The dynamics of moral progress

Julia Hermann

Department of Industrial Engineering & Innovation Sciences, Group “Philosophy & Ethics”, Eindhