpack a second attempt to theorise about progress within the pragmatic tradition. Philip Kitcher offers a related yet distinct conception of progress grounded in problem-solving and historical responsiveness. Examining Kitcher's functionalist conception of progress alongside Jaeggi's pragmatic conception allows for a comprehensive assessment of the strengths and limitations of the approaches to theorising about moral-political progress inspired by philosophical pragmatism.

Philip Kitcher – A Functionalist Conception of Progress

Although Kitcher draws from Deweyan and Rortyan pragmatism he refers separately to moral progress, ethical progress, and social progress and it is

²⁵ Jaeggi, R., 2023, 11.

not immediately clear how each relates to the concept of moral-political progress. However, the concept of moral-political progress refers to how individuals ought to act and how society ought to be organised; it provides an account of the moral practices and political institutions that we ought to adopt for our society to make an all-things-considered improvement. For functionalists, society ought to take the form that is free of instability and conflict and individuals ought to act in accordance with the ethical code that enables this to happen. When considered in this way, it is clear that moral progress, ethical progress, and social progress are all part of the functionalist conception of moral-political progress. Moral progress and ethical progress relate to changes in the values, moral principles, and political norms that enable a society to overcome a problem. Social progress relates to the change in moral practices and political institutions that result in the problem being overcome.²⁶ So moral, ethical, and social progress are all relevant to Kitcher's functionalist conception of moral-political progress.

The core claim of Kitcher's functionalist conception of moral-political progress is that values, moral principles, and political norms are a 'social technology'.²⁷ According to Kitcher, our ethical code is a social technology orientated towards solving 'social instability and conflict'.²⁸ To unpack the underlying cause of social instability and conflict, Kitcher claims that they are the result of 'altruism failures' which are 'situations in which members of a group do not act in ways that acknowledge the interest of others'.²⁹ Our innate self-interest and parochial scope of concern cause collective action problems when groups of people come to live together. Our selfishness leads to the emergence of free rider

²⁶ Kitcher, P., 2017/2015, supports the idea that when material resources are below a sufficient level, moral-political progress requires improvements in our material economic condition. As Kitcher puts it, 'forms of economic progress can contribute to social progress, since material resources are needed for people to achieve their goals' but makes clear that we ought not to 'confuse what may often be a *means* to social progress with social progress itself' (2017, 54). Kitcher reiterates that '[a]t some stages of human history, human welfare is advanced by providing the material resources that sustain life from day to day: food, water, medicines, shelter, and so forth' and claims that up until those levels are met 'progress would be made by transitions in which their chances of being supplied are increased' (2015, 126).

²⁷ Kitcher, P., 2021, 52.

²⁸ Kitcher, P., 2011, 225.

²⁹ Buchanan, A., Powell, R., 2018, 77.

problems, our want for resources leads to the tragedy of the commons, and our desire for status brings us into conflict with one another.³⁰ To rectify this and create the conditions in which a flourishing society can emerge, functionalists claim that it is the 'original function of ethics is to remedy those altruism failures provoking social conflict'.³¹ Kitcher reveals the influence of philosophical pragmatism when he states that his functionalist conception of progress adopts a 'Deweyan picture of ethics as *growing* out of the human social situation' in which we have '*invented* ethics' and 'made it up' in response to the 'difficulties of [our] social life'.³² This marks an important element of the functionalist account. Not only does Kitcher claim that ethics is that which emerged in order to solve social problems but he also states that fulfilling this function is what morality is.

To explain this point, it is worth distinguishing between etiological functionalism and constitutive functionalism.³³ Etiological functionalism is about the historical reasons why a function exists. It is the view that the function of a system is determined by the role it played in promoting the reproduction of that system over time.³⁴ For example, with regard to pain, etiological functionalism claims that the ability to feel pain causes organisms to avoid injury and that it is passed on because the avoidance of injury increases their chance of survival. As such, the avoidance of injury is taken to be an effect of pain that has causally contributed to the inheritance of the ability to feel pain. With regard to morality, etiological functionalism claims that an ethical code enabled collective action problems to be overcome and that it is passed down over time because the overcoming of collective action problems supports the continuation of society.

³⁰ Kitcher presents an individualistic diagnosis of social problems, attributing them to failures of human psychology. This framing does not consider the possibility that structural factors cause social problems and that the solution to them lies in fixing structural conditions. Even altruistic people could face problems of class-based inequality, institutional racism, and gendered hierarchies. As a result, Kitcher overlooks the importance of structural considerations.

³¹ Kitcher, P., 2011, 223.

³² Kitcher, P., 2011, 3 [original emphasis].

³³ Buchanan, A., Powell, R., 2018, 78.

³⁴ Luco, A., 2019, defines etiological functionalism as where an item 'has an effect that contributed causally, through some mechanism of selection, to the historical persistence of either the item itself or the system containing the item', 434.

As such, overcoming collective action problems is taken to be an effect of an ethical code that causally contributes to that ethical code continuing across generations.³⁵ In contrast, constitutive functionalism is about explaining what a thing is in functionalist terms. It is the view that the function of something is determined by its role in the current system. For example, with regard to pain, constitutive functionalism claims that pain *just is* that which causes injury avoidance behaviour. With regard to morality, constitutive functionalism claims that morality *just is* whatever system enables a society to solve its collection problems. Therefore, in short, etiological functionalism explains a function by its historical contribution to the survival of a system, whereas constitutive functionalism defines something by the role it currently plays within that system.

Crucially, Kitcher adopts etiological functionalism *and* constitutive functionalism. For Kitcher, an ethical code just is that which over subsequent generations has solved the collective action problems that a society has faced.³⁶

Endorsing etiological *and* constitutive functionalism is a very strong position. Even if we accept that there are some parts of an ethical code that perform the function of overcoming a collective action problem (for example, norms of fairness that condemn free-riding), there appear to be others that do not in any way have the same effect (for example, norms of equality that prohibit discrimination and norms of charity that promote efforts of international aid).³⁷ To respond to this challenge, Kitcher would likely expand the functional view to claim that whilst the origins of morality were to overcome collective action problems the broader function of morality is to overcome the range of threats and

³⁵ Luco, A., 2019, describes the etiological functionalism of morality as how it 'promote[s] the impartial well-being of an indefinitely extended population of agents who interact within the context of a social dilemma', 434.

³⁶ Buchanan, A., Powell, R., 2018, 'For Kitcher, morality just is a social technology for coping with altruism failures. In other words, Kitcher not only espouses what might be called etiological functionalism, or the hypothesis that morality first emerged as an adaptation for solving altruism failures; he also holds that this function is *constitutive* of morality – all that there is to anything that could properly be called morality is the performance of this function', 78.

³⁷ I am grateful to David Miller for providing this example and highlighting this point.

social problems that a society faces. Kitcher might argue that although norms related to kindness, gratitude, rescue, and redistribution do not directly solve collective action problems they foster the trust and goodwill necessary to form a cohesive society. For Kitcher, values, moral principles, or political norms that do not directly solve collective action problems can still be understood in functionalist terms insofar as they solve problems by promoting cooperation, reducing conflict, and ensuring social stability. Therefore, in its broadest terms, the etiological and constitutive functionalist position is that morality is what regulates behaviour, resolves conflict, and maintains order in a way that enables a society to overcome dilemmas and move into the future as a cohesive unit.

With this clarification in mind, it becomes clear how Kitcher builds upon philosophical pragmatism. Kitcher retains the central tenet of philosophical pragmatism when he states that ‘we make progress by problem-solving’.³⁸ For Kitcher, progress occurs when the values, moral principles, and political norms of a society adapt to overcome a problem that threatens social cohesion. On Kitcher’s functionalist conception of moral-political progress, progress is the overcoming of social problems and morality is the tool that enables that progress to be brought about. Therefore, progress is not understood in terms of moving towards a desired goal but in terms of changes to the ethical code that move us away from a present problem.

Although the claims of etiological and constitutive functionalism are highly contestable, the purpose of this analysis is not to challenge them on ontological grounds. This analysis will not critique the claim that values, moral principles, and political norms exist because they serve the function of overcoming social dilemmas. On the one hand, constitutive functionalism as an

³⁸ Kitcher, P., 2015, 123.

ontological position has already been powerfully challenged.³⁹ On the other hand, the purpose of this analysis is to assess how Kitcher's functionalist conception of progress as a conception of progress inspired by philosophical pragmatism (i.e., as a conception of progress that abandons normative teleology) responds to the five conceptual concerns levelled against the concept of moral-political progress. Therefore, Kitcher will be assessed in terms of how coherent his functionalist conception of moral-political progress is and how convincingly it is able to respond to the conceptual concerns.

Pragmatic and Functionalist Progress – Response to Conceptual Concerns

Rahel Jaeggi's pragmatic conception of progress and Philip Kitcher's functionalist conception of progress draw upon the core claims of philosophical pragmatism to respond to the conceptual concerns. In particular, the abandonment of normative teleology and the conceptualisation of progress in terms of solving problems form the basis of their response.

The empirical concern states that we face an interrelated set of crises, the scale and magnitude of which prove that humanity and society are not moving towards an ever-better future and that previous progressive achievements can be undone. Pragmatic and functionalist conceptions of progress claim that when we theorise teleologically and conceptualise progress as the movement towards a normative telos and regress as the movement away from a normative telos the fact that a society has regressed or is regressing undermines the concept of progress. However, on pragmatic and functionalist accounts, progress is conceptualised as the solving of problems and regress is conceptualised as the

³⁹ Buchanan, A., Powell, R., 2018, argue that 'even if etiological functionalism is correct, it is quite another matter to defend constitutive functionalism'. They critique constitutive functionalism on the grounds that some instances of progress cannot be understood in terms of a change in the ethical code that solves a social problem. Instead, the justification for such examples of progress 'must come from standards of morality that are independent of evolutionary functionalist considerations' and are 'ultimately non-functionalists', 78-86.

failure to solve a problem or as the prevention of a solution from being found.⁴⁰ In addition, these conceptions of progress retain the idea that societies are dynamic entities that possess the ability to adapt in the face of existential threats. Therefore, for pragmatic and functionalist conceptions of progress, regression does not discredit the concept of progress. On the contrary, it entails that there are opportunities for progress in that there are problems to be solved and challenges to be overcome. To make this point clear, consider the two heads of the empirical concern. On the one hand, the concern is that the range and scale of contemporary problems mean that we are regressing or that we will regress in the future. On the other hand, the concern is that historical examples of regression mean that we cannot have progressed over time. However, the pragmatic and functionalist approaches take both progress and regress to be possible. Since societies are adaptable, they overcome problems, but so too can prior solutions to previous problems come undone and solutions to new problems cannot be found. In either case, regress will then occur. However, regress or the prospect of regress does not invalidate the fact that prior progress has occurred or that it could continue into the future. If anything, it should focus our attention on overcoming the problems of the present that the empirical concern highlights. So pragmatic and functionalist conceptions of progress push back against the empirical concern on the grounds that problems should be understood as opportunities for progress and not be taken to undermine the concept of progress.

The political concern states that when an end-goal is outlined any course of action can be justified as long as it brings about that ultimately desirable state of affairs. Pragmatists and functionalists argue that since there is no telos determining the final end to which all societies are heading there can be no impulse to bring it about at all costs. Instead, they argue that the impulse is only ever to solve a problem or crisis. So, according to their conceptions of progress,

⁴⁰ Jaeggi, R., 2024.

the Berlinian concern about a 'final solution' is avoided because progress simply requires solving local problems as and when they arise.

The value pluralism concern states that since values are incompatible (trade-offs between values occur) and incommensurable (there is no common measure of comparison), claims of all-things-considered progress either ignore conflicts between values or rely on questionable assumptions that such conflicts do not exist. The core claim of philosophical pragmatism is that since there is no normative standard that acts as a benchmark against which claims of progress can be made, the problem of dealing with the incompatibility and incommensurability of values evaporates. Pragmatists argue that any change to the values, moral principles, and political norms that alter moral practices and political institutions in a way that overcomes a problem or crisis is considered an all-things-considered improvement. As such, they claim that there is no need to rank values and adjudicate between theoretical trade-offs because changes are judged according to the effect they have on overcoming problems. The change is justified as long as the change in values, moral principles, or political norms results in a solution to the problem. Therefore, pragmatists and functionalists claim that their conceptions of progress never have to weigh up gains and losses because they are exclusively concerned with context-specific problem-solving. Since solving the problem is all that matters, the concern of value pluralism is said to be circumvented because any change that solves a problem is an instance of progress no matter the trade-offs.

The Eurocentric concern states that the concept of progress is inherently tied to a Western worldview that reinforces a narrative in which European modernity is the sole valid path of development, excludes the histories of non-European societies, and frames non-European societies as stagnant or backward. Problem-solving conceptions of progress argue that since problems are local, the solutions are local. As such, pragmatists and functionalists claim that all societies,

no matter their form of social order, have the ability to solve their problems and progress.⁴¹ The implication is that the history of every society should be considered important because each history is relevant to the local process of problem-solving. In turn, this implies that non-European societies need not conform to the European archetype.⁴² The requirement that a society must overcome its problems to progress means that it can retain its unique socio-cultural identity and need not conform to a model of social organisation adopted by any other context. As a result, pragmatists and functionalists can claim that their local problem-solving orientation enables them to overcome the Eurocentric concern.

The historicism concern states that the concept of progress is tied to a strong form of historicism, which, as a result of assuming a teleological direction to history, implies a form of determinism that undermines human agency by taking historical change to be governed by fixed laws rather than individual actions and unpredictable developments. Conceptions of progress that draw from philosophical pragmatism claim that they can make sense of the forward-moving directionality of history without introducing a form of determinism. For them, history can be understood in terms of an iterated sequence of problem-solving. Societies cease to exist because they fail to overcome the problems they face. Societies that continue to exist solve their problems and ward off the threats of regression as and when they arise. Therefore, pragmatists and functionalists claim that the directionality to history can be observed in societies that achieve progress and prevent regress by solving problems and, since the continued existence of a society is contingent upon it overcoming its problems, determinism is not baked into the account of history. As such, problem-solving conceptions of progress claim that their accounts of history overcome the historicism concern because successful societies observe a directionality to their course of

⁴¹ Jaeggi, R., 2018, stresses that progress is possible within any form of life and that the critique necessary to achieve it must be immanent and historically informed, 221-226, 311.

⁴² Kitcher, P., 2011, 248.

development without relying on deterministic ideas of fixed natural laws and set paths of progressive change.

Therefore, pragmatists and functionalists claim that as a result of abandoning normative teleology and understanding progress in terms of solving problems they are able to overcome the conceptual concerns. However, whilst I admire the ambition, I believe that their approach to theorising about progress results in incoherent conceptions of progress. To justify this position, I critically assess the normative-teleological, causal-agential, and historical elements of the pragmatic and functionalist conceptions of progress and argue that these problems undermine their responses to the conceptual concerns.

Normative-Teleological Element – Deficient, Indeterminate, Uncritical

Conventionally, conceptions of moral-political progress reference a normative goal and understand progress in terms of movements that diminish the distance between the actual and desired states of society.⁴³ As such, these normative-teleological conceptions of moral-political progress require an account of normativity to be set out in advance in order to determine the telos of moral-political progress. In contrast, conceptions of progress inspired by philosophical pragmatism deny that the normative-teleological element is required for a thick conception of moral-political progress. Instead of conceptualising progress in terms of ‘progress *to*’, pragmatic and functionalist conceptions of progress understand progress in terms of ‘progress *from*’ and make claims of progress without referencing a normative goal. As such, pragmatic and functionalist conceptions dispense with both the normative aspect and the teleological aspect. On the one hand, they claim that progress does not require an account of normativity to be set out in advance. On the other hand, they claim that progress does not require an end goal to orientate and direct

⁴³ Kitcher, P., 2021, 24; 2017, 48; 2015, normative-teleological conceptions of progress ‘assess the relation between states by considering their distance from some goal state’, 117.

progressive change. Instead, pragmatists and functionalists understand moral-political progress as overcoming problems and moving away from problematic states of affairs.

One charge levelled against these conceptions of progress is that there is actually no difference between them and normative-teleological conceptions of progress. This objection states that just like normative-teleological conceptions of progress, pragmatic and functionalist conceptions reference an end (the end of finding a solution to a problem) to make claims of progress. However, it is not that pragmatic and functionalist conceptions of progress abandon the idea of a goal *per se* but that they abandon the notion of a *normative* goal. Kitcher acknowledges the concern that ‘the pragmatic idea of progress as problem-solving collapses into a teleological concept’ because ‘the identification of a situation as problematic already presupposes a goal, to wit the goal of finding a solution’. In response, Kitcher makes clear that the ‘goal is not some final state against which all successive stages are to be measured’.⁴⁴ Rather, it is ‘an immediate, *local*, end’. In this regard, pragmatic and functionalist conceptions of progress dispense with the notion of a ‘*final end*’ and maintain that there is ‘no ideal state to which they would move closer by overcoming the difficulty now pressing’.⁴⁵ Therefore, according to Kitcher, the distinction between normative-teleological and pragmatic conceptions of progress is that the latter do not reference a final end that is determined by an antecedent account of normativity. So pragmatists and functionalists claim there is no need for an account of normativity in order to make claims of all-things-considered desirable change.⁴⁶

However, pragmatic and functionalist conceptions of progress must do three things. First, they must identify genuine social problems. Second, they must

⁴⁴ Kitcher, P., 2015, 117.

⁴⁵ Kitcher, P., 2017, 49.

⁴⁶ Musschenga, A. L., Meynen, G., 2017, reiterate this point and argue that the ‘advantage of functional criteria seems to be that they are normatively neutral: they do not require an evaluative base – a set of moral beliefs, values, principles and rules on which judgements of moral progress are based’, 8.

select a legitimate solution to genuine social problems. Third, they must be able to critique the status quo that results from the legitimate solution to the genuine social problem. Going against the grain of recent scholarship, I argue that the abandonment of normativity means that pragmatic and functionalist conceptions of progress are unable to fulfil any of these requirements without implicitly relying on an antecedent account of normativity. Therefore, I argue that pragmatic and functionalist conceptions of progress are incoherent and fail on their own terms.

In terms of identifying genuine social problems, Kitcher states that a 'situation is prima facie morally problematic if there is some individual or group of individuals who resent the fact that the accepted moral framework permits it'.⁴⁷ According to Kitcher, a problem is determined by an individual or group raising their hand and vocalising what they perceive to be an undesirable state of affairs. The issue with Kitcher's proposal is that his functionalist conception of progress has no means by which to ensure that problematic situations will be identified as such by the aggrieved parties. Consider the requirement that the aggrieved parties raise their hand and vocalise their unhappiness with the status quo. This requires that marginalised members of a society can recognise that their position is undesirable. However, as Jan-Christoph Heilinger points out, the 'dynamics of *exclusion* and of *false consciousness*... make it difficult to even *perceive* a situation as problematic'.⁴⁸ Consider the Hindu caste system. At its most forceful, the caste system consigned Dalits ("untouchables" or "outcasts") to the lowest position in the social hierarchy. They were marginalised, excluded, and impoverished. This discrimination and ostracisation entrenched the rigid social structure in the consciousness of individuals and communities. Through the religious notions of karma (their position at the bottom of the social hierarchy was a result of actions committed in a past life) and dharma (fulfilling the duty of their current social role leads to a better position in the social hierarchy in their

⁴⁷ Kitcher, P., 2021, 34.

⁴⁸ Heilinger, J-C., 2021, 5.

next life), the cultural reinforcement of the hierarchy through social segregation and prohibitions on inter-caste marriage, and the internalisation of caste norms, some members of that caste were unable to perceive their situation as problematic. In such a situation, the marginalised acquiesce to the status quo and become reconciled to their position in the social hierarchy. Therefore, it is not clear that the afflicted persons would perform their role as the functionalist conception of progress requires. As Heilinger puts it, often in cases where the problems of society are the most acute do we find that an 'entire community, including its oppressed or marginalised members, holds the belief that the status quo which so unequally distributes advantages in the community is *not* problematic'.⁴⁹ Without reference to an external account of normativity that can label a situation as problematic, the functionalist account is unable to ensure that ostensibly problematic situations are perceived as such.

Acknowledging the limits of Kitcher's account, Jaeggi suggests that we look to the '*dysfunction* and *crisis* inherent in the concept of a problem'. According to Jaeggi, problems are identified as 'moments of *crisis* and *dysfunction*... leading to obstacles and hindrances within the course of affairs of our practical social life'. Jaeggi suggests that this removes the subjective element of the identification of a problem and replaces it with an objective element; i.e., 'something that happens in the world and not in our reaction to it alone'.⁵⁰ However, this significantly restricts the range of problems that the conception of progress can address. There may be a long-standing issue that would be the kind of problem to which a resolution ought to count as an instance of progress that is, nevertheless, not a crisis or disaster. For example, consider the historical practice of suttee in which widows were expected to immolate themselves on their husband's funeral pyre. In the context of such a patriarchal system, the practice was framed as a virtuous act of loyalty and spiritual purity. Within this framework, the practice of suttee did not present itself as a dysfunction or crisis; rather, it was perceived as a ritual

⁴⁹ Heilinger, J-C., 2021, 6.

⁵⁰ Jaeggi, R., 2021, 122-123.

that reaffirmed the social and religious order. However, the abolition of the practice seems to be the kind of change that Jaeggi would want to consider an instance of progress. This suggests that a pragmatic account needs to be able to identify problems that do not present themselves as crises or dysfunctions. Jaeggi appears to recognise this concern and suggests that even before the moment when a critical situation arises we can pre-empt the rupture by locating in a society 'dysfunctions, dissonances, and inner contradictions'.⁵¹ As a result, Jaeggi claims that the pragmatic account need not start from the subjective viewpoint of 'the individual's feelings' but from the objective viewpoint of 'an analysis of the tension within social formations'.⁵² However, an analysis of tension within a social formation cannot be objective. False consciousness ensures that when the lid is lifted on a problematic society there will be no observable signs of dysfunction, dissonance, and disquiet. The problem with the practice of suttee was precisely that it was sustained by women who had internalised it as morally meaningful. As a result, its moral abhorrence was obscured to many living within the society at the time.⁵³ In reply, Jaeggi might argue that tensions need not be explicit and manifested because hidden and repressed tensions can still be observed. However, the problem is that within a false-consciousness society there need not be any tension at all. False consciousness ensures that the oppressed, as well as the discriminated and ostracised, acquiesce to their social status such that no tension is generated within that ostensibly problematic form of social order. Therefore, the only way Jaeggi can locate a problem is by an implicit appeal to the antecedent normative notion that condemns the marginalisation, social exclusion, and oppression that gives rise to such false consciousness. Without smuggling in normative notions, Jaeggi cannot locate the genuine social problems that require a resolution.

⁵¹ Jaeggi, R., 2021, 124.

⁵² Jaeggi, R., 2021, 125.

⁵³ The practice of suttee was eventually banned by the British colonial authorities in 1829 after Christian missionaries and Indian campaigners condemned the practice as morally indefensible and scripturally unjustified. This demonstrates that the practice did not end after precepting a social crisis but after moral reflection that confronted the practice whilst it was being observed.

As a result, the identification of genuine problems on either the functionalist or pragmatic account is forced to rely on normative commitments to label a situation as genuinely problematic in the first place.

In terms of detailing solutions to social problems, the core of the philosophical pragmatism approach is that progress is whatever solves the social problem. There are obvious problems with a crude interpretation of this approach to theorising about progress. For example, consider a totalitarian regime that uses violence to suppress dissent to maintain its grip on power. Imagine that an opposition leader emerges, raises their head above the parapet, and calls out the problem as they see it. The opposition movement gains momentum and a demonstration takes place where people state their grievances and outline their desired solution to the problem. In this situation, two solutions present themselves. On the one hand, the regime could enter into a dialogue and come to a resolution that respects the interests and wishes of the opposition movement. On the other hand, the regime could forcibly end the demonstration, send the dissenters to a gulag or concentration camp, and repress any lingering sentiment of opposition to the regime. Both solutions solve the problem; the problem no longer exists after either course of action is taken. Therefore, both solutions appear progressive according to problem-solving conceptions of progress. Inevitably, pragmatic and functionalist conceptions of progress attempt to move beyond the crudeness of this approach by differentiating between legitimate and illegitimate solutions to social problems.

Kitcher argues that legitimate and illegitimate solutions can be distinguished via an 'ideal conversation in which the perspectives of stakeholders with respect to both situations were represented'.⁵⁴ When all those who will be affected by the change endorse the solution, a resolution to the problem has been found. Accordingly, progress is enacting the resolution to the

⁵⁴ Kitcher, P., 2021, 38.

problematic situation that all those affected by it have endorsed. To deny that the repressive course of action is a legitimate resolution to the problem, Kitcher stipulates that '[e]ach participant has complete knowledge of the wishes of others, and of the ways in which their wishes are modified through the course of their interactions with one another' and that 'a discussion of an ethical problem (generated by a functional conflict) is assessed against a standard of replicating the course of an ideal deliberation under conditions of mutual engagement in which all members of the human population can participate'.⁵⁵ However, it is at this point that Kitcher's conception of progress introduces a normative notion into the supposedly normatively neutral approach. Kitcher requires that the participants in the conversation endorse a principle of mutual respect and engage with each other as equal partners in the conversation. As Amia Srinivasan puts it, 'the *ideal* nature of the deliberation that is supposed to allow Kitcher to distinguish between genuine and non-genuine moral problems, and between legitimate and illegitimate resolutions to those problems, all without appealing to antecedent moral principles' requires that the 'participants in the ideal conversation must endorse and act on a principle of basic moral equality: they must recognise the moral worth of those with whom they deliberate'.⁵⁶ The problem for Kitcher is at this point 'we have a moral notion being built into our understanding of moral progress, via the putatively non-moral notion of an "ideal" method of deliberation'.⁵⁷ Kitcher's functionalist conception of progress smuggles in normative terms in order to make claims of progress in a normatively neutral manner. Even though Kitcher sets up a particular kind of procedural ideal (a procedure that determines what qualities a deliberation must have in order to produce a progressive outcome) and not a particular kind of substantive ideal (an end goal that is ultimately desirable), antecedent normative notions are smuggled into what is supposed to be a normatively neutral apparatus. This suggests that antecedent normative notions are required to

⁵⁵ Kitcher, P., 2011, 343-345.

⁵⁶ Srinivasan, A., 2021, 107-108.

⁵⁷ Srinivasan, A., 2021, 108.

determine what counts as a legitimate solution. Kitcher responds to this challenge by arguing that there is an innate aspect of our moral psychology, our ‘*responsiveness*’, that renders us capable of ‘detecting the attitudes of others and adjusting actions to bring us into harmony with those with whom we interact’.⁵⁸ But the starting point of the functionalist account is that the parochial limits of our moral psychology give rise to altruism failures that cause collective action problems. It is inconsistent to then appeal to altruistic moral psychology in order to ensure that legitimate solutions to problems will occur without referencing antecedent normative terms. As such, Kitcher is forced to return to his implicit norm of basic moral equality to ensure that all parties are sympathetic to each other and willing to agree upon a desirable resolution.

Jaeggi argues that we can select legitimate solutions by looking into the social conditions and processes that bring them about. For Jaeggi, when a crisis arises, as long as the pre-conditions for progress are in place, the outcome will be a legitimate solution. However, there are normative notions baked into the supposedly normative neutral idea of the appropriate social conditions and processes. For instance, if we return to the caste society, Jaeggi would want to say that because the discriminated and ostracised are viewed as unworthy of equal consideration, the appropriate social conditions are not in place. Jaeggi would conclude that any solution is illegitimate because the conditions to arrive at it were not sufficiently inclusive. The problem with this response is that Jaeggi appeals to normative notions in order to determine which social conditions and processes are appropriate and, therefore, generate legitimate solutions to social crises. In the caste case, Jaeggi integrates a notion of basic moral equality into the supposedly normative neutral pre-conditions. Therefore, Jaeggi also fails to identify suitable solutions without appealing to antecedent normative notions.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Kitcher, P., 2021, 147-148.

⁵⁹ Jaeggi explores this issue in greater detail in *Fortschritt und Regression* (2023). An English translation of the text is forthcoming but was not available at the time of writing.

So, again, pragmatic and functionalist conceptions of progress are forced to rely on implicit normative notions in order to determine what counts as a legitimate solution to a particular problem.

A subsequent problem with pragmatic and functionalist conceptions of progress is that they are indeterminate. Even after antecedent normative notions have been appealed to in order to determine what counts as a legitimate solution, the conceptions of progress are unable to choose between mutually exclusive solutions. There are two parts to this indeterminacy.

First, consider how the functionalist conception of progress might respond to the problem of slavery in nineteenth-century America. To overcome the problem, enslaved people and enslavers enter into a conversation where they consider each other's perspective, have knowledge of each other's wishes, and understand how they can meet the desires of the other party. Imagine that, as a result of this conversation, multiple solutions emerge such as gradual emancipation (phasing out slavery by emancipating enslaved children whilst older enslaved people remain in slavery for the remainder of their lives), compensated emancipation (compensating enslavers for their loss as an incentive for them to allow their enslaved people to be freed), containment (containing slavery to the states in which it already exists but preventing its expansion into new territories in the hope that it eventually ceases over time), or colonisation (sending freed African Americans to a free colony in Africa, such as Liberia, so that they were not present in and integrated into American society). In such a case, the ideal conversation details mutually exclusive solutions that are agreeable to both the enslaved and the enslavers. The problem with Kitcher's functionalist conception of progress is that it cannot be option-comparative. As long as each of these is proposed by the ideal conversation and endorsed by both parties, there are no grounds upon which one is preferred over the other. As long as the solution arises from the ideal conversation, then one solution cannot be

'more right' than another and no solution can be 'better' than another so long as they both result in the problem being overcome. This illustrates that in addition to problem-solving conceptions of progress incoherently relying on normative notions to determine legitimate from illegitimate solutions, they are unable to select between mutually exclusive legitimate solutions when they arise. On top of this, Kitcher's approach suffers an additional shortcoming. Since Kitcher relies on an ideal deliberation procedure to select legitimate solutions the range of options would not be option-complete. This is because there may also be solutions that result from ignoring the perspective of one participant. For example, the requirement to accommodate the perspective of the enslavers ensures that abolition (immediate emancipation) cannot be endorsed by the deliberation procedure. Even if Kitcher's procedural ideal required participants to go beyond considering each other's perspective to justify their claims to each other and set aside any interest that cannot be justified in this way, it is not clear that the interests of the slavers can be ignored. Kitcher's procedure requires that the enslaved consider and appreciate the interests of the enslavers. Since neither party can appeal to normative notions to disregard the interests of the other, the interests of the enslavers cannot be discarded. As a result, Kitcher's procedural ideal means that the range of options could not include the option of abolishing slavery. This illustrates how Kitcher's deliberation procedure cannot yield a full range of options and is restricted to offering up solutions that are arrived at as a mutually endorsed compromise. Therefore, Kitcher's deliberation procedure is neither option-comparative nor option-complete; it is indeterminate and cannot provide the full range of potential courses of action.

Second, consider that there may be multiple simultaneous problems, each of which requires a different solution, but that the solution of one problem may hinder the ability to solve another. In such cases, progress involves choosing between conflicting courses of action and prioritising one course of action over another. As a result, pragmatic and functionalist accounts must be able to weigh

up problems to determine which is the most pressing and which solution with its negative consequences is to be preferred. The problem with problem-solving conceptions of progress is that they cannot weigh up gains and losses between rival courses of action to adjudicate between the trade-offs. Without an evaluative standard for comparing competing goals or values, these conceptions cannot determine which solution is more urgent or more desirable. All they can do is respond to problems as they arise and treat any problem resolution as progress without a principled basis for choosing between incompatible solutions. When problems require prioritisation or the acceptance of trade-offs, problem-solving conceptions of progress lack the evaluative tools to decide which course of action should be pursued and which should be delayed or denied.

So, in addition to pragmatic and functionalist conceptions of progress relying on implicit normative notions in order to select legitimate solutions, problem-solving approaches are indeterminate insofar as they cannot choose between rival solutions to a problem and they are unable to weigh up trade-offs between multiply exclusive solutions to concurrent problems. In addition, Kitcher's functionalist approach is option-incomplete insofar as it cannot offer the appropriate full range of solutions to potential problems. As a result, whilst these approaches aim to avoid the dangers associated with the normative-teleological element of a conception of moral-political progress, they do so at the cost of coherence and normative force.

In terms of challenging the solution to a social problem, the absence of a normative telos renders pragmatic and functionalist conceptions of progress unable to critique the resultant status quo. As long as the solution is stable and does not cause a subsequent problem that needs to be solved, there are no grounds upon which the moral practices and political institutions that arose from

the problem-solving process can be critiqued.⁶⁰⁶¹ Wayne Hudson and Wim van Reijen put this objection to Rorty. They asked, 'in what terms would you develop a moral criticism of current social rules'.⁶² Rorty accepts that the pragmatic approach cannot critique the current social order and concedes that '[t]he only way we can criticise current social rules is by reference to utopian notions which proceed by taking elements in the tradition and showing how unfulfilled they are'.⁶³ Since doing so requires a normative telos, pragmatic and functionalist accounts of normativity are unable to challenge the moral practices and political institutions of the resultant status quo.

Since problem-solving conceptions of progress rely on normative notions to identify genuine problems and select legitimate solutions, the project of making all-things-considered claims of progress in the absence of an account of normativity does not succeed. Pragmatic and functionalist conceptions of progress become incoherent when they rely on antecedent normative notions to make claims of progress. In addition, the absence of a normative telos renders the accounts unable to criticise the resultant status quo. Therefore, problem-solving conceptions of progress fail; an antecedent account of normativity that corresponds to a normative telos is required to guide moral-political change.

Causal-Agential Element – Ex-Post Causal Agency

Pragmatic and functionalist conceptions of progress face a challenge with regard to their account of causal agency. Conceptions of progress inspired by philosophical pragmatism accept that the causal force lies in the intended

⁶⁰ Małecki, W., Voparil, C., 2022, stress this deficiency in the functionalist account and criticise it for 'severing us from the independent standards and external checks needed to keep our beliefs from falling into error', 6-7.

⁶¹ Buchanan, A., Powell, R., 2018, argue that '[e]ven if morality first developed because it fulfilled certain functions crucial for survival it is undeniable that at some point human beings developed the capacity to articulate the norms they have been following and the moral concepts they have been using, to subject them to critical appraisal, and to affirm, abandon, or modify them accordingly' and stress that this capacity exists 'irrespective of functional considerations', 86.

⁶² Hudson, W., Reijen, W. van, 2006, 25.

⁶³ Rorty, R., 2006, 24.

consequences of normative action because progress occurs when the agents of progress act in a way that causes the moral practices and political institutions to change so that a problem can be overcome. In addition, a contingent account of causal agency is retained because without such agential input the problem would not be solved and moral-political progress would not occur.⁶⁴ However, these conceptions of progress run into difficulty when specifying who the agents of progress are.

Pragmatic and functionalist conceptions of progress are able to look back into history, find examples of moral-political progress, and discern who contributed to solving historical problems. However, it is not clear whether such conceptions of progress are able to look into the future and provide an account of who the agents of progress will be. David Miller makes this point in an adjacent critique of Lea Ypi's account of avant-garde agency (an account that also attempts to locate causal agency in the absence of an antecedent account of normativity).⁶⁵ As Miller argues, locating agency 'seems much easier to do looking backwards than looking forward' because we know what changes were progressive and can identify who brought those changes about.⁶⁶ However, this identification of causal agency *ex-post* does not necessarily lead to an account of causal agency *ex-ante*.

To make this point clear, consider Rorty's examples of causal agency. Rorty looked back through history and claims that 'Martin Luther King, Betty Friedan and leaders of the gay rights movement' are individuals who brought about a progressive change on the grounds that they 'incited social hope by proposing programs of action, and by prophesying a better future'.⁶⁷ Putting it in

⁶⁴ Rorty, R., 1997(a), highlights the contingency of both moral-political progress and moral-political regress when he states that because philosophical pragmatism rejects 'the view that things would *inevitably* go well' then we are forced to 'grant the possibility that the vanguard of humanity may lose its way, and perhaps lose our species over a cliff', 22-23.

⁶⁵ Ypi, L., 2012.

⁶⁶ Cf. Miller, D., 2013, 94-95.

⁶⁷ Rorty, R., 2007(b), 60.

more broad terms, Rorty referred to the agents of progress as 'leaders with sufficient imagination to propose bold yet concrete solutions'.⁶⁸ So, according to Rorty, the agents of progress are individuals courageous enough to take on a problem and bring about a resolution to it. Herein lies the issue with the philosophical pragmatism account of causal agency. Because progress is defined in terms of what solved a problem, pragmatic and functionalist conceptions of progress can only ascribe agency once we know how history turned out. Extrapolating these labels of agency into the future commits an inductive fallacy; namely, just because an individual or group solved a problem in the past does not mean that they will do so in the future. For example, Rorty also looked back and located progressive agency in the Supreme Court of the United States of America. Rorty wrote that '[m]ost of the moral progress that took place in the second half of the twentieth century was brought about by the Supreme Court's invocation of constitutional rights'.⁶⁹ Just as the Supreme Court of the late twentieth century proposed bold solutions to perceived problems, so too does the Supreme Court of today. Nevertheless, I imagine Rorty would be hesitant to locate progressive causal agency in the Roberts Court given its assault on reproductive rights, voting rights, labour rights, and environmental protections. At this point, Jaeggi might interject that if we locate causal agency in collective actors, then we can be more confident in projecting an *ex-post* account of causal agency into the future. However, imagine it is the mid-1970s and we use Jaeggi's approach to identify progressive causal agency. We might look back to the Indian Independence Movement (1857-1947), U.S. Civil Rights Movement (1950s-1968), and Anti-Vietnam War Movement (1964-1973) to find examples of collective causal agency in religious, leftist, proletarian, and student movements. As such, during the mid-1970s, it would have seemed safe to ascribe progressive causal agency to collective social movements of a similar form. However, the Iranian Revolution (1979) would have soon demonstrated the problem with forecasting that account of causal agency into the future. Just because a type of social

⁶⁸ Rorty, R., 1997(b), 213.

⁶⁹ Rorty, R., 1996, 152-153.

movement brought about progressive change in the past does not mean that a similar social movement will bring about progressive change in the future. Therefore, the collective *ex-post* account guarantees *ex-ante* causal agency no more than the individual *ex-post* account. On either account of causal agency, it is not enough to look back in history, find examples of progressive causal agency, and suggest that those agents of progress or similar groups will bring about all-things-considered desirable change today.

This highlights a core limitation of pragmatic and functionalist conceptions of progress. Since these conceptions identify progressive agency retrospectively they cannot specify in advance who the agents of progress will be. Without a forward-looking criterion for progressive agency, these accounts collapse into a purely descriptive historiography that offers no normative or predictive insights into the nature of moral-political change.

An additional issue arises with Jaeggi's collective account of progressive agency. Jaeggi's collective account marginalises the role of individual actors in the causal mechanism of moral-political progress. As the *geistesgeschichte* analysis demonstrated, individual agents are able to initiate changes that otherwise might not have occurred without their intervention. This ability can be realised by individuals founding and leading social movements as a means of bringing about the change that they envision. Of course, the social movements that they establish can result in outcomes that were not originally intended. However, the social movement should not be conceived of as an entity with agency independent of the individuals who constitute and direct them. Rather, social movements should be understood as the means through which individual agents enact their visions of progress. Although social movements produce outcomes that diverge from the original intention and can outlive the agency of the initiating agent of progress, they do not possess causal agency independent of the individuals who bring them into being and set them in motion. Therefore, contrary to Jaeggi's emphasis

on collective progressive agency, the individual agent of progress remains the locus of initiative and imagination with social movements serving as the instruments that amplify their agency, albeit imperfectly in ways that the agent might not have intended.

Reaffirming the role of individual agents of progress preserves the possibility of identifying progressive agency *ex-ante*, not by looking for certain types of collective, but by recognising the power of individuals who are willing to confront the status quo and imaginatively propose concrete alternatives. Inevitably, this account of causal agency is more challenging because it is not based on historical examples. Nevertheless, *ex-ante* causal agency can be identified in the agents who are able to articulate new values, moral principles, and political norms, and change moral practices and political institutions to move in line with them. Although this *ex-ante* account is fallible, it enables a conception of progress to point to prospective agents of progress in advance so that support can be given to their progressive endeavours.

Although conceptions of progress inspired by philosophical pragmatism cannot provide an *ex-ante* account of causal agency, there are two aspects worth preserving.

First, it is worth preserving the emphasis on the contingency of progress and regress. Kitcher stresses that progress ‘depended on events that might easily have gone otherwise’. Even though we can look back into history and observe that ‘[e]xceptional people emerged to speak with unusual clarity and to display unusual courage... [in order to spark] social and political discussions, out of which new beliefs and practices emerge’, Kitcher reminds us that it is ‘all too easy to imagine daring checked by reasonable prudence, and a passive continuation of the status quo’.⁷⁰ Kitcher provides a warning that it would be an error to

⁷⁰ Kitcher, P., 2021, 14.

assume that just because moral-political progress happened in the past it will continue into the future. For Jaeggi, the contingency of progress entails that previous progressive gains are at risk of coming undone. As such, we ought to remain vigilant against the ongoing possibility of regress.⁷¹ Just as it is an error to assume that moral-political progress will continue, it is an error to assume that moral-political regression will not occur. Taken together, the emphasis on contingency encourages a vigilant and proactive mindset that focuses on protecting as well as achieving all-things-considered improvements in our social reality.

Second, it is worth preserving the emphasis on the relationship between the critical and constructive aspects of progressive agency. Kitcher emphasises that it is ‘critics who probe the path to the present’ because it is most often the ‘cadre of critics’ who ‘contribute proposals’ for progressive change.⁷²⁷³ So whilst there is a distinction between criticism and construction (criticism does not necessarily facilitate construction), Kitcher demonstrates that those who critique the present social order are well placed to articulate the form that ought to replace it. This is because it is a pre-requisite of moral-political progress that the status quo is challenged. Progress can only occur when we no longer acquiesce to the pre-existing moral practices and political institutions. Criticism of the current social order opens up a range of possible futures and so creates the space in which progress can occur. In opening up this space, critics have the first pass at constructing the form of social order that they think ought to be brought about. Therefore, the account of causal agency ought to maintain that agency is located in individuals who possess both a critical ability to challenge the status quo and a constructive ability to articulate the form of moral-political reality they want to bring about. Whilst the actual progressive change may be the result of a collective endeavour (whether class-based, religious, civil rights, anti-colonial,

⁷¹ Jaeggi, R., 2024.

⁷² Kitcher, P., 2017, 63.

⁷³ Kitcher, P., 2021, 98.

environmental, or otherwise), it is the dual critical and constructive capacity of the agent of progress that remains decisive. So although the collective endeavour is the means by which the vision is enacted, the critical-constructive agency of the individual remains the creative origin of moral-political progress.

Therefore, rejecting an antecedent account of normativity causes deficiencies in the causal-agential aspect of a conception of progress. Nevertheless, the causal-agential element ought to emphasise the contingency of progress and regress, locate progressive agency in individuals, and stress the importance of their critical and constructive capabilities. Whilst social movements and other collective formations often serve as the vehicles through which progressive change is realised and taken beyond its initial intention, their agency remains rooted in and dependent upon the individuals who initiate, shape, and lead them.

Historical Element – Incomplete Understanding and Insufficiently Critical

Pragmatic and functionalist conceptions of progress advance a revised continuous account of history. On this account, history is the ongoing process of problem-solving and conceptualised as a long continuum without distinctly defined periods. As Kitcher put it, problem-solving conceptions of progress conceptualise history as a ‘continuous temporal process’ that does not ‘presuppose a division of some time period into discrete stages’.⁷⁴ This entails that progressive transitions are incremental and occur gradually whenever a problem is solved. In this way, the account of history is cumulative because the solutions to prior problems are built upon when new problems arise and are overcome. As Kitcher wrote, once a transition has occurred there will be further ‘potential transitions from that successor state’ and since there is ‘no “perfect end”... progress could continue indefinitely’.⁷⁵ Even though regressions can

⁷⁴ Kitcher, P., 2017, 47.

⁷⁵ Kitcher, P., 2017, 59.

undo the solutions to prior problems, subsequent progress can be made once problem-solving resumes. This post-regression problem-solving need not retrace the same steps and result in a restoration of the prior status quo. Rather, post-regression progress can solve problems in new ways such that novel paths of progressive development can be followed.

There are two deficiencies with the pragmatic-functionalist account of history.

The first deficiency relates to how the account understands the actual record of history. Because the account views history as a single continuum of progressive development it cannot make sense of the interconnected nature of transitions that occur at a similar time in history. Understanding that a certain time period has a shared set of factors that affect the course of progress enriches the account of history. For example, consider the French Revolution. On the pragmatic-functionalist adoption of the continuous account of history, the French Revolution is understood as a local solution to the problem of the economic and political resentment of the Third Estate. However, this ignores wider factors that influenced the French Revolution. The French Revolution was influenced by the American Revolution and influenced by ideas such as Rousseauian popular sovereignty, Montesquieu's separation of powers, and Voltaire's critique of absolute monarchy. In turn, subsequent revolutions of the nineteenth century, such as the Haitian Revolution, the Irish Rebellion, the Belgian Revolution, the Polish November Uprising, and the Springtime of Nations (the European revolutions that began in 1848), were all influenced by the successes and failures of the French Revolution. Therefore, viewing the French Revolution on its own fails to appreciate that the long nineteenth century had a common set of philosophical, political, economic, and social factors that affected how progressive transitions unfolded. Instead, viewing the French Revolution as part of a distinct period of history in which transformative events influence one

another provides a richer understanding of the historical record. As such, the pragmatic-functionalist continuous account of history is descriptively insufficient because it understands history to be a sequence of siloed transitions where each one responds only to its own problem with its own solution.

This account of history also makes it harder to differentiate transitions of progress from circular changes or transitions of regress. If each problem is considered on its own terms and the only relevant consideration is whether or not the course of action solves the problem at hand, then the account of history struggles to distinguish progressive solutions from regressive ones. Consider the French Revolution and the sequence of transitions from the Ancien Regime, the French Revolution of 1789, the First Republic, the First Empire, and the Bourbon Restoration. When these transitions are placed on one continuum so that they are only considered in the context of the problem that preceded it, each transition appears to represent a progressive resolution to a prior problem. For example, the Bourbon Restoration can be viewed as a progressive resolution to the instability of the Hundred Days and the tumult of the First Empire. However, if history is not viewed as a continuum of problems to be solved, then it can be seen as a circular transition that returns France to the monarchical pre-Revolution status quo. Jaeggi may push back here and argue that on her pragmatic conception of progress the cumulative learning process entails that each counter-revolution generated a learning such that the entire sequence of events can be seen as a progressive continuum. However, this stretches the continuous account to the point of absurdity. Imagine that the same cycle of revolutions and counter-revolutions repeated itself ten times over and that only with the establishment of the Eleventh Republic was stability in France finally achieved. It is nonsensical to label this sequence of events as progressively continuous on the grounds that each change represents an experience from which some lesson could be learned. The cumulative learning defence cannot dismiss the charge that viewing history

as an ongoing continuum blinds the account of history to circular patterns and instances of regress.

The second deficiency relates to how critical the pragmatic-functionalist account of history can be to the actual path of historical development. Since history is viewed as a continuum of problem solutions, pragmatists and functionalists cannot look back and point out that had a certain development been otherwise, we would now be enjoying a preferable moral-political reality. As long as a solution to a problem is found, the account of history is unable to say that an opportunity was missed. Since the only thing that matters is solving the problem, the statement that a sub-optimal outcome remains in place because a more optimal solution was available and not taken does not make sense. The actual sequence of events that solved the problem represents an optimal solution. As such, the account of history cannot retain a critical position with regard to the actual path of historical development.

Again, Hudson and van Reijen put this objection to Rorty. Since philosophical pragmatism evaluates doctrines 'in terms of their historical success', they questioned whether that makes it difficult for a pragmatist to 'maintain a rationally justifiable critical approach to the way things turn out? To the path which historical tendencies take?'.⁷⁶ Rorty concedes that 'there is something conservative about pragmatism' but argues that 'devotion to concrete historical contents is something one loses at one's peril'. In addition, Rorty warns that without concrete examples the account of progress 'falls into utopianism in the bad sense, when people begin to kill each other for abstract principles'.⁷⁷

However, Rorty sets up a false dichotomy. It is not the case that an account of history either adheres to the historical record and relinquishes the ability to be critical about the ways things turned out or disregards the actual record of history

⁷⁶ Hudson, W., Reijen, W. van, 2006, 24.

⁷⁷ Rorty, R., 2006, 24.

in order to say that things could have been better had they turned out completely differently. An account of history can avoid dangerous utopianism by respecting the path-dependent nature of history. The account of history can accept that past events and circumstantial limitations constrain the range of options available for progressive development. We cannot and should not envisage a history and a future untethered from reality. However, the account of history need not go too far and introduce a form of historical determinism. The account of history need not assume that things could not have turned out otherwise because prior events constrained the trajectory of development. An account of history can remain faithful to the actual course of history whilst also accepting that at certain junctures the contingency of progress entails that things could have turned out differently. So the concern against a utopian account of history can be satisfied without tethering ourselves to the actual path that history happened to take.

An account of history that is not problematically utopian but retains a critical ability has two desirable features. First, it ensures that the account of history need not condone periods of suffering that form part of the actual record of history. The critical ability enables us to condemn harmful transitions and say that the path of historical development would have been better had those transitions not taken such a horrific form. Of course, it may be the case that certain transitions can only take a violent form. Overthrowing a genocidal regime almost certainly requires the taking up of arms and a violent struggle. We should not shy away from violent transitions when there is no other alternative. Nevertheless, non-violent and peaceful transitions should always be preferred. The imperative is to minimise the harm in progressive transitions and to condemn unnecessarily harmful transitions where they form part of the historical record. Second, when looking forward, the critical reflection on the past may suggest avenues through which the course of progressive development can be corrected. This enables us to learn from past mistakes and be aware of our ability to put right historical wrongs.

In addition, there is an aspect of the pragmatic account that we ought to retain. This account of history rejects the view that each path of progress will end up converging on a form of social order akin to European modernity. Rorty emphatically rejected this view when he wrote that we 'would do well to abandon the notion that there is some final worldview to which the world's civilisations are destined to converge. A decent, even utopian global society could contain dozens of worldviews... They might have nothing more in common than the conviction that humiliation and cruelty are terrible evils, evils that men and women of goodwill can join together to overcome'.⁷⁸ Retaining this insight ensures that a conception of moral-political progress does not become entangled in Eurocentric assumptions about rationality, secularity, or liberal-democratic norms as universal endpoints. Instead, it allows for the recognition that progress may take culturally embedded and contextually specific forms, grounded in different civilisational traditions, histories, and ethical frameworks. In this way, the account of history preserves its humility by recognising that no single culture or society holds a monopoly on what moral-political progress must look like.

Therefore, although pragmatic-functionalist conceptions of progress update the continuous account of history by emphasising continuity, contingency, and problem-solving, ultimately, they are descriptively and normatively insufficient. Its failure to account for the interconnected nature of historical transitions and its limited capacity for critical evaluation of the historical record undermine its usefulness as an account of historical progress. An adequate account of history must do more than describe sequences of problem resolution; it must also recognise historical patterns, distinguish progress from regress, and retain the critical capacity to assess not only what did happen, but what might have happened and what ought to have happened. It must allow us to condemn suffering, identify missed opportunities, and advocate

⁷⁸ Rorty, R., 1997(b), 212.

for the redirection of historical trajectories where necessary. At the same time, it must avoid utopian detachment by acknowledging the path-dependent constraints and cultural specificity of historical development. So, ultimately, the deficiencies of the pragmatic-functionalist view make clear that a reappraised continuous account of history ought not to be adopted. Nevertheless, it reveals that an adequate account of history must include a sensitivity to historical context and contingency, a critical stance towards the actual course of events, and an openness to multiple forms of modernity and moral-political development.

Conclusion – Beyond Pragmatic and Functionalist Progress

The philosophical pragmatism approach to theorising about moral-political progress attempts to respect the Hegelian turn whilst providing a forward-looking programme for all-things-considered change. However, pragmatic and functionalist conceptions of progress run into a range of challenges when they attempt to construct a conception of moral-political progress without referencing an antecedent account of normativity. The result is a set of conceptions that are ultimately incoherent on their own terms. These conceptions rely on normative notions to identify genuine problems, select legitimate solutions, and critique social outcomes, even as they deny the necessity of an antecedent account of normativity and a normative telos. This incoherence fatally undermines their internal consistency and their theoretical ambition. In turn, the incoherence undermines the purported strength of pragmatic and functionalist conceptions in addressing the five conceptual concerns. Since these conceptions smuggle in the normative standards they claim to reject, their ability to respond to the empirical, political, value pluralism, Eurocentric, and historicism concerns collapses. Their rejection of a normative telos was supposed to be the key to circumventing these concerns, but if such a rejection is incoherent, then so too are the responses that derive from it.

Nevertheless, analysing pragmatic and functionalist conceptions of moral-political progress yields positive insights regarding aspects that a conception of progress ought to retain. The normative-teleological element must remain; a conception of progress must refer to an antecedent account of normativity that can determine the goal of progressive change. The causal-agential element ought to emphasise the contingency of progress and regress, retain an individual account of causal agency, locate progressive causal agency *ex-ante*, and foreground the critical and constructive ability of the agents of progress. The historical element ought not to refer to a continuous account of history, be able to critique the actual path of historical development, and be able to understand the directionality of history in pluralistic terms.

Therefore, philosophical pragmatism and neither the pragmatic nor functionalist conceptions of progress form the template upon which a conception of moral-political progress ought to be developed. However, the following chapter endeavours to realise the ambitions of this project – its anti-foundationalism, sensitivity to historical contingency, and appreciation of multiple plausible forms of social organisation – whilst incorporating the essential normative-teleological, causal-agential, and historical capacities that a thick conception of moral-political progress must possess.

Chapter Five: Amy Allen's Conception of Progress and the Methodological Resources of Michael Walzer

Since conceptions of moral-political progress cannot abandon normative teleology, a plausible conception must incorporate a normative-teleological element that is coherent and able to address the conceptual concerns.

Amy Allen takes up this task in *The End of Progress: Decolonising the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*. In particular, Allen addresses the Eurocentric concern in two parts.¹ First, Allen claims that a conception of progress is Eurocentric when its philosophy of history looks back and uses the Enlightenment path of development to ground its account of normativity. To remedy this, Allen argues that we ought to abandon the backward-looking notion of 'progress as fact' and do away with its commitment to a strong philosophy of history. Instead, Allen suggests that claims of progress (either historical or contemporary) are made with reference to an independently justified and contextually specific normative telos. Second, Allen claims that the normative telos must be grounded in a way that falls neither into the trap of foundationalism nor that of relativism. To avoid the trap of foundationalism, Allen argues that the normative telos must be grounded immanently (i.e., within the social world). To avoid the trap of relativism, Allen advocates for 'metanormative contextualism' – a normative account which states that whilst first-order normative judgments are objectively true or false within a particular context the normative standard itself is contingently justified. Taken together, Allen argues that the immanent account of metanormative contextualism enables the conception of progress to overcome the Eurocentric concern.

¹ Allen, A., 2016, presents these in the opposite order (to avoid foundationalism we resort to immanent normativity, to avoid relativism we resort to 'progress as a fact'). Since I accept Allen's criticism of 'progress as a fact', I have presented the logic of her argument in this form. This emphasises the problems with an immanent account of normativity and highlights how Allen's account of metanormative contextualism is supposed to respond to them.

Allen's approach shows how a normative-teleological conception of progress can overcome the Eurocentric concern. However, I believe Allen's approach can be strengthened. To this end, I begin by outlining Allen's approach to theorising about moral-political progress. I argue that the limitations of Allen's approach arise from its methodological reliance on Theodore Adorno and Michel Foucault. Instead, I show how these shortcomings can be overcome by turning to the methodological resources of Michael Walzer. Although Walzer is not a theorist of progress, I demonstrate that his normative and epistemic methods enable an alternative immanent account of normativity to be adopted. I argue that this alternative immanent account of normativity provides a more robust grounding for the normative-teleological element than the account of metanormative contextualism. I then argue that this normative-teleological framework enables a reconceptualisation of modernity so that it can be understood as neither a scientific, technological, or economic condition nor a temporal ideal derived from a Eurocentric interpretation of historical development but a moral-political condition in which the minimal requirements for human flourishing are met. This normative understanding of modernity responds to the Eurocentric concern by allowing multiple forms of modernity, each a distinct form of life that, whilst culturally and historically diverse, satisfies the basic conditions necessary for human flourishing. In addition, I demonstrate that the account of social criticism illuminates how agents of progress come to think critically about their moral-political condition and formulate a vision for change. Whereas Walzer points to leftist politics as the force behind social change, I draw from his focus on political action to clarify how progressive outcomes are the result of activists who work to bring about a particular moral-political vision. Finally, although Walzer does not articulate a philosophy of history, his methodological approach enables a clearer understanding of how normative transformations underpin historical transitions. As a result, I use Walzer's methodological resources to develop a novel conception of moral-political progress that builds upon the critical insights of Allen's approach.

Allen begins by defending the concept of progress as a tool for political theorising. Allen writes that ‘when we engage in the project of critique, we are critiquing existing social relations in light of some kind of conception of the better, whether that is framed positively in terms of some ideal we are trying to achieve or more negatively (as I would favour framing it)’. Allen follows through by outlining a negativist conception of progress that builds upon Foucault’s desire to bring about the ‘minimisation of relations of domination’ and Adorno’s desire to ensure ‘the avoidance of catastrophe’.² However, Allen stresses that even such a negativistic project ‘appeals to some kind of forward-looking notion of progress understood as a moral political imperative or goal that we are striving to achieve’.³ For Allen, her ‘negativistic forward-looking conception of progress’ states that ‘what would constitute progress in a forward-looking sense is minimising relationships of domination and transforming them into non-dominating, mobile, reversible, and unstable power relations’.⁴ Therefore, Allen shows that a normative telos is an essential component of a conception of progress whether it takes a positive or negative form. The problem Allen identifies, as the subtitle of *The End of Progress* suggests, is that the dominant approaches to grounding a forward-looking normative telos have profoundly Eurocentric implications.

To clarify the Eurocentric concern, Allen outlines how the forward-looking aspect of progress as ‘a moral-political imperative, a normative goal that we are striving to achieve’ has often been determined via reference to a backward-looking development narrative.⁵ Allen labels the backward-looking aspect ‘progress as fact’ and describes it as a ‘judgement about the development or learning process that has led up to “us”, a judgement that views “our”

² Allen, A., 2019, 83.

³ Allen, A., *et al.*, 2016, 226.

⁴ Allen, A., *et al.*, 2016, 249.

⁵ Allen, A., 2016, 7.

conception of reason, “our” moral political institutions, “our” social practices, “our” form of life as the result of a process of sociocultural development of historical learning’.⁶ According to Allen, the Eurocentric concern arises when the ‘normative principles that serve to orient the forward-looking conception of progress is justified by the backward-looking story about how “our” modern, European, Enlightenment moral vocabulary and political ideals are the outcome of a learning process’.⁷ This is because a normative telos justified in this way entails a hegemonic form of modernity. The history of post-Enlightenment Europe is taken to be *the* normatively relevant developmental narrative and, as such, enshrines the ‘developmental superiority of our own point of view’.⁸ The superiority of this perspective introduces a unidirectional path of development in which all non-European contexts converge on the European archetype. This is why Allen states that the European form of modernity is ‘bound up with complex relations of domination, exclusion, and silencing of colonised and racialised subjects’.⁹ Allen concludes that when ‘the forward-looking conception of progress as an imperative depends on the backward-looking claim about progress as a “fact”, then... the normative perspective... [is] Eurocentric at best and, at worst... obscuring the racialised aspects of European modernity and thereby reinforcing them’.¹⁰ So any conception of progress that references a normative goal that is determined via reference to the Enlightenment history of development will entrench a European vision of modernity that, in turn, contributes to either the downgrading, disregard, or detrimental treatment of non-European contexts.

To combat this Eurocentrism, Allen argues that we need to divorce the backward-looking ‘progress as fact’ from the forward-looking ‘progress as imperative’; retaining the latter whilst abandoning the former.¹¹ Crucially, this

⁶ Allen, A., 2016, 12.

⁷ Allen, A., 2016, 14.

⁸ Allen, A., 2015, 523.

⁹ Allen, A., 2016, 19.

¹⁰ Allen, A., 2016, 25.

¹¹ Allen, A., 2016, 226.

does not prohibit historical claims of progress. It is worth emphasising this point because it has been widely misunderstood. Payrow Shabani, Bruce Robbins, and John Lundy all critique Allen on the grounds that there is no substantive difference between progressive change in the past and progressive change in the present or future. They argue that Allen makes a categorical error when she attempts to retain the latter whilst abandoning the former. As Lundy puts it, drawing a ‘categorical distinction between forward and backward looking conceptions of progress is a mistake’ because there is no ‘fundamental difference between positive change in the past and positive change in the future’.¹² Of course, on the one hand, Lundy is correct; there is no categorical difference between progress in the past and progress in the present or future. However, on the other hand, as a critique of Allen, it entirely misunderstands her position. Allen accepts that backward-looking claims of progress, which she refers to as ‘progress in history’, are categorically the same as forward-looking claims of progress made in the present. However, Allen distinguishes “[p]rogress in history” ... from the more robust conception of “historical progress” and argues that we ought to only reject the latter insofar as it is used to ‘justify or vindicate our own normative point of view’.¹³ Allen argues that we ought to abandon the notion of ‘historical progress’ and dispense with its ‘claims to broad-based historical learning and sociocultural development’ that ‘serve to underwrite the normative perspective’ of a conception of progress.¹⁴ Therefore, Allen’s position is that although historical claims of progress are permissible (‘progress in history’), we ought to give up the ‘progress as fact’ approach that determines what progress will be reading out of the post-Enlightenment history of European development (‘historical progress’).

With this in mind, Allen argues that the only thing claims of progress require (whether contemporary or historical) is a normative standard that can act

¹² Lundy, J., 2018, 38.

¹³ Allen, A., 2017, 682.

¹⁴ Allen, A., 2016, 32.

as a benchmark towards which progressive change can be orientated and against which progress can be judged. As Allen put it, to make 'a claim about progress (or regress) having taken place' all that we need is a 'normative standard that we could judge ourselves as having more or less closely approximated or achieved'.¹⁵ With such a normative standard in place, Allen writes that the 'backward- and the forward-looking conceptions of progress can never be fully disentangled, for as soon as one articulates a normative standard of any sort, one can use it to make judgements about what has constituted progress up to now and what would constitute progress in the future'.¹⁶ Whether in the past or in the present, progress is the movement of the moral practices and political institutions of a context closer to the form detailed by the normative telos. It is for this reason that Allen alludes to Adorno's adage in the title, *The End of Progress*. Divorcing 'progress as fact' from 'progress in history' and 'progress as imperative' results in a 'second meaning of the phrase "the end of progress", a meaning that draws inspiration from Adorno's dictum that "progress occurs where it ends": the idea that progress in the future is possible only if we jettison the ideological Eurocentric narrative of historical progress as a "fact" of modernity'.¹⁷ In other words, the concept of progress can only be retained if the account that determines the normative telos is justified without reference to the story of European development.

The question that arises is how to ground the normative account that forms the teleological aspect of the thick concept of progress. To answer this, Allen makes two moves.

First, Allen outlines her 'desire to avoid foundationalism'.¹⁸ In contrast to the Hegelian historical-learning-process approaches that reference the backward-looking 'progress as fact', Kantian and post-Kantian approaches

¹⁵ Allen, A., 2017, 681-682.

¹⁶ Allen, A., 2016, 229.

¹⁷ Allen, A., 2019, 75.

¹⁸ Allen, A., 2016, 13.

construct their accounts of normativity with reference to either self-evident normative commitments or normative commitments that are constructed via a rational procedure. Either way, a set of foundational normative commitments is determined from which the more complex fixed and universal normative standard is derived. Allen highlights three problems with such accounts of normativity.¹⁹ First, these normative commitments are detached from the contingencies of the context to which they are supposed to apply. These ahistorical and universal normative commitments are contextually insensitive and run the risk of being inapplicable to the realities of a context. As Allen describes it, a foundational account 'gives too freestanding an account that is not embedded enough in history'.²⁰ Second, foundationalist approaches are rigid and immune to challenge. The normative commitments do not display an ability to be revised over time as the social and cultural realities of a context change. Third, the problem of justificatory regress. If complex normative commitments are justified with reference to a foundational set, then the question becomes what justifies those 'self-evident' normative commitments. If they are justified by a constructivist procedure, then the question becomes what justifies that procedure. The problem of justificatory regress shows that foundationalist accounts are ultimately unable to explain what grounds their normative commitments. As a result of these problems, Allen concludes that we ought to move away from foundationalist approaches to normativity.

Second, Allen argues that since the 'attempt to avoid foundationalism gives rise to the resolution to ground the normative perspective... immanently, within the existing world' it then 'inevitably raises worries about conventionalism and relativism'.²¹ The worry about conventionalism is that an immanent account of normativity commits the is/ought fallacy; it moves from describing the normative commitments of a context to affirming that they are the

¹⁹ These problems were explored in Chapter Two during the analysis of Kantian constructivism.

²⁰ Allen, A., *et al.*, 2016, 242.

²¹ Allen, A., 2016, 13.

moral values and political norms that the context ought to hold. As Allen put it, if 'our normative perspective is grounded within the social world', then the immanent account of normativity struggles to 'avoid the charge of reducing normativity to an endorsement of whatever normative standards happen to be accepted at a given time and place'.²² Put simply, immanent accounts of normativity appear to be nothing more than 'self-congratulatory defences of the status quo'.²³ The worry is that this collapses into a form of relativism because although the conventionalist account does allow immanent critique (moral practices and political institutions may still be critiqued on the grounds that they do not live up to the moral values and political norms detailed by the conventional account of normativity), the concern is that it prohibits critique of a more substantial form.²⁴ Supposedly, this form of critique would use an external standard to 'validate' and determine the desirability of the particular set of contextual normative commitments. In its absence, we are unable to challenge the normative commitments as long as they relate to a particular immanent account of normativity. So the collapse of conventionalism into relativism is said to render us impotent to challenge the normative commitments of an imminent account of normativity.

Therefore, the challenge for the thick conception of moral-political progress is that if we are to reference a normative telos that is disconnected from a Eurocentric reading of history, then we need to outline a non-relativistic immanent account of normativity.

To meet this task, Allen draws from the contextualism of Michael Williams and Linda Alcoff and the 'genealogical-contextual conception of normativity' of Michel Foucault and Theodor Adorno.²⁵ In doing so, Allen states that if we accept that the 'normative content' is drawn 'from within existing social reality', then

²² Allen, A., 2016, 13.

²³ Allen, A., 2016, 22.

²⁴ Cf. Miller, D., 2002, 11-12.

²⁵ Allen, A., 2017, 686-687; 2019, 75.

we are forced to develop a 'more contextualist meta-narrative position'.²⁶ Allen calls this form of contextualism 'metanormative' because 'the contextualism operates at the level of the metanormative justification of our first-order normative principles'.²⁷ Allen makes a distinction between first-order normative commitments (commitments that an individual holds to be true regarding certain moral-political concerns) and second-order concerns (concerns regarding the justification of the normative context itself). The essential claim of Allen's metanormative contextualism is that on a first-order level we can be committed to certain values, moral principles, and political norms within a particular context (this forms the normative telos that represents what the moral practices and political institutions of that context ought to be) whilst on a second-order (metanormative) level understand that the normative account is justified contingently. To flesh out this position, Allen separates the account of metanormative contextualism into two claims. First, 'moral principles or normative ideals are always justified relative to a set of contextually salient values, conceptions of the good life, or normative horizons – roughly speaking, forms of life or lifeworlds'. Second, 'there is no über-context, no context-free or context transcendent point of view from which we can adjudicate which contexts are ultimately correct or even in a position of hierarchical superiority over which others'. As a consequence of these two positions, Allen argues that 'our normative principles can be justified relative to a set of basic normative commitments that stand fast in relation to them, but because there is no context-transcendent point of view from which we can determine which contexts are superior to which others those basic normative commitments must be understood as contingent foundations'.²⁸ For Allen, the absence of a context-transcendent account of normativity means that first-order normative commitments on a contextual account of normativity will always have contingent foundations.

²⁶ Allen, A., 2016, 34.

²⁷ Allen, A., 2019, 76.

²⁸ Allen, A., 2016, 215.

The challenge facing the account of metanormative contextualism is that its contingent foundations make it vulnerable to the charge of relativism. Again, this has been widely misinterpreted, so it is important to be clear about what exactly the relativism concern is. For example, Reha Kadakal proposes that the account of metanormative contextualism ‘leaves our normative commitments in the precarious position of being a function of subjectivity’.²⁹ In other words, the concern is that metanormative contextualism collapses into a form of individual subjectivism where the normative goal that acts as the telos of progress is nothing more than the subjective preference of individuals. However, Kadakal misses the point. The account of metanormative contextualism avoids the concern of individual subjectivism. Allen writes that ‘[t]o say that normative principles are justified or grounded contextually is not to say that they are justified relative to the viewpoints or perspectives of individual subjects’. On the contrary, these viewpoints are ‘historically embedded in forms of rationality that themselves provide the conditions of possibility for the formation of individual subjects who are capable of thought and action’. Allen reiterates, ‘the relevant “context” here is not the individual subject but rather something like the historical... form of life’.³⁰ As such, the concern about subject relativism can be set aside. Normative commitments are not a result of individual preference. Rather, they are a result of the historical socio-cultural context. This is why Allen emphasises that ‘one can be a contextualist about normative justification... without thereby undercutting the possibility of normative validity at the first-order normative level and thus collapsing into moral relativism’.³¹ However, the challenge is that this only demonstrates that the account of metanormative contextualism does not collapse into individual subjectivism. The more pressing challenge comes from the concern against cultural relativism.

²⁹ Kadakal, R., 2019, 32.

³⁰ Allen, A., 2019, 80.

³¹ Allen, A., 2016, 215.

Allen recognises the concern that ‘metanormative contextualism [might be] nothing more than a form of conventionalism or radical historicism in which norms are relative to historical forms of life or rationality’.³² To push back, Allen argues that although metanormative contextualism rules out a ‘context neutral point of view from which to make such judgments in an absolute or context-transcendent way’ it nevertheless ‘does not rule out making contextually grounded judgements about the correctness or incorrectness of particular contexts, whether our own or someone else’s’. To explain how, Allen draws a distinction between internal critique (‘drawing on the resources internal to a specific order of justification in order to critique that order’) and external critique (‘drawing on the resources of one order of justification to critique another’). Allen denies that external critique requires ‘reference to an overarching context of justification that transcends all contexts and enables us to assemble them into a context-neutral hierarchy’.³³ Instead, Allen suggests that all external critique requires is for a critic to remain cognisant of the fact that all normative perspectives are grounded on contingent foundations. This awareness gives rise to a critical empathy that allows the critic to appreciate that had the historical contingencies of their context been otherwise then their normative commitments would have been different as a result. As such, Allen believes that the critic is able to reflect back onto their own normative account and critique it in light of this adopted external position. This is what Allen is referring to when she writes that there are more radical “external” modes of critique’ where ‘justificatory standards that are held fast in one context are brought to bear on those of another, and vice versa’.³⁴ Allen describes these as ‘more or less ‘external’ forms of critique – forms that are based in the normative claims of different contexts, cultures, forms of life’.³⁵ When this is done, normative commitments are understood as something more than merely the product of historical contingency. According to Allen, this form of external critique can enable the normative commitments of a

³² Allen, A., 2019, 80.

³³ Allen, A., 2019, 86.

³⁴ Allen, A., 2016, 218.

³⁵ Allen, A., 2017, 685.

particular context to be challenged. In doing so, Allen maintains that although this will not necessarily lead to cross-contextual agreement on substantive normative positions, it will enable the immanent account of normativity to push back against the charge of cultural relativism.³⁶

Here we see Allen's conception of progress in its final form. Through the account of metanormative contextualism, the normative commitments of a particular context are grounded immanently and not via reference to a backward-looking reading of European history. Allen believes that the account of metanormative contextualism can avoid the charge of cultural relativism because even in the absence of a context-transcendent normative standard there is scope to interrogate the normative commitments of a context through a process of external critique. As a result, Allen claims to have outlined how the normative telos can be formed in an immanent and non-relativistic manner.

Although I accept Allen's argument that the normative-teleological element of a conception of moral-political progress ought to refer to an immanent and non-relativistic account of normativity, I argue that her conception of moral-political progress can be strengthened in four central respects.

Strengthening the Allenian Conception of Progress

Highlighting the four areas for development indicates how a conception of moral-political progress can preserve Allen's critical insights whilst becoming even more coherent and compelling.

First, Allen's conception of moral-political progress can be enhanced by moving beyond its negativistic orientation and taking a positive form. There are three reasons why a positive conception of moral-political progress is preferable.

³⁶ Allen, A., 2016, 229.

First, the negative approach seems at odds with the desire for radical social change. If progress is seen only as a diminishment of domination and/or oppression in terms of what that means for a particular context, the scope for reimagining the moral practices and political institutions of a context is reduced. In contrast, a positive telos provides a full vision of a better future. It articulates moral and political ideas that provide a normative horizon against which existing moral practices and political institutions can not only be critiqued but also radically reimagined. Therefore, expanding the account to include a positive orientation more powerfully realises the ambition of orientating and bringing about radical social change. Second, a positive conception of progress has a heightened motivational force. By offering a vision of an all-things-considered better tomorrow it provides a sense of hope that motivates the action required to bring it about. To be clear, I am not saying that there is no motivational force in the negativistic desire to minimise domination, oppression, and suffering. Rather, the claim is that the hope and motivation that comes from a positive conception of progress cannot be replicated in the negative. Therefore, the conception of progress ought to take a positive form and become a potent source of motivation for progressive action. Third, even if the purported benefits of the positive conception are contested, it seems as though a positive orientation necessarily accompanies the negative one. For example, if the negative conception of progress reveals that domination will be minimised by altering a moral practice or reconstructing a political institution, then it seems as though at least some vision of what the new moral practice or political institution would be should accompany it. Therefore, the conception of progress ought to be unrestricted and allowed to provide the picture of the world that we want to create. Collectively, this demonstrates that the conception of progress can be strengthened when it goes beyond the negative and takes a positive form.

Second, the account of metanormative contextualism faces three challenges and an alternative immanent account of normativity would more

robustly ground the conception of moral-political progress. The first challenge is that the account of metanormative contextualism cannot escape the charge of conventionalism. To avoid the charge of conventionalism, the account of metanormative contextualism must explain how normative commitments are not simply a product of a historical milieu and its prevailing conventions. Allen does state that the normative commitments are '*generated* locally, contingently, and historically'.³⁷ If they are *generated* and not simply the conventions of the context, then an explanation of that process is required. The account of metanormative contextualism does not include such an explanation and, in its absence, it struggles to overcome the charge of conventionalism. The second challenge is that the account of metanormative contextualism cannot escape the charge of cultural relativism because it lacks a coherent account of critique. Allen argues that by engaging in a cross-cultural process of putting on the other's shoes we can gain an out-of-context perspective on our own normative commitments and either validate them or challenge them by doing so. The thought here is that through an engagement with another form of social life we are able to observe other normative commitments and move our own normative commitments closer to those we find desirable. However, it is unclear why this is a form of external *critique*. At best, it seems to facilitate a form of mimicry where exogenous normative commitments are internalised and form part of the domestic normative account. At worst, it seems redundant because the normative commitments of contexts with wildly different historical contingencies are said to be incompatible and contexts with similar historical contingencies are said to have similar normative commitments anyway. Therefore, in order to address the problem of cultural relativism, an alternative mechanism of critique needs to be established whereby the account of normativity can either be endorsed or challenged and changed. The third challenge is that it is not clear how the account of metanormative contextualism makes sense of ostensibly universal normative commitments. Although Allen states that some normative commitments 'may

³⁷ Allen, A., *et al.*, 2016, 243 [emphasis added].

even be universalistic in scope', the stark differences in historical contingencies across contexts mean that there is no reason to expect universal agreement on even basic normative commitments.³⁸ If we want to locate and defend at least some universal normative commitments, then there needs to be a mechanism that can identify the normative commitments, articulate what grounds the universal applicability of those normative commitments, and discriminate between them and particular ones. Taken together, it is clear that an alternative immanent account of normativity that is neither conventionalist nor culturally relativistic and is able to make sense of ostensibly universal normative commitments would provide a more robust grounding to the conception of moral-political progress.

Third, the accounts of causation and agency can be clarified.

With regard to the account of causation, Allen writes that the conception of progress ought to facilitate 'radical social change – and it has to be careful not to prejudge the outcome of such radical transformations, for to do so would necessarily be to presuppose ... the end point of history'.³⁹ Allen appears to agree that the causal account ought to treat the path and destination of future change as open and not predetermined. However, Allen goes on to argue that whilst 'social transformations happen as a result of people gaining distance or engaging in some kind of critical work... it is very rarely the case that the more critical theoretical work is inducing social change'.⁴⁰ Instead, Allen suggests that the criticism often takes the form of retrospective reflection that is 'trying to understand what has already happened'.⁴¹ Yet, this position risks reintroducing a form of necessity into the causal account. When Allen writes that people 'get swept up in the tide of events or were busy thinking other things', it seems to imply that progress is something that happens *to* people rather than being caused

³⁸ Allen, A., *et al.*, 2016, 243.

³⁹ Allen, A., 2016, 188-189.

⁴⁰ Allen, A., *et al.*, 2016, 237.

⁴¹ Allen, A., *et al.*, 2016, 237.

by people.⁴² This position is worryingly redolent of the strong form of determinism that Karl Popper dismantled. Therefore, in order to retain plausibility, the account of causation needs to make clear that progress is contingent and the product of historically situated human agency and not the unfolding of a predetermined logic.

With regard to the account of agency, Allen's commitment to Foucault appears to entail a catalytic form of agency. Allen writes that Foucault characterises critique as 'following lines of fragility in the present'.⁴³ As Allen puts it, the 'idea is that the lines are there' and that criticism 'works by opening up the lines of fragility and fracture within the present that serves as glimmers or anticipatory illuminations of other possible worlds'.⁴⁴ What concerns me is not the normative question of whether the vision of another possibility is too utopian or not radical enough but the causal question of whether the agents of progress have a catalytic agency that can only speed up and bring about a predetermined progressive transition or a creative agency that can conceive of and bring about a novel progressive change. The reference to Foucault's tracing of the pre-existing fractures suggests that whilst the transformation could be radical, the critic qua agent of progress merely opens up the fault lines that already exist to usher into existence a nascent reality. Allen could push back and argue that the lines of fragility suggest a number of possible futures and that it is the work of the critic to bring one into existence. Nevertheless, this would still count as a catalytic form of agency. The critic would still be restricted in their ability to conceive of and bring about a novel progressive transition.⁴⁵ To genuinely break with the present, agents of progress must do more than uncover possibilities. Agents of progress

⁴² Allen, A., *et al.*, 2016, 237.

⁴³ Foucault., M., 1994, 36.

⁴⁴ Allen, A., 2016; 247-248; 2015, 525.

⁴⁵ It may appear as though Foucault's account is no different from a path-dependent account of causal agency. However, on Foucault's account, there is a limited range of options and the agent of progress has the ability to bring about one of these nascent realities. On the path-dependent account, there is a broad space constrained only by the limits of socio-cultural reality. Within that space, the agent of progress has an unrestrictive ability to conceive, articulate, and bring about a progressive change. Thus, Foucault's account is restricted and catalytic. The path-dependent account is unrestricted and creative.

must possess an unrestricted ability to reimagine their social order and bring that novel possibility about. Therefore, the account of causal agency would benefit from clarifying how it enshrines a creative form of causal agency.

Fourth, there is the opportunity to enrich the account of history. Allen claims that we ought to reject stadial accounts of history on the grounds that they also reinforce the Eurocentric perception of modernity. As Allen put it, 'stories about progress and the Enlightenment are rooted in this experience that Europeans... read reports from the colonies about what the lives of indigenous people were like'. As a result of this tainted interaction, Allen notes that Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment theorists who inherited such a viewpoint 'thought, "those people must be more primitive than we are, and there must be a progressive story that goes from how we used to be to how we are now"'. This position 'is not only a justification of colonialism but... it was immediately set up as a relationship of superiority by Europeans who heard these stories in which Europeans served as inheritors of that primitive condition'.⁴⁶ As such, Allen sets out a stinging criticism of the stadial account of history. To enrich the conception of moral-political progress, it ought to be made clear what account of history is adopted in its place. An enriched conception of progress would not only reject the stadial account of history but outline an alternative account of historical change that can make sense of the forward mark of history and explain the extent to which regressions are possible.

Therefore, to build upon the foundations of Allen's conception of progress, the reconceptualisation ought to put forward a positive conception of progress, detail a replacement account of immanent and non-relativistic normativity, expound a contingent account of causality and a creative account of agency, and flesh out an account of history.

⁴⁶ Allen, A., *et al.*, 2016, 238.

To begin this reconceptualisation, it is worth reflecting on the methodological inheritance that underpins Allen's conception of progress. Allen references Mathias Thaler as an inspiration for the account of metanormative contextualism. Thaler addresses the problem of 'deep contextualism and radical criticism' and argues that political theorists 'cannot have it both ways'.⁴⁷ According to Thaler, the price of an immanent account of normativity is that it surrenders critical ability. Thaler puts forward Michael Walzer as an example of a theorist who articulates an immanent account of normativity only to argue that Walzer's account of social constructivism and social interpretivism lacks a critical edge. Instead, Allen turns to Michel Foucault and Theodor Adorno to extract methodological approaches that can underpin her conception of progress. However, I believe we ought to revisit Thaler and his engagement with Michael Walzer. Instead of dismissing Walzer's normative and epistemic approaches, we ought to return to them and assess whether they can underpin the normative-teleological, causal-agential, and historical elements of a conception of progress that follows in the Allenian vein.

Michael Walzer – Social Constructivism and Social Interpretivism

Michael Walzer outlines an immanent approach to normative theorising based on an account of social construction. According to Walzer, the process of social construction creates a set of moral values and political norms that 'reflect a general agreement'. Because of the common agreement, the normative commitments gain an 'unqualified objectivity' on the grounds that they enable a communal form of life. As Walzer put it, the normative commitments 'have some sort of binding force, which derives from common life that is sustained on the basis they provide'.⁴⁸ This is why Walzer states that 'social construction is also

⁴⁷ Thaler, M., 2012, 140.

⁴⁸ Walzer, M., 1993, 32-33.

moral legislation' because although the 'social processes that make this possible... remain mysterious', the 'complex social process' nevertheless produces 'consensus and shared understandings'.⁴⁹

This places individuals at the heart of this process of normative justification. As Walzer put it, 'social construction implies (some sort of) human agency and requires the recognition of women and men as agents (of some sort)'.⁵⁰ Crucially, those involved in the process of social construction are not atomised individuals taking part in a rationalistic form of Kantian constructivism. Instead, each person is embedded within the normative context of which they are a part. They are formed by their participation in various involuntary associations and become immersed in the language, history, and culture of the context. Therefore, although the historical contingencies do not determine the normative commitments, they shape those who engage in the process of social construction. In turn, this defines the boundary of the account of normativity because shared contingencies determine who takes part in the social construction. Walzer states that participants in the social construction are required to share a '[c]ommon language and judgement, agreements and understandings' in order to 'agree at a deeper level on the rough contours of a way of life and a view of the world'.⁵¹ This ensures that the most common normative context is the nation because it is in the nation where a common language, heritage, sense of self, and perspective on the world is found.^{52,53} Importantly, Walzer stresses that even in a poly-ethnic national setting there will be 'shared meanings and a common life, which have been revised and reproduced' and makes clear that 'marginalised and repressed voices... have to be engaged' in the process of social construction.⁵⁴ So Walzer envisions a group

⁴⁹ Walzer, M., 1989(b), 32.

⁵⁰ Walzer, M., 1993, 47.

⁵¹ Walzer, M., 1989(b), 32.

⁵² Walzer, M., 1995, 14.

⁵³ This does not preclude sub-national or supra-national normative commitments as long as there is a common set of understandings that bind together the participants who take part in the process of social construction.

⁵⁴ Walzer, M., 1994(b), 404-405.

of individuals, embedded in their context, shaped by a set of historical contingencies, sharing a set of understandings, engaging in an ongoing process of social construction. In this way, the normative commitments are shaped by socio-cultural historical contingencies but are not simply a product of the social world. The immanent account of normativity arises from a process of social construction in which individuals play an active part.

To take the account of social construction to its logical conclusion, Walzer notes that the process of social construction repeats across contexts. Walzer refers to this as reiterative universalism. Each context undertakes its own process of social construction. Each process of social construction takes into account the unique historical contingencies of the context. Therefore, each context possesses its own distinct socially constructed account of normativity.

To add to this universally reiterated process of social construction, Walzer makes a distinction between thin and thick accounts of normativity (which he calls 'moralities').

The thin account of normativity is the set of normative commitments that are unaffected by contextual historical contingencies. These normative commitments are determined by something more fundamental and related to what it means to be human. Walzer writes that because of our common humanity, 'the same normative entailments appear again and again, in all or almost all human societies' because there is 'something in the nature of the human agents that accounts for the construction'. Walzer is sceptical that the 'list of similar constructions would be very long; nor would it include the complex and specific constructions that make for the thickness of moral life'.⁵⁵ Instead, Walzer argues that it 'will be a set of standards to which all societies can be held – negative injunctions – most likely, rules against murder, deceit, torture,

⁵⁵ Walzer, M., 1993, 45.

oppression, and tyranny'.⁵⁶ Walzer is keen to stress that this minimal account of normativity is different from 'covering law universalism' because the normative commitments do not exist outside of the context and then get applied to it.⁵⁷ Rather, the universal commitments emerge out of each context because the process of social construction generates an identical set of basic normative commitments. This is why Walzer writes that 'the moral minimal is not a free-standing morality. It simply designates some reiterated features of particular thick or maximal moralities'.⁵⁸ The account of reiterative universalism explains how this small set of thinly characterised normative commitments can be universal whilst retaining its particularity at the same time. Reiterative universalism ensures that this set of normative commitments 'would lose its particularist character without ceasing to be relative to social construction'.⁵⁹ The result is that the 'list of similarly constructed uses and values, then, constitutes what we might think of as a universal and objective morality – relative to social construction where construction repetitively takes the same form, relative to the prevailing argument where the same argument always prevails'.⁶⁰

The thick morality is a more substantial account of normativity and its nuance speaks to the complexities and richness of social life. It details a culturally specific normative system where its values, moral principles, and political norms prescribe the appropriate moral practices and political institutions for the context. Due to its comprehensive nature, it is thoroughly affected by the socio-cultural historical contingencies of the context. As a result, the values, moral principles, and political norms that form the maximal account of normativity will be objective relative to the particular context but hold no force in other contexts. So although maximal accounts of normativity share the same minimal normative

⁵⁶ Walzer, M., 1994(a), 10.

⁵⁷ Walzer, M., 1989(a), 531.

⁵⁸ Walzer, M., 1994(a), 10.

⁵⁹ Walzer, M., 1993, 44.

⁶⁰ Walzer, M., 1993, 45.

commitments there will be significant variation between the fuller set of values, moral principles, and political norms that different contexts endorse.

Through the approaches of social constructivism, reiterative universalism, and thin/thick moralities, Walzer outlines a compelling account of immanent normativity. This account provides a clear framework in which we can understand the normative commitments of a context. Walzer writes that ‘the experience of reiteration makes it possible, at least, for people to acknowledge the diversity of claims... so we are capable of recognising a particular understanding as someone else’s, and both of them as moral understandings’.⁶¹ Because each account of normativity is the result of a particular process of social construction, it is appropriate for the context from which it emerged. This provincialises the normative account and renders our moral values and political norms as one set amongst many plausible alternatives. Inevitably, in virtue of it being the result of our process of social construction, we place our own account of normativity as first amongst equals. Nevertheless, each normative account that results from the universally reiterated process of social construction is presumed to be worthy of respect. As Walzer writes, reiterative universalism ‘operates mostly within the limits of ours and theirs – not of Reason with a capital ‘R’ but of our reasons and their reasons’ and so it requires ‘respect for others, who are just as much moral makers as we are’.⁶² At this point, it looks as though Walzer is advocating for something similar to Allen’s appreciation-of-contingent-foundations position. However, the approaches differ because Walzer does not use this cross-contextual respect to pursue a form of external comparison-cum-critique. Whilst Walzer maintains that this cross-cultural respect grants the presumption of validity to the normative commitments of other contexts, he denies that criticism relies upon the comparison between two accounts of normativity that this respect enables. Instead, Walzer outlines a separate method of critique that is born out of his epistemic account of social interpretivism.

⁶¹ Walzer, M., 1989(a), 527.

⁶² Walzer, M., 1989(a), 532.

The central tenet of Walzer's account of social interpretivism is that since moral values and political norms are a product of historically contingent social construction, the normative commitments can only be interpreted by critics who are embedded within a context, shaped by its socio-cultural historical contingencies, and able to understand the conventional social meanings of their society. There are two implications of such an epistemic account.

On the one hand, it rules out external critique. Not only does it prohibit the traditional form of transcendental critique, it also prohibits Allen's form of external critique.⁶³ According to Walzer, if the account of normativity is socially constructed and access to the normative account requires contextual embedding, then a critic cannot access the normative account of another context to use it for the purpose of critique. A critic cannot sufficiently understand the other context and its socio-cultural contingencies. Therefore, it is not possible to engage in either a transcendental or Allenian form of external critique.

On the other hand, it facilitates a distinct form of immanent critique.

With regard to the minimal account of normativity, immanent critique need not be restricted to the critic's own context. Walzer writes that the minimal morality 'provides a critical perspective' which enables it to be seen that a 'society or political regime... that violated the minimal standards would be a deficient society'.⁶⁴ This is because 'no arrangement, and no feature of an arrangement, is a moral option unless it provides for some version of peaceful coexistence (and thereby upholds basic human rights)'.⁶⁵ For example, Nazi Germany's systemic persecution of Jews and other minority groups, the widespread system of labour camps across the Soviet Union, the disappearances and political terror carried

⁶³ Walzer, M., 1994(a), mocks transcendental critique by arguing that, if it were possible, then 'local critics could be replaced by a universal Office of Social Criticism, where an internationally recruited and specially trained civil service... applied the same moral principles to every country, culture, and religious community in the world', 48.

⁶⁴ Walzer, M., 1994(a), 10.

⁶⁵ Walzer, M., 1997, 5.

out under Augusto Pinochet's dictatorship in Chile, and the use of torture and violent repression in Syria under the Assad regime are examples that exemplify how violence, oppression, torture, and tyranny undermine basic human dignity. Because the minimal normative standard is universally reiterated across contexts, a critic does not need to be embedded within a particular context to condemn such violations. Anyone from any context is able to call out regimes as deficient if they fail to uphold the foundational normative commitments. Therefore, the minimal account of normativity serves as a thin universal standard that acts as a floor beneath which no society should fall. On Walzer's account, if a society meets this baseline and upholds the minimal standard, then it can be considered decent. In contrast, if a society goes beneath that floor and violates the minimal standard that protects basic human dignity, then it can be judged as defective. Whenever and wherever elements of the thicker normativity come to violate the universal minimal elements that are part of it, that society can be called out as defective. Importantly, when this occurs, it is not a clash between the thick and thin elements of a context's account of normativity. Rather, the clash represents a contradiction within the society's own thick normative framework. Since, on Walzer's account, the minimal normative commitments are already part of the thick account of normativity, regimes that violate them are in tension with their own foundational commitments. This enables an immanent form of critique that does not appeal to transcendent standards but instead holds moral practices and political institutions accountable to the values, moral principles, and political norms that they already affirm. In this way, the minimal account of normativity provides a basic critical capacity that preserves the possibility of critique without invoking an external, context-independent viewpoint. It ensures that criticism can be levelled against a normative account that does not establish a fundamental standard of decency and fails to support a decent form of social order.

With regard to the maximal account of normativity, Walzer accepts that 'when we criticise... in ways that suggest an alternative, we move quickly

beyond the minimum'.⁶⁶ The thought is that as long as we are confident that the moral values and political norms of a given context justify a set of normative commitments that do not violate the minimal requirements, then when we engage in the critical project we are doing something more substantial. For Walzer, this more substantial form of criticism is 'necessarily carried on in terms of one or another thick morality'.⁶⁷ So we need to consider the possibility of critique against particular maximal moralities. To do so, it is worth bearing in mind Walzer's insistence that although each normative account is the result of a process of social construction and has the presumption of validity, that 'does not mean that the moralities we and they make are of equal value (or disvalue)'. This is because 'at any moment in time, a given morality may prove inadequate to its occasions, or its practice may fail to measure up to its own standards or to a newly developed or dimly made set of alternatives – for reiteration is a continuous and contentious activity'.⁶⁸ According to Walzer, a critic situated in and embedded within a particular context is able to reveal this inadequacy by interpreting what they take the moral values and political norms of the context to be and holding the existent moral practices and political institutions up to this standard. This is why Walzer writes that the 'work of the critic, when it is maximalist work, is also local and particularist in character'.⁶⁹ The maximal form of criticism has to be conducted from within and done by presenting interpretive arguments regarding the social meanings of the context, detailing the moral values and political norms that these social meanings are taken to support, and then holding up the existing moral practices and political norms to them. In this regard, criticism becomes an essentially interpretive endeavour. As Walzer put it, if 'there is (as I believe) no single, correct, maximalist ideology, then most of the disputes... that arise within a particular society and culture have to be settled – there is no choice – from within. Not without suggestions from the outside, not without reference to other maximal moralities, but by and large through...

⁶⁶ Walzer, M., 1994(a), 10.

⁶⁷ Walzer, M., 1994(a), 11.

⁶⁸ Walzer, M., 1989(a), 532.

⁶⁹ Walzer, M., 1994(a), 60.

interpretive arguments... and through political processes adjusted to them'.⁷⁰ Walzer further states that the maximal form of criticism 'depends on objective values, where objectivity is a true report on social meaning. The criticism itself... is not objectively true or false, for it also depends on an interpretation of social meaning, and interpretations are (except at the margins) only more or less persuasive and illuminating'.⁷¹ So on this thicker account of criticism, the critic interprets the social meanings of their context, presents their interpretation of the moral values and political norms that they entail, contests this interpretation of the maximal account of normativity with the extant interpretation and other rival interpretations, and then holds up the moral practices and political institutions of the context to the newly endorsed normative standard when successful in that competition. Walzer takes it to be possible that a maximal account of normativity and its thicker set of normative commitments can be challenged and changed as a result of immanent critique.

However, this is precisely the point that Thaler challenged. Thaler argued that the condition of social embeddedness prevents the critic from gaining the critical distance required to genuinely challenge the immanent account of normativity. As Thaler put it, the 'obvious danger in any conception of social criticism that singles out the embedded intellectual as a model is that injustices might be overlooked because they are so entrenched in a community's way of life'.⁷² The concern is that the embedded critic becomes so attached to the community's normative commitments that, rather than challenging their foundations, they either defend or only superficially oppose them. Therefore, the problem for an immanent account of criticism is that the embedded critic appears to become 'too involved in what is commonly seen as valuable' so that they lose their 'critical edge' and instead 'feel so attached to the home he/she was supposed to rearrange that he/she ends up dusting off the old furniture'.⁷³

⁷⁰ Walzer, M., 1994(a), 49.

⁷¹ Walzer, M., 1993, 46.

⁷² Thaler, M., 2012, 148.

⁷³ Thaler, M., 2012, 148.

Of course, Walzer rejects this conclusion. Walzer is committed to what he calls the 'radical potential of an internal critique' and insists that 'social criticism in maximalist terms can call in question, can even overturn, the moral maximum itself, by exposing its internal tensions and contradictions'. Walzer refers to this as 'the subversiveness immanence'.⁷⁴ However, the question is not whether Walzer's *account* of social criticism allows for radical critique. Clearly, he thinks that it does.⁷⁵ The question is whether social criticism *as it actually works in practice* operates this way. That is, to address Thaler's concern, it must be asked whether actual critics, embedded in their context, are able to identify, challenge, and revise deeply entrenched normative commitments or whether they remain too bound to their status quo to do so. To assess the strength of Walzer's position and its ability to respond to Thaler's concern, it must be determined whether the actual practice of embedded social criticism permits radical change and whether embedded critics have the capacity to undertake it.

To show how immanent critique can operate in such a way, two points are relevant.

First, contrary to the claim that embeddedness hinders critical capacity, it can actually be a virtue that enhances criticism in two important respects.

On the one hand, because critics are situated within their context they will care deeply about the society they are critiquing. This fosters a critical posture that is emotionally engaged and more likely to result in a persuasive critique. In this way, embeddedness strengthens the practical force of criticism by enabling it to resonate with those it seeks to convince. For example, Mahatma Gandhi mobilised Indian cultural and religious traditions to transform the principle of *ahimsa* into a critical tool that could be used against British rule and colonial injustices in India. Similarly, Lech Wałęsa drew upon his Polish working-class

⁷⁴ Walzer, M., 1994(a), 47.

⁷⁵ Walzer, M., 1987.

identity and Catholic religious culture to persuasively critique the authoritarianism of the Communist regime in Poland. These examples illustrate how critics embedded within their particular contexts can speak with an authority and cultural astuteness that an outsider would lack. Walzer highlights this aspect of immanent critique in *The Company of Critics*, where he argues that '[c]loseness is the crucial quality of the good social critic' because 'if he were a stranger, really disinterested, it is hard to see why he would involve himself in their affairs'.⁷⁶ Admittedly, Walzer overstates the case on this point. It is not hard to imagine a stranger who is interested in a foreign context. However, the point is that the absence of socio-cultural immersion combined with no long-term commitment to the context means that their criticism would be imperceptive, lack nuance, and be poorly received as a result. In contrast, the mindfulness and commitment of an insider enables their criticism to be astute and more openly received. Therefore, rather than inhibiting criticism, social embeddedness ensures that critique will be more persuasive and have a greater impact on challenging extant normative commitments.

On the other hand, since the critic is embedded within the context, their critique offers more plausible forms of change. Because embedded critics share the common understandings, cultural narratives, and historical contingencies of their context they are uniquely positioned to generate alternatives that are recognisable, meaningful, and actionable within that context. Rather than proposing abstract or utopian ideals, the embedded critic can rework familiar moral and political commitments into a reimagined normative framework that resonates with the lived experience of those who share the normative context. Walzer captures this when he observes that there are 'many interesting, provocative, possibly valid critical arguments – and they derive from different experiences and perspectives *within* the society that is being criticised'.⁷⁷ What makes such arguments plausible is that the critics are rooted within the context

⁷⁶ Walzer, M., 2002, xiii; 20.

⁷⁷ Walzer, M., 2002, xii.

itself. Again, Walzer explains that viable alternatives ‘cannot be carried on without some sense of historical possibility’. That is because social criticism can only be ‘oriented toward the future’ when the social critic firmly believes that ‘the conduct of his fellows can conform more closely to a moral standard than it now does or that their self-understanding can be greater than it now is or that their institutions can be more justly organised than they now are’.⁷⁸ The grounded orientation is precisely what allows the embedded critics to challenge the status quo in a way that does not appear alien or irrelevant. For example, Simone Weil’s critique of the normative commitments of postwar France drew on the republican values of liberty, equality, and secularism that were a foundational feature of French national identity to critique the place and role of women in French society. Her rootedness enabled the proposed reform to the normative account to be culturally intelligible and practically viable. Similarly, Tawakkol Karman’s critique of the Yemeni account of normativity prior to the Arab Spring was grounded in Islamic principles and Arab nationalist ideals. Rather than framing her support for democratic reform and women’s rights as an import from Western liberalism, she drew from endogenous religious and cultural resources in order to give her critique legitimacy and resonance within Yemeni society. These examples show that embeddedness allows a plausible challenge to be made to the status quo. This is why Walzer writes that it is ‘a mistake, in social criticism as in moral philosophy, to suppose that we must escape our situation in order to describe it accurately’.⁷⁹ On the contrary, Walzer demonstrates that embedded social critics provide a more credible form of critique.

Second, although the critic is embedded within their context, they occupy a liminal space and function as an insider and outsider at the same time. While the critic is deeply rooted in the shared understandings of their socio-cultural context they are able to adopt a perspective that allows them to reflect on their society with a sense of detached remoteness. Walzer highlights the critic’s liminal

⁷⁸ Walzer, M., 2002, 17.

⁷⁹ Walzer, M., 2002, 230.

nature and explains that their detachment is a form of 'critical distance' that is 'less a matter of intellectual perspective or personal circumstance than of political position'. Walzer makes clear that the critic gains their independence as a result of their 'freedom from government responsibility, religious authority, corporate power, party discipline'.⁸⁰ It is important not to overinterpret this statement. Walzer is not saying that intellectual perspective and personal circumstance are unimportant. Rather, he emphasises that the former cannot result in a potent critique if the critic is constrained by the institutions of their context. The critic needs to be embedded within the context but also able to think freely and interpret the communal social meanings in a novel, potentially subversive way. To see how this operates in practice, it is helpful to consider an example Walzer offers of such a critic. Walzer describes George Orwell as a critic who is embedded within his context but who occupies a space between insider and outsider as a result of his political independence, intellectual perspective, and personal circumstance. Though Orwell was shaped by the middle- and upper-class culture of interwar Britain, he deliberately stepped outside of its conventions by living among the poor in Paris and London, experiencing the working-class mining communities of Northern England, and fighting in the Spanish Civil War. As Walzer put it, Orwell 'tore up his roots and then found himself rootless, without a clear social identity. This is the ideal position for the radical critic'.⁸¹ Because Orwell was unconstrained by political institutions and unwedded to one perspective he was able to reflect on his context as a whole. This is why Walzer claims that 'Orwell's power derives from his intimate grasp of the society he is criticising'.⁸² As a result, Orwell was able to provide a novel interpretation of the social meanings, articulate a subversive set of moral values and political norms, and radically break free from the status quo.⁸³ In this way, it

⁸⁰ Walzer, M., 2002, 237.

⁸¹ Walzer, M., 2002, 119.

⁸² Walzer, M., 2002, 128-129.

⁸³ Orwell, G., 1937, castigated a vision of progress that was divorced from the lived realities of the working class. However, this should not be interpreted as a wholesale rejection of the concept. Rather, Orwell rejected a particular alienating and inhumane conception that equated progress with technological and economic advancement.

is the liminality of the social critic that makes it possible to comprehensively challenge the normative commitments of the status quo.⁸⁴

The persuasive plausibility of liminal criticism demonstrates that Walzer's account of immanent critique can overcome Thaler's concern. Walzerian immanent criticism is not bound to the status quo; it does not sacrifice critical ability when it eschews external criticism. Rather, the account enables the social critic to challenge the appropriateness of the normative account for its circumstances. If the normative standard is found to be wanting, then the critic is able to subvert it so that an alternative set of values, moral values, and political norms can be generated and entrenched in its place. Therefore, Thaler was wrong to claim that an immanent account of normativity comes at the cost of critical ability. Walzer's normative account of social construction and epistemic account of social interpretivism demonstrate that an immanent account of normativity can retain its critical edge. As a result, the account of normativity is immanent and can avoid the charge of cultural relativism.

In what follows, I appropriate and extend Walzer's methodological resources in order to supplement Allen's approach to theorising about moral-political progress. In doing so, I develop a set of conceptual elements that form a novel conception of moral-political progress. First, I show how the alternative immanent account of normativity preserves contextual sensitivity but secures a more robust normative-teleological grounding. I then set out how this normative-teleological element gives rise to a pluralistic conception of modernity, one that resists Eurocentric developmentalism by defining modernity normatively as the satisfaction of conditions for human flourishing. Second, I clarify the causal-agential element of progress by demonstrating how Walzer's account of social

⁸⁴ Walzer, M., 2002, addresses the question of 'whether one can be a social critic of someone else's society' by defending how although Orwell's 'books have been incorporated into the literature of resistance' he was 'aimed only at local effects' and the British intelligentsia. Other critics may use foreign criticism for their own ends. However, a critic should not seek to interfere in the maximal morality of another context. Walzer endorses Orwell's statement in the preface to the Ukrainian edition of *Animal Farm* that 'I would not wish to interfere in Soviet Domestic affairs', 134.

criticism illuminates the account of progressive agency and how the political process affects the manner in which the progressive visions are brought about. Finally, I explain how this rich understanding of normative transformation reveals how shifts in social meanings and moral-political commitments underpin historical progress.

The Normative-Teleological Element – Multiple Modernities

Walzer provides an alternative immanent yet non-relativistic account of normativity. However, I believe that his account can be developed to construct a robust normative-teleological element that follows in the Allenian vein.

First, the normative account of social construction can underpin a positive conception of progress. The socially constructed normative telos goes beyond the negative and encapsulates a vision of what the moral practices and political institutions of the context ought to be. In doing so, it is capable of bringing about radical social change. The normative telos details a potentially profound reimagining of how we ought to live and how society ought to be organised, provides the orientation necessary to pursue radical change, and the prospect of bringing about the desired form of life motivates the actions necessary to bring it about. So the account of socially constructed normativity provides the basis for the normative telos that is part of a positive conception of progress.

Second, the normative account of social constructivism and reiterative universalism alongside the epistemic account of social interpretivism detail a compelling alternative to the account of metanormative contextualism. The initial concern levelled against the account of metanormative contextualism was that it collapsed into a form of conventionalism where the normative commitments were determined by the historical contingencies of the context. The subsequent concern was that this form of conventionalism collapsed into a form of cultural

relativism because Allen's account of external critique was unable to challenge or endorse its inherited normative commitments. The final concern was that the account is unable to make sense of ostensibly universal normative commitments. Walzer's methodological resources enable the normative-teleological element to adopt an alternative immanent account of normativity that responds to these concerns. To push back against the conventionalism concern, the process of social construction ensures that the normative commitments are generated and not simply a product of historical contingency. To push back against the cultural relativism concern, the possibility of immanent critique enables normative commitments to be challenged by revealing contradictions and tensions within the normative framework based on either the current or a new interpretation of conventional social meanings. This means that a certain type of social critic (embedded yet liminal) can critically engage with the normative commitments of the status quo, subvert them if they are deemed to be insufficient, and articulate a new set of normative commitments based on a reinterpretation of conventional social meanings. This process ensures that we are able to validate the appropriateness of those commitments to the context at the time in question. Therefore, the approach fulfils Allen's aim as it can make contextually grounded judgements about particular contexts, albeit in a maximal sense with regard to our context and in a minimal sense with regard to someone else's.⁸⁵ In addition, the account of reiterative universalism explains universal normative commitments. The universally reiterated process of social construction results in a set of foundational moral values and political norms that are part of each and every maximal account of normativity. Therefore, Walzer's methodological resources can be used to ground an immanent account of normativity that fulfils the requirement of the normative teleological element of a thick conception of moral-political progress.

⁸⁵ Allen, A., 2019, 86.

Third, the distinction between decent and defective societies can be developed. One explanation for why Walzer advanced this dichotomy is that it supported his account of permissible military intervention. According to Walzer, external military intervention is permissible only in defective regimes where the minimal normative commitments are being violated. Walzer maintains that decent societies, even though they may be imperfect, ought to be sovereign and self-determining because their moral practices and political institutions abide by the negative injunctions.⁸⁶ However, there are two problems with this framework.

On the one hand, the account has limited descriptive ability. Consider two societies: Society A and Society B. Both societies are decent because they adhere to the minimal set of negative injunctions. However, Society A has a maximal account of normativity that enables individuals to live lives they have reason to value as defined by their historically and culturally specific shared understandings. Society B has a maximal account of normativity that does nothing more than meet the minimal standards of decency. According to Walzer, it is not possible to determine that the former is better than the latter. All that can be said is that both are decent insofar as they adhere to the minimal set of common normative commitments.

On the other hand, the account ignores that each process of social construction will produce a positive inverse of the negative desire to avoid violations of basic human dignity. Walzer argues that each person shares a sense of what it means to be human. For Walzer, the implication of this shared sense of humanity is that each process of social construction results in a thin set of negative injunctions that protect basic human dignity. However, it is not clear why this shared sense of humanity would not also cause each process of social construction to give rise to a thin set of positive normative commitments. From

⁸⁶ See Walzer, M., 2004/1988 for a discussion of the forms of intervention justified as a result of a violation of the universal minimal account of normativity.

the shared sense of humanity, each person has not only a desire to avoid being murdered, tortured, and oppressed but also a set of positive commitments that, while varying in content across societies, express a shared human aspiration for health and vitality, freedom and autonomy, dignity and respect. Importantly, these positive commitments are not specified by any singular ideal. Rather, their interpretation will vary depending on the maximal account of normativity. What counts as well-being, agency, and recognition is defined within the normative horizon of each context.

To overcome these limitations, the universally reiterated process of social construction can be understood as resulting in an immanent account of normativity that incorporates a set of positive commitments. Just as each context arrives at a thin set of prohibitions, so too does it arrive at a set of positive normative commitments that reflect a shared human aspiration to live well. These positive commitments are not externally imposed ideals but arise from the same process of social construction that gives rise to the negative ones. However, the realisation of these positive commitments will be far more contextually varied. The positive commitments engage the thicker dimensions of a normative horizon and so are more thoroughly affected by historical and cultural particularities. In this sense, whilst the positive commitments are shared across societies their substantive interpretation are locally realised. This does not undermine the pluralism of Walzer's account because it recognises that societies construct different visions of what it means to live a meaningful life.

This extended interpretation of the Walzerian framework provides the resources to introduce a pluralistic notion of modernity. Crucially, this conceptualisation of modernity is neither techno-scientific, economic, material, nor temporal in nature. It neither refers to the level of industrial or bureaucratic development nor does it refer to a specific moment in a global historical timeline. As such, modernity is not defined by a point in time such as the Treaty of

Westphalia, the Industrial Revolution, or even the digital revolution. Rather, it is a moral-political notion, a normative designation that applies to societies which realise both the negative and positive commitments that emerge from the universally reiterated process of social construction. In this sense, a society can be called modern when it upholds the conditions required for it to protect human dignity and when it enables individuals to lead meaningful lives in accordance with particular understandings of well-being, agency, and recognition.

Although this notion of modernity is normative, a qualified temporal condition remains as a result of the conception of progress maintaining a pre-conditional relationship between normative and non-normative forms of progress. Arriving at a modern moral-political condition may depend upon certain techno-scientific and economic capacities being met and these non-normative conditions might not have been available in earlier historical contexts. Therefore, while modernity in this framework is not defined by its place in time, it may, nevertheless, presuppose some form of temporal condition that is linked to the levels of scientific, technological, and economic development required for human dignity, agency, and recognition to be realised.

One implication of this notion of modernity is that it allows the immanent account of normativity to incorporate the multiple modernities perspective. The multiple modernities perspective challenges the idea that there is a single universal model of modernity.⁸⁷ On this account, any society that enables people to lead a full life counts as modern. There will be a range of different yet equally modern societies because the form that the society takes and the maximal account of normativity that details how the moral practices and political institutions of the context ought to be organised will depend on the social, cultural, political, and religious histories of the context.

⁸⁷ Eisenstadt, S., 2002; Arnason, 2015.

Another implication is that it provides a more nuanced ability to engage with societies that do not violate minimum standards. As a consequence of taking the accounts of social construction and reiterative universalism to detail a positive counterpart to the negative injunctions, we can differentiate between defective, decent, and modern societies. If a society violates the minimal normativity, then it is defective. If a society only meets the minimal normative commitments by prohibiting genocide, torture, and oppression, then it can be regarded as decent. If a society meets both the minimal and maximal requirements, then it qualifies as modern. In contrast to Walzer's original dichotomy, this framework enables a decent society to be challenged on the grounds that although it does not violate the minimal normative commitments it fails to meet the positive injunctions that enable human flourishing. Again, the distinction is not temporal. A society is not modern because it belongs to a particular historical period. Rather, a society is modern because it realises a moral-political order in which both the negative and positive normative commitments are sustained. For example, apartheid-era South Africa had the institutional markers of a developed state but denied well-being, agency, and recognition to the majority of its population. On this account, apartheid-era South Africa, even though it was industrially and bureaucratically advanced could not qualify as a modern society. The systemic violation of agency and the denial of recognition precludes it from meeting that normative threshold. Likewise, a bureaucratically and technologically sophisticated state that engages in mass internment and cultural erasure of a minority could not be classified as modern. Exclusionary and discriminatory regimes cannot be considered modern despite their economic power and sophisticated state structure.

A corollary of this understanding of modernity is that the meaning and requirements of modernity cannot be fixed. Since the positive commitments that define modernity are interpreted through the thick accounts of normativity of each context, what it takes to realise them will shift over time. As societies change,

so too will the standards by which the realisation of these positive commitments are evaluated. Forms of well-being, participation, and recognition that were once seen as sufficient may later be judged to be insufficient in light of new normative interpretations. Therefore, modernity cannot be a static achievement or a historical destination but an evolving condition shaped by an ongoing process of social construction and normative re-evaluation.

As such, an immanent yet non-relativistic account of normativity can be employed to construct a positive conception of moral-political progress that incorporates a normative notion of modernity. This notion preserves the core insight of the multiple modernities perspective while resisting Eurocentric developmentalism by affirming the legitimacy of diverse, evolving, and historically grounded moral-political forms of life and social order.

The Causal-Agential Element – Enriching Progressive Agency

Walzer's methodological resources also enable us to reflect upon the four conditions of progressive agency. To recall, the four-part account of progressive agency states that agents of progress must: (a) have thought critically about the moral-political condition of their society; (b) had a vision of the normative change they want to realise; (c) acted in ways that aim to bring this change about; and (d) acquired the means to ensure the success of their action. On the one hand, Walzer's account of critical interpretivism shows how agents of progress must be embedded in a particular context but occupy a liminal position within it in order to critically reflect on the moral-political condition of their context. On the other hand, Walzer's focus on politics as the driver of progressive change demonstrates how the political process mediates the realisation of a progressive vision. This clarifies how the critical and constructive aspects as well as the practical aspects of progressive agency ought to be understood.

The account of social interpretivism and immanent criticism illuminates the first two components of progressive agency. This account shows that critical capacity is not something achieved by someone existing outside of their society but by someone who is embedded within a society. The ability to engage in the critical endeavour results from an individual understanding the shared normative vocabulary and understandings of a particular society. However, the individual must also be somewhat estranged from their context. This detached embeddedness is what enables an individual to sense and diagnose the problems in the status quo and begin to envision alternatives. Therefore, agents of progress must be contextually embedded yet capable of gaining the distance necessary to possess a critical capacity sufficient for progressive agency.

In addition, Walzer's focus on political action as the driving force of progressive change clarifies the latter two components of progressive agency. The attention placed on politics as the place in which progressive visions are contested and pursued demonstrates that progressive change is not forged by individuals but ultimately the result of a collective struggle and collaborative endeavour.⁸⁸ Agents of progress, after outlining their vision of a better set of moral practices and political institutions must work with others to construct coalitions to bring about their vision. Even if a particular agent of progress already possesses military and economic power, there is still a need to mobilise others who have come to share their vision. The conditions of progressive agency require that even the most powerful individuals are required to engage others in order to ensure that their vision is enacted and able to endure. Therefore, politics and the political struggle should be understood as a central element of progressive agency. Moreover, Walzer's sensitivity to the messiness of politics clarifies how progress might unfold in a way that is impossible to predict in advance. Political movements are marked by conflict and compromise. The outcome of the political process rarely mirrors the intentions of those who enter

⁸⁸ Walzer, M., 1994(a), ix; 1971.

into it because coalitions are brokered, priorities decided, self-interests negotiated, and strategies revised in response to success and failures. This ensures that the outcome of the process is profoundly contingent. The contingency further explains the presence of the unintended consequences in history. Walzer enables us to see even more clearly how the actions of agents to purposively realise their normative ideal are often shaped by the broader political landscape and the activists that they enlist to take up the mantle of their moral-political vision.

Therefore, Walzer's methodological resources clarify the conditions of progressive agency. His account of social criticism clarifies how agents of progress come to reflect critically on their condition and formulate a new normative vision. His emphasis on political struggle clarifies how they come to secure the means to practically bring about moral-political change. Taken together, these show that progress is driven by embedded yet liminal individuals who possess the critical and constructive capacity to envision a better future as well as the practical ability, shaped and constrained by the complexities of political reality, to bring it about.

The Historical Element – Developing An Epochal Account

Although Walzer does not endorse a philosophy of history, he illuminates how progress in history can be understood and how transformations between periods of history occur.

In terms of understanding progress in history, Toby Reiner details how because there is 'no universal path that social construction must take... when meanings change over time, it does not follow that the old way of life was a mistake: the appropriate arrangements may have followed from the relevant

meanings'.⁸⁹ Therefore, rather than labelling prior accounts of normativity as 'backward' and condemning previous forms of society for not living up to our contemporary standard, we can appreciate historical arrangements as appropriate to the normative account of the time. This means that progress in history is marked by the movement of the moral practices and political institutions of a context towards what the socially constructed normative account detailed at that moment in history.

In terms of understanding normative transitions between periods of history, at the start of an epoch, an interpretation of collective social meanings consolidates into a normative horizon that provides the telos towards which moral-political progress is oriented. The important point is that during an epoch the normative telos remains in place. An epoch ends when the normative horizon is itself contested and subverted. Again, this occurs when an agent of progress reinterprets the social meanings of their context in a way that undermines the legitimacy of the existing normative order and proposes a new set of values, moral principles, and political norms to take its place. If this reinterpretation succeeds in reshaping moral practices and political institutions, a new normative horizon emerges and a new epoch begins. This makes it clear that since each progressive transition involves contesting the normative commitments of the prior status quo and transforming the normative horizon by entrenching a new account of normativity, each transition is likely to include a lengthy period of articulation and negotiation followed by an abrupt moment of affirmation. However, because the historical shift emerges from a reinterpretation of social meanings there will always be something of a continuation with the prior social order. Therefore, the epochal shift does not throw off everything that has gone before but still represents a precipitous break with the values, moral principles, and political norms that had previously been objective.

⁸⁹ Reiner, J. T., 2020, 155.

Finally, regressions within an epoch are possible but regressions to a prior epoch are not because the process of social construction has a critical as well as a constructive part. In the critical part, the critic challenges the normative account by calling out its deficiencies and inadequacies. This assault fatally undermines the prior account of normativity so that it can never again arise from a process of social construction and be consensually endorsed. In the constructive part, the critic articulates and defends a new set of normative commitments on the grounds that they are a better interpretation of the conventional social meanings. Even once this interpretation of the conventional social meanings is challenged so that the new account of normativity is itself undermined, the account of normativity cannot revert to the prior form because the original criticism still renders it redundant. To make this point clear, consider two contrasting slave revolts.⁹⁰ On the one hand, the Spartacus Slave Revolt (73-71 BCE) saw enslaved gladiators rise up against the Roman Republic and fight to liberate themselves. Although it was initially successful, the Roman army eventually defeated the revolt and the institution of slavery was reintroduced. On the other hand, the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804) saw a popular uprising against the institution of slavery. Although it was initially successful, the French colonial army and white militias repressed the uprising and the institution of slavery was reintroduced. On both accounts, the practice of slavery was contested, overthrown, and then reintroduced. However, the Haitian Revolution was underpinned by a shift in the normative standard that supported the institution of slavery. The French Revolution and its Enlightenment ideals of freedom, equality, and universal human rights changed the values, moral principles, and political norms that were applicable in France and Haiti. So once the institution of slavery was reintroduced in 1802, it jarred against this new account of normativity. As a result, the institution of slavery was permanently abolished in 1804. In contrast, there was no change in the account of normativity that unpinned the Spartacus Slave Revolt. Consequently, the institution of slavery was reintroduced and

⁹⁰ I am grateful to Anton Jäger and Elizabeth Frazer for suggesting this example.

continued following its reintroduction. These examples demonstrate that when a precipitous break in the normative standard occurs, reversals in a specific practice or institution will not undermine the normative change that occurred.

In this way, Walzer's methodological resources enable us to understand historical progress as a series of normative ruptures grounded in reinterpretations of social meanings. His commitment to immanent critique offers a framework for understanding how societies transform from one moral-political order to another. It is through these transitions that history can be understood as a punctuated sequence of normative transformations.

Conclusion – Integrating Amy Allen and Michael Walzer

Amy Allen provides a powerful template for how to theorise about moral-political progress without relying on Eurocentric assumptions. However, certain aspects of Allen's account can be strengthened so that a comprehensive conception of moral-political progress can be constructed. To this end, I proposed a methodological pivot from Foucault and Adorno to the normative and epistemic resources of Michael Walzer. Although Walzer is not a theorist of progress, his accounts of social construction and social interpretivism offer a robust account of how a normative telos can be immanently grounded without collapsing into cultural relativism. Through social construction, normative commitments come to have objective standing within a context whilst remaining open to immanent critique and transformation. Walzer's methodological resources also strengthen the normative-teleological element by enabling a positive vision of progress to be articulated. In turn, this provides the conceptual tools to reframe modernity not as a temporal ideal but as a plural and dynamic moral-political condition defined by the achievement of both minimal human dignity and positive capacities for well-being, agency, and recognition. In addition, Walzer's account of social criticism clarifies the four conditions of

progressive agency. The embedded yet liminal critic exemplifies the dual posture required to be an agent of progress; the individual must be rooted in their society but capable of attaining the distance required in order to critique the status quo and articulate a new normative horizon. Walzer's attention to the political process also highlights the contingency of progress and how coalitions and compromises lead to unintended consequences that shape the trajectory of moral-political change. Finally, it became clear how normative transformations occur as a result of reinterpreting shared social meanings and bringing about transitions between normative epochs. These transitions mark irreversible shifts in an account of normativity that cannot be undone. Taken together, Walzer's methodological resources can replace the dependence on Adorno and Foucault to enable the construction of a more normatively coherent, causally accurate, and historically informed conception of moral-political progress.

As a result of this analysis, I am now in a position to bring together the conclusions of the *geistesgeschichte* analysis of Section One and the conceptual analysis of Section Two to fully articulate the normative-teleological, causal-agential, and historical elements of the reappraised conception of moral-political progress. The Conclusion will detail the conception of moral-political progress that the collective analysis of the thesis supports and detail what responses this conception of moral-political progress can offer to the conceptual concerns

Conclusion: A Thick Conception of Moral-Political Progress

The project to construct a thick conception of moral-political progress proceeded in two parts. Section One undertook a *geistesgeschichte* analysis in which the Enlightenment, Kantian, and Hegelian conceptions of progress were deconstructed and evaluated according to their normative-teleological, causal-agential, and historical elements. This analysis revealed the most defensible conception of moral-political progress as things stood before political theorists turned away from the concept. The analysis showed that even though there are shortcomings with Hegel's conception of progress, a Hegelian framework would be the most plausible template for the conceptual elements of a thick conception of moral-political progress. Therefore, at the end of Section One, the question became how to build upon the Hegelian template to construct a robust, forward-looking conception of progress that can also respond to the conceptual concerns. Section Two was a project of conceptual analysis that sought to determine whether a contemporary approach to theorising about progress could support that ambition. I argued that pragmatic and functionalist approaches to theorising about progress result in incoherent conceptions of moral-political progress. In contrast, I argued that Amy Allen's approach can make sense of backward-looking and forward-looking claims of progress and respond to the Eurocentric concern. In addition, I argued that the methodological resources of Michael Walzer could be incorporated into Allen's approach to construct a robust, positive conception of moral-political progress that references an immanent yet non-relativistic account of normativity.

As a result of the analysis, I can outline the form that the reappraised conception of moral-political progress ought to take, reflect on how it responds to the conceptual concerns, and identify the commitments that must be maintained for it to serve as a tool for political theorising.

I argued that a normative-teleological conception of moral-political progress ought to take a positive form and paint a picture of the world that we want to create. Allen showed that the conception of moral-political progress (of either a positive or negative form) requires an account of normativity to ground the normative telos that acts as the goal towards which progressive change is orientated. However, Allen also made clear that in order for a conception of moral-political progress to avoid the Eurocentric concern the account of normativity that underpins its normative-teleological element needs to be immanent (i.e. come from within the social world) and avoid collapsing into either individual subjectivism or cultural relativism.

In this way, Allen demonstrates that a conception of moral-political progress can take either a backward-looking or forward-looking form. On the backward-looking form, progress occurred when the moral practices and political institutions of a context moved closer to the arrangement detailed by the normative telos applicable at the time. Therefore, progress in history is not judged against the benchmark that is operative today but against the benchmark operative at the time in question. On the forward-looking form, progress occurs when the moral practices and political institutions of a context move closer to the arrangement that is currently detailed by the normative telos. As such, progress (either historical or contemporary) is defined as a change that moves the moral practices and political institutions of a context closer to the arrangement detailed by the normative telos. Inversely, regress (either historical or contemporary) is defined as a change that moves the moral practices and political institutions of a context away from the arrangement detailed by the normative telos.

Therefore, although the reappraised conception of progress will be positive, it follows in the Allenian vein insofar as it articulates a normative-

teleological conception of progress that can take either a backward-looking or forward-looking form and references an immanent yet non-relativistic account of normativity.

The next stage in the conceptual construction is to build upon this outline to flesh out the normative-teleological, causal-agential, and historical elements.

The Reappraised Thick Conception of Moral-Political Progress

The first element is the normative-teleological element. The normative aspect of a conception of moral-political progress refers to the values, moral principles, and political norms that determine how we ought to live and how we ought to organise our society. The normative aspect enables it to be determined that a change is desirable because it moves the moral practices and political institutions of a society closer to the desired form. The teleological aspect refers to the end goal of progressive change. This goal provides the benchmark against which claims of progress can be made and acts as the lodestar that orientates progressive change. Taken together, the normative-teleological element orientates progressive change and enables it to be determined that a change is progressive because it is a forward movement towards a desired goal.

With regard to the normative aspect, the question is how to ground the account of normativity. The strength of the Hegelian conception of progress is that it rejects foundationalism in favour of a historicism that takes our moral practices and political institutions to be the result of context-specific historical development. The Allenian approach outlined how Hegelian anti-foundationalism can be paired with a forward-looking perspective when the normative account is grounded immanently. The challenge for the immanent account of normativity is to explain how it avoids collapsing into cultural

relativism. Walzer's methodological resources provide an immanent account of normativity that can do just that.

According to this account, normative commitments are generated by a process of social construction. This process takes normative commitments to be shaped by the socio-cultural and historical contingencies of a particular context because they emerge from the shared meanings of contextually embedded individuals. Since these shared meanings are most deeply rooted in a common language, heritage, and identity, the nation often serves as the context in which normative commitments take shape. Within this context, a consensus forms around values, moral principles, and political norms. As a result, the accounts of normativity are objective within their own context but do not carry objective authority outside of it. This process of social construction is reiterated universally so that every context undergoes its own process of social construction that takes into account its own set of socio-cultural historical contingencies and results in its own immanent account of normativity.¹

I argued that an additional strength of this approach is that it can make sense of a pluralistic notion of modernity. Although the term 'modernity' carries considerable conceptual and historical baggage as it is often associated with Eurocentric narratives of economic development, bureaucratic rationalisation, and techno-scientific advancement, my use of the term is an explicit attempt to reclaim it and employ it in a moral-political sense. Just as there are different types of progress there are also different types of modernity. The account I advance refers specifically to a *normative (moral-political)* notion of modernity. On this account, modernity does not refer to a level of economic development, techno-

¹ Although I refer to the nation as the context in which normative commitments most commonly take shape, this should not be read as an attempt to reify the nation or to suggest that normative contexts are always neatly bounded by national borders. In practice, such contexts are often far more complex, encompassing sub-national, supra-national, and even inter-national formations. Nevertheless, the nation frequently provides the site in which these socio-cultural and historical factors converge and, thus, serves as a useful heuristic for describing how normative commitments are socially constructed.

scientific ability, bureaucratic sophistication, or a point in history. Instead, modernity is a normative notion that refers to a condition where human dignity is protected *and* individuals are enabled to lead meaningful lives in accordance with particular understandings of well-being, agency, and recognition. These conditions are universal because the negative requirement to protect human dignity and the positive requirement to enable human flourishing are reiterated across contexts. Each process of social construction gives rise to the same negative and positive commitments because they stem from something fundamental about what it means to be human. However, the form that these commitments take varies across contexts. So while the commitments to dignity and flourishing are reiterated, the specific values, moral principles, and political norms that give the commitments form are shaped by contextually specific conditions. In addition, because what it means for an individual to live well evolves over time, what counts as sufficient well-being, agency, and recognition is subject to ongoing reinterpretation. This ensures that modernity is not a static condition or a historical endpoint but an ongoing project of normative reflection.

This understanding of modernity incorporates the multiple modernities perspective into the normative framework because different societies, each shaped by their distinct social, cultural, political, and religious particularities, can realise the conditions of modernity in their own way. Beyond meeting these positive and negative commitments, each society will develop a set of normative commitments that regulate the full thickness of moral-political life. These context-specific commitments shape how individuals ought to act, how institutions ought to be organised, and how the ideals of that society are interpreted and sustained. In this way, the immanent account of normativity not only secures universal commitments to dignity and flourishing but also provides the resources to articulate and guide the complexities of moral-political life within particular contexts.

This account of normativity can push back against the charge of cultural relativism on two grounds. First, since the negative and positive commitments recur across contexts, there is scope for cross-contextual critique. This critique observes whether a society adheres to the shared negative and positive injunctions and enables distinctions to be made between defective, decent, and modern societies. The ability to categorise societies and their accounts of normativity as either defective, decent, or modern provides an initial response to the cultural relativism concern by showing that normative commitments can be challenged and need not be accepted as a product of their context. Second, embedded critics are able to engage in a radical form of immanent criticism. This can subvert the incumbent account of normativity, articulate a new set of normative commitments based on a reinterpretation of the conventional social meanings, establish that the new account of normativity is more appropriate at that time, and then secure a consensus around the new account of normativity. Therefore, the account of normativity can push back against the cultural relativism concern because normative commitments can be challenged and changed by the process of immanent critique.

In sum, adopting an extended Walzerian approach to normativity enables an immanent yet non-relativist account of normativity to be adopted. This approach results in pluralistic accounts of normativity that are made up of multiple values, moral principles, and political norms. Therefore, the account must address the value pluralism concern.

With regard to the teleological aspect, it has to be determined whether the scope is universal or particular and whether the status is definitive or provisional.

The analysis of the Enlightenment and Kantian conceptions of progress revealed the Eurocentric implications and dangerous developmental logic that come with a universal account of teleology. The Hegelian account of teleology

offered a more nuanced approach that mixed the universal and particular. However, whilst the particular aspect enabled contextual factors to be taken into account, the universal aspect reintroduced a form of Eurocentrism insofar as it disregards non-European histories and foresaw a convergence to the European archetype. A more plausible approach considers each normative telos to be the result of a contextually specific process of social construction and, therefore, to apply only to the context in question. However, even though each normative telos is particular, it can make sense of ostensibly universal normative commitments by referencing the common set of negative and positive injunctions that arise out of each process of social construction. This account of teleology pushes back against the concern that non-European developmental narratives are disregarded because the socio-cultural historical contingencies of each and every context are relevant for their particular process of social construction. Furthermore, the incorporation of the multiple modernities approach entails that there will not be one form of moral-political order that qualifies as modern to which all other societies are encouraged to converge.

The Kantian conception of progress revealed that a definitive telos restricts our ability to hope for a better future, disregards the dynamic nature of society, and rests on an extraordinary faith in our epistemic abilities. In contrast, the Hegelian conception of progress detailed that a provisional account of teleology appreciates the dynamic nature of society, acknowledges that our understanding of the goal of progressive development can be revised, and ensures that mankind can always hope for a better future. However, Hegel also showed that there are two forms of provisional teleology. The first takes a series of teloi to come to an end with a definitive telos. The second takes the series of teloi to continue *ad infinitum*. The problems with a definitive account of teleology resurfaced for a provisional account of teleology that terminates with a definitive telos. As such, a more plausible approach understands the sequence of teloi to continue *ad infinitum* because the process of social construction that generates the normative

telos is an ongoing process of making and remaking that does not end. Even when there is a consensus regarding the interpretation of the conventional social meanings, a social critic can challenge the normative account and, by providing an alternative interpretation of the social meanings, offer up a new account of normativity in its place. Crucially, even though each telos is provisional, it still has a binding motivational force. The knowledge that there will be a further goal does not diminish the desire to achieve the goal set out for us in the present. Therefore, in Saul Alinsky's terms, we can never reach the top of the mountain. After we have struggled on up to reach what we think is the top all we can do is wait for the clouds to part so that the next top is revealed. We then continue on up until we reach the new top, only for the process to repeat, interminably.²

When set out in this way, an answer is made available to the question of how to determine that a shift in the normative telos is desirable. Through the process of immanent critique, each new account of normativity identifies and overcomes a deficiency in the existing normative framework. This ensures that the change is neither arbitrary nor does it reintroduce past deficiencies. Even when a subsequent deficiency is discerned, the return of previous deficiencies is unlikely because those were the very features that prompted the prior critique. In other words, the process of social construction, guided by embedded immanent critique, moves forward by overcoming inadequacies and preventing their re-emergence. Therefore, while each normative telos remains open to revision, the process selects against known failures so change does not reintroduce deficiencies and tends towards improvement.

The second element is the causal-agential element. This element contains a causal aspect and an agential aspect. The causal aspect explains how a transition to the normative telos occurs and the agential aspect details who the agents of progress are.

² Alinsky, S. D., 1971, 21.

With regard to the causal aspect, there are two parts.

The first part of the causal aspect concerns the relationship between moral-political progress and non-normative forms of progress. Indirect accounts of causation, whether in the Enlightenment form (where techno-scientific development is said to cause moral-political progress) or the Kantian form (where self-interested economic pursuit is said to cause moral-political progress), ought to be rejected. Instead, a conception of progress ought to adopt a direct account of causation. On this view, moral-political progress occurs when the moral practices and political institutions are intentionally altered in ways that move them closer to the desired arrangement. That said, this does not mean that the level of scientific, technological, or economic development are irrelevant for moral-political progress. On the contrary, a level of non-normative development may be necessary for certain instances of moral-political progress to occur. For example, the expansion of literacy and communication technology may have been required before individuals could exercise meaningful political agency and claim equal recognition. In their absence, efforts to establish democratic equality or participatory government may fail because the baseline conditions for moral-political progress have not been met. In this sense, their relationship is pre-conditional rather than causal. Therefore, although moral-political progress is caused by direct changes to moral practices and political institutions, some changes depend on certain levels of scientific, technological, and economic development.

The second part of the causal aspect relates to the type of causal agency that the agents of progress possess. On the one hand, Rousseau demonstrated that the moral-political state of affairs depends upon agents of progress and their actions. On the other hand, Hegel showed that the path and end of progressive development depend upon particular inputs. Therefore, a conception of progress should retain a contingent aspect and recognise that progressive outcomes are

not predetermined but depend on specific, often unpredictable, human actions to be brought about. As the analysis into functionalist and pragmatic conceptions of progress demonstrated, this emphasis on contingency should encourage not only a proactive intent to achieve moral-political progress but also a vigilant mindset that focuses on preventing regress in order to protect previously secured progressive gains.

With regard to the agential aspect, there are three parts.

The first part of the agential aspect concerns who the agents of progress are. Since the reappraised conception of progress adopts a direct account of causation, it rejects accounts that attribute progressive agency to the drivers of scientific and technological innovation or those who pursue their economic and political self-interest. Instead, agents of progress are understood to be individuals who (a) critically assess the moral-political condition of their society; (b) articulate a vision of a more desirable moral-political order; (c) act to bring that vision about; (d) acquire the means to ensure that their actions are effective. Walzer's account of social interpretivism made clear that the critical requirements of progressive agency are met by embedded yet liminal individuals who are able to identify the deficiencies in the current moral-political order and reinterpret the shared moral vocabulary of their context to propose a meaningful alternative. Their embeddedness gives them interpretive authority while their distance enables them to identify the shortcomings of and propose a constructive challenge to the status quo. In addition, Walzer's insight that the political domain is the arena in which normative visions are pursued foregrounds the practical dimension of progressive agency. Agents of progress are not just critics but practical people who mobilise allies and build coalitions to engage in the political struggle necessary to realise their vision. This clarifies how social movements and political organisations play a role in progressive change. These collectives are the vehicles through which moral-political visions are translated into action. They

provide the organisational infrastructure and strategic coordination required to overcome resistance and embed moral-political progress.

This account of progressive agency has three virtues. First, this account suggests that agents of progress are able to realise progressive change without recourse to military means. As such, this account can point to the examples of Mahatma Gandhi, Lech Wałęsa, and Tawakkol Karman as examples of individuals who met the requirements of progressive agency through alternative means. Therefore, this account makes clear that when it comes to acquiring the means to bring about progressive change the pen and the pulpit are just as mighty as the sword. The second virtue is that it makes clear that there is a distinction between agents of progress and moral-political activists. Agents of progress originate new normative visions and initiate progressive change. Moral-political activists sustain and develop those visions through political work. This distinction is not meant to underplay the importance of moral-political activists. For example, figures such as William Wilberforce, Granville Sharp, Olaudah Equiano, and Hannah More were remarkable campaigners who played an essential role in securing the abolition of the British slave trade in 1807 and the abolition of slavery throughout the British Empire in 1833. Nevertheless, the account highlights the distinction between those who conceive of a new moral-political vision and initiate efforts to realise it and those who carry that vision forward. The third virtue is that this account applies not only *ex-post* but also *ex-ante* insofar as it enables us to say that the agents of progress will be those liminal yet embedded individuals who will be able to criticise the status quo, set out a new vision of moral-political order, and acquire the means to bring that vision about.

To be clear, this account should be understood as a framework that specifies what it takes, in principle, for someone to be an agent of progress. Whilst it is articulated in individualistic terms, the four components of progressive

agency need not always be embodied within a single person. In practice, different individuals may discharge different aspects of progressive agency. Moreover, it may not always be possible to identify precisely who first fulfilled a particular condition. For example, in historical cases, the origins of transformative ideas are diffuse and the initial articulation of a new moral-political vision emerges from collective discourse rather than any identifiable individual. Nevertheless, the account clarifies that all four components must be fulfilled by various individuals for moral-political progress to occur. In the fullest sense, an agent of progress is an individual who meets all four conditions. However, the framework is best understood as identifying the necessary components of the agential aspect of progress rather than restricting progressive agency solely to those who embody all of them simultaneously.

It still needs to be determined whether the vision articulated by the agent of progress would actually constitute an instance of moral-political progress. The four-part model only specifies the conditions for who has the capacity for progressive agency and does not guarantee that the vision would actually bring about a desirable change. An individual may fulfil the conditions of progressive agency and yet advocate for a vision that is, upon reflection, regressive. To address this, the conception of progress integrates epistemic and critical safeguards. The epistemic check relies on the embeddedness of agents of progress to ensure that their visions are responsive to the lived experiences and normative demands of their context. If their vision garners support and their reinterpretation becomes the consensus, this should ensure that it represents a desirable change that moves the society in a better direction. If it did not, the epistemic check should ensure that the vision could not gain support and the new account of normativity could not be embedded. However, this cannot be relied upon because the epistemic check is fallible. As the example of Nazi Germany demonstrates, consensus can form around deeply regressive visions where collective endorsement does not reflect moral-political progress but exclusion

and domination. In other words, popular acceptance does not guarantee improvement, particularly when minorities are marginalised, silenced, or persecuted. To combat the shortcoming of the epistemic check, the critical check ensures that prospective visions of change can be critically evaluated. Any proposed normative reinterpretation must meet the minimal standards set by the negative and positive commitments. If a vision fails to meet these requirements, it can be rejected as regressive, regardless of how widely it is endorsed. In this way, the conception of progress establishes the criteria against which normative visions that emerge from within the context can be assessed and distinguished as either progressive or regressive. As a result, the critical check ultimately secures the normative integrity of changes to the normative telos and the moral-political reality.

The second part of the agential aspect relates to the type of agency that the agents of progress have. The Enlightenment conception of progress demonstrated that a necessary account of causation downgrades causal agency to the catalytic form. The Kantian conception of progress showed that the catalytic form of causal agency leads to nihilism and existential despair. As such, the account of causal agency ought to take a creative form. To strengthen the creative position, Hegel made clear that nihilism and existential despair are avoided on an account of causal agency that gives meaning to our intentions and actions. Therefore, the creative account of causal agency is adopted and it is taken that the trajectory of progressive change is not pre-set and that the actions of the agents of progress can forge the path and destination of progressive development.

The third part of the agential aspect relates to the intentionality of progressive actions. The challenge is how to incorporate into the creative account of causal agency the fact that the intentions of the agents of progress do not map onto the actual record of progressive change. On the one hand, it was accepted

that although the agent of progress conceives of the progressive change they want to bring about, their attempt to realise it is likely to have consequences that were not foreseen in advance. On the other hand, the practical components of the account of agency suggest two reasons why progressive outcomes rarely mirror intentions. First, the political process navigates self-interest, resistance, and institutional restraints. Second, the social movements and political organisations that are part of the political process are composed of individuals and groups with differing priorities, interpretations of the moral-political vision, and methods of bringing it about. As a result, the political process is marked by negotiation and compromise, which, in turn, lead to unintended consequences that alter the intended trajectory of progressive change.

The third element is the historical element. This element requires an account of history that can make sense of the apparent directionality of historical change and the relatively stable rate of improvement, detail the form that progressive transitions take, and justify the presumption against the reversibility of progressive change.

The analysis of the Kantian conception of history demonstrated that a continuous account of history struggles to account for meaningful periods of plateau and regress. In addition, the analysis of pragmatic and functionalist conceptions of progress made clear that a continuous account of history fails to make sense of the interconnected nature of transitions that occur at a similar time in history and struggles to differentiate between circular changes and instances of regress.

The analysis of the Enlightenment account of history demonstrated that a stadial account of history divides history into a sequence of stages that each build accumulatively upon the last. This account retains a developmental logic that creates a rigid hierarchy that ranks forms of moral-political order. Allen

developed this critique and argued that stadial accounts of history reinforce a Eurocentric perception of modernity because the European form of society is taken as superior and all non-European societies are labelled 'primitive' and 'backward'.

The analysis of the Hegelian account of history demonstrated that an epochal account takes history to be structured by distinct periods. I argued that the epochal account of history can take the distinct periods to be defined by the dominant account of normativity that is objective for a context over a given period. In contrast to the stadial account, transitions between epochs are marked by the discrediting of the prior normative framework and the consolidation of a new one in its place. Importantly, this epochal account of history does not attempt to resurrect the classical grand narratives account that identified a few epochs and laid out how societies move between them. Rather, this account softens the epochal account by focusing on the mechanics of historical change. The important aspect of this epochal account of history is the process through which a moral-political order is overturned and reconstituted. So although each epoch is internally fragmented and contested, it maintains a degree of coherence over time and space as a result of its shared constellation of values, moral principles, and political norms that bind it together. At the core of each epochal transition is a 'sunrise moment' that marks the point at which the dominant account of normativity is no longer sustainable and a new set of values, moral principles, and political norms begin to take shape. These transitions are the result of a long-term process that reveals the limitations and contradictions of the prevailing account of normativity, resulting in a sense that the prevailing moral-political order has exhausted its legitimacy. Over time, new interpretations of shared social meanings are advanced and, when one consolidates, the new epoch takes shape. This process is dialectical insofar as the negation of a moral-political order is followed by the emergence of a new one, a period of backlash against its perceived excesses and overcorrections, and, finally, a resolution in which a

compromise configuration of the new normative framework and moral-political order becomes accepted. Although an epochal transition can take the form of a revolutionary rupture, it can also unfold more quietly through extended periods of contestation, reinterpretation, and transformation. In such cases, it may not be immediately clear that a new epoch has been entered or at least it is not easy to define what the new epoch is and the shape that it will take. The contours of the epoch may only become clear in retrospect once a society has worked through the tensions of the previous order and stabilised around a new account of normativity. As such, the boundaries of an epoch may not be clear immediately. Nevertheless, once a new account of normativity becomes operative, it generates a strong presumption against regression. Whilst progress within an epoch may be marked by forward as well as backward steps, it is not possible to regress to a prior epoch. This is because a discrediting of the prior normative account underpins the transition. In this sense, epochal transitions function like a ratchet. Even if backward steps are taken the normative shift cannot be undone. The discredited account no longer holds authority and cannot regain the consensus needed to govern moral-political life. In this way, we can retain faith in the improvement of moral-political life not by imagining progress as inevitable and continuous but by recognising that once certain normative commitments are realised they cannot be forgotten.³ Finally, this account of history is capable of critically evaluating the paths that history has taken in order to avoid the charge that it justifies historical suffering. While recognising that historical developments are path-dependent and constrained by prior conditions, it can be acknowledged that at certain junctures, alternative, less harmful transitions were possible. This allows the account to condemn violent transitions and affirm that, where possible, non-violent and less harmful paths should have been taken. In

³ Criticism of the notion of a historical 'ratchet' often results from a sense of pessimism about current moral-political conditions. Yet, it is important to distinguish between temporary assaults on and a wholesale abandonment of normative commitments. This account of history allows for contestation and backsliding but posits that once moral-political commitments have been realised they cannot be entirely erased. Therefore, the account of history does not support a blind faith in irreversible progress. Instead, it suggests that prior progressive achievements must be continually defended even though the normative commitments that underpin them cannot be lost altogether.

doing so, it avoids justifying suffering and emphasises the importance of learning from the atrocities of the past to guide more humane transformations in the future.

In conclusion, the reappraised conception of progress follows in the Allenian vein and draws on Michael Walzer's methodological resources to construct the conceptual elements of a conception of progress in a way that develops and refines the Hegelian framework. The normative-teleological element refers to a pluralistic account of immanent normativity and a particular and provisional telos. The causal-agential element adopts a direct and contingent account of causation with an individual, creative, and unintended consequences of normative action account of agency. The historical element adopts an epochal account of history and retains an ability to criticise the actual path that historical transitions took. The collective analysis of this thesis suggests that this is the most plausible form that a conception of moral-political progress can take.

The final task is to analyse how this conception of progress can respond to each of the five conceptual concerns and unpack what commitments might need to be retained in order for it to be used as a tool for political theorising.

Response to the Conceptual Concerns

While the reappraised conception of moral-political progress cannot claim to conclusively resolve all concerns, it offers a coherent and plausible framework for responding to the empirical, political, value pluralism, Eurocentrism, and historicism concerns, provided certain commitments are retained and its limitations are acknowledged.

The empirical concern has two parts. On the one hand, the concern is that the range and scale of contemporary problems mean that we are regressing or

that we will regress in the near future. On the other hand, the concern is that historical examples of regression mean that it is not possible to say that we have progressed over time. To the first part of the concern, there are two potential lines of response. The first is that even though the reappraised conception of progress is teleological, on this conception of progress, the prospect of regress does not invalidate the possibility of progress. Whilst it is always possible to move away from the form of moral-political order that is deemed normatively desirable, the inverse is also true. It is always possible to stop the regression and prevent our moral practices and political institutions from moving further away from the desired arrangement. Therefore, in the face of a panoply of problems that threaten previously secured progressive gains, the reappraised conception of progress invites us to be vigilant and to work to combat these regressive threats. The second line of response notes that even though regression is possible and we ought to endeavour to combat it, because of the epochal nature of progressive change we can remain confident that the underlying normative commitments will not change. The ratcheting effect of the changes to the values, moral principles, and political norms ensures that deteriorations in moral practices and political institutions will constantly be in conflict with the operative account of normativity. As such, there will always be a countervailing force that works against these intra-epochal regressive changes. So whilst it is not a guarantee that the regression will end, the dissonance between the deteriorated form of the moral practices and political institutions and the dominant account of normativity creates a tension that motivates attempts to restore the moral practices and political institutions to their prior state. To the second part of the concern, the reappraised conception of progress rejects the idea that we are always taking one step after another along a long path of continuous improvement. The account of history enables us to look back and state that the path of historical development would have been better had certain periods of history not occurred as they did. So the fact that they occurred invalidates neither the idea that progress had occurred up until that point nor the idea that progress

has occurred since. Horrifying periods of history can be acknowledged without undermining the idea of progress. Furthermore, reflections upon these periods can motivate actions that address them in progressive change moving forward. Therefore, neither the historical examples of moral-political catastrophes nor the present threats to our moral-political condition suggest that moral-political progress has not occurred and that it cannot continue in the future. As such, the reappraised conception of progress offers a potential response to the empirical concern.

The political concern states that a teleological conception of progress is dangerous because the ends justify the means when it comes to realising the goal of progressive development. It has to be acknowledged that this danger cannot be eliminated entirely. Any appeal to a goal carries some risk of abuse. As such, a judgement will always have to be made that weighs the utility of a normative telos (such as its ability to motivate and direct progressive action and to provide a standard against which change can be assessed) against the risk that having such a goal entails. However, the reappraised conception of progress does mitigate this risk in a number of ways. Since the account of teleology is provisional, the goal towards which a society is aiming is understood as temporary rather than a definitive endpoint. As such, there is no 'final solution', only a succession of provisional goals that reflect our current understanding of what constitutes a better moral-political order. In this way, the urgency to realise the goal at any cost is weakened because the goal itself is open to critique and subject to revision. However, the provisional nature of the normative telos is not enough to dismiss the political concern. A telos is not rendered harmless just because it is provisional. For example, a regime could pursue an agenda of ethnic cleansing by claiming that it is a provisional step on the road to a better future and not a 'final solution' in and of itself. This is why the normative aspect of the reappraised conception of progress is so important. Since each normative telos is immanently grounded and arrived at through a universally reiterated process of

social construction, what counts as progress is not simply a movement towards any goal but a movement towards a goal that aligns with the commitments to protect human dignity and enable human flourishing. On this account, goals that require ethnic cleansing, oppression, violence, and cruelty fail to qualify as progressive in the first place. In this way, the normative framework sets significant constraints on what kind of telos can be endorsed and denies that abhorrent ideologies could ever be justified under the banner of progress. However, there is still a concern that even if the goal itself is consistent with the requirement to protect human dignity and enable human flourishing, political movements may resort to violence in order to achieve it. It is at this point that the reappraised conception of progress can point to the fact that it can condemn violent transitions when they were avoidable to insist that progressive change should be pursued through peaceful and non-violent means where possible. At the same time, this does not prescribe passivity in the face of obstacles to progress. There may be cases where violent resistance is necessary to defend the basic conditions of human dignity and end regimes that prohibit human flourishing. Nevertheless, in such instances, the use of force is not celebrated but permitted by necessity. Therefore, whilst the reappraised conception of progress cannot definitively reject the political concern, it offers meaningful safeguards to ensure that the goal is desirable and that there is a commitment to achieving it in as harmless a way as possible.

The value pluralism concern states that because the reappraised conception of progress retains a pluralistic account of normativity it runs into the problems of incompatibility and incommensurability. The incompatibility worry is that the full realisation of one aspect of the account of normativity blocks the full realisation of another. The incommensurability worry is that gains in one aspect of the account of normativity cannot be weighed up against losses in another. Under these conditions, the worry is that all-things-considered judgements would have to rest on either a naïve assumption about a bundle of

non-conflicting normative desirables or the *ceteris paribus* assumption that all other things remain equal. The reappraised conception of progress accepts that the pluralist account of normativity is comprised of incompatible elements but does not rely on either problematic assumption to make all-things-considered claims of progress. Instead, they are made by resisting incommensurability. Therefore, in order to use the reappraised conception of progress as a tool for normative theorising, the theorist must be willing to commit to the view that although it may be impossible to make abstract, fine-grained comparisons that determine whether a gain in X is precisely worth a loss in Y and objective judgements that discern whether a trade-off is permissible in all possible contexts, it is possible to make broader evaluative judgements about certain trade-offs in particular contexts. Once this commitment is maintained, it becomes clear how all-things-considered claims of progress can be made. Progress is determined by evaluating a change that moves the moral practices and political institutions of a context closer to the arrangement detailed by its normative telos. That telos reflects a judgement about which values, moral principles, and political norms ought to be prioritised. Even though certain aspects of the normative account may be incompatible, the process of social construction has implicitly made judgements about which trade-offs count as an improvement. Therefore, it is possible to say that, in light of the prevailing account of normativity, a certain change constitutes an overall gain and, therefore, is an instance of moral-political progress.

The Eurocentric concern was addressed by Allen and the reappraised conception of moral-political progress was constructed in line with her approach. As a result, the reappraised conception of progress does not determine the future goal of moral-political progress by looking back and extrapolating out of the post-Enlightenment European development narrative. Instead, each normative telos is grounded immanently via a process of context-specific social construction. In addition, the account of normativity adopted by the reappraised

conception of progress entails that there are multiple forms of modernity. Each modern form of moral-political order protects the basic human dignity of its people, enables each person to flourish, and has a comprehensive set of values, moral principles, and political norms that detail how society ought to be organised and how people ought to act. This account of normative teleology and its incorporation of the multiple modernities approach pushes back against each aspect of the Eurocentric concern. To address the root of the Eurocentric concern, the reappraised conception of progress makes clear that non-European societies are just as able to progress and reach the standard of modernity as European societies. There is scope within the reappraised conception of progress to allow for different visions of what progress might look like and the end to which progressive development aims. The reappraised conception of progress opens up a space in which these visions can emerge, be articulated, and come to be viewed as equally modern forms of social organisation. Of course, it is not for me to outline what these forms of modernity will look like. It is for agents of progress within each context to articulate a normative account that can meet the standard of modernity and provide a thicker account of how life should operate given the unique socio-cultural particularities of their context. As a result, this opens up the possibility that modernity can be realised without adopting the moral practices and political institutions that European societies now display. This ensures that the histories of non-European contexts are equally important because they provide the socio-cultural context for equally modern forms of life. In addition, this ensures that there will be no notion of civilisation supremacy because no modern form of moral-political order is considered better than any other. Different modern moral-political orders simply reflect the different socio-cultural factors that underpin each context. In sum, the reappraised conception of progress proves that the Eurocentric worldview can be jettisoned from a conception of progress and that its pernicious implications can be avoided.

The historicism concern can be addressed because the reappraised conception of progress can compare two temporal states of affairs, favourably assess the latter against the former, and ensure that the latter is likely to persist into the future without relying on deterministic assumptions. It maintains that, had certain interventions not occurred, the path and destination of historical development would have been different from what it turned out to be. Nevertheless, the account of history retains the idea of a relatively stable rate of improvement due to the ratcheting effect of historical transitions. When an epochal transition occurs the values, moral principles, and political norms irrevocably shift in a desirable direction. So even though intra-epochal regression can occur, the change in the account of normativity that defines the epoch cannot be undone. Therefore, whilst a new status quo might be liable to backsliding, a pure restoration of the status quo ante is not possible. This entails a weaker version of the stronger form of historicism because although the meaningful direction of history is preserved and there is a presumption against the reversibility of progressive change, the trajectory and end of progressive development are contingent upon the normative actions and their unintended consequences and deteriorations in the moral practices and political institutions of a context are permanently possible. As such, the worry about the reintroduction of determinism is avoided and a robust account of history is preserved.

Taken together, these responses suggest that the reappraised conception of moral-political progress offers plausible avenues for addressing the five conceptual concerns. Although they are not conclusively resolved, it shows how each concern can be met with a considered response and identifies the commitments that must be retained to do so.

Employing the Conception of Moral-Political Progress

This thesis outlined why we ought to re-engage with the concept of progress and constructed a thick conception of moral-political progress that can be employed by political actors and political theorists. In this way, the thesis should be taken not only as an academic contribution but also as an invitation. On the one hand, it invites political actors to become agents of progress and employ the conception of progress to set out visions of a better future and then mobilise the forces necessary to bring them about. On the other hand, it invites political theorists to critically engage with those visions in order to challenge and refine them. In a time when progress is so desperately needed, I hope that this thesis contributes to the wider effort to recover the concept as a powerful tool for political action and a meaningful tool for contemporary political theorising.

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Appendix: A Taxonomy of Progress

Normative-Teleological Element

	Normative Aspect		Teleological Aspect			
	Normative Framework		Scope		Status	
	Monism	Pluralism	Universal	Particular	Definitive	Provisional
Turgot	X		X		X	
Condorcet	X		X		X	
Kant	X		X		X	
Hegel	X			X		X
Kitcher	-	-	-	-	-	-
Jaeggi	-	-	-	-	-	-
Allen		X		X		X
Reappraised Conception		X		X		X

Causal-Agential Element

	Causal Aspect							
	Cause of Moral-Political Progress				Type of Causal Account (Type of Causal Agency)			
	Direct		Indirect		Cosmogenic		Anthropogenic	
	Irrelevant	Precondition	Knowledge-Based	Interest-Based	Necessary	Contingent	Necessary (Catalytic)	Contingent (Creative)
Turgot			X				X	
Condorcet			X				X	
Kant				X			X	
Hegel		X						X
Kitcher		X						X
Jaeggi		X						X
Allen		X						X
Reappraised Conception		X						X

	Agential Aspect							
	The Agents of Progress				Intentionality of Progress-Causing Actions			
	Individual	Profession	Class	Collective	Normative Action		Non-Normative Action	
					Intended Consequences	Unintended Consequences	Intended Consequences	Unintended Consequences
Turgot		X					X	
Condorcet		X					X	
Kant		X						X
Hegel	X					X		
Kitcher	X				X			
Jaeggi				X	X			
Allen	X				X			
Reappraised Conception	X					X		

	Historical Element		
	Continuous Account	Stadial Account	Epochal Account
Turgot		X	
Condorcet		X	
Kant	X		
Hegel			X
Kitcher	X		
Jaeggi	X		
Allen		-	
Reappraised Conception			X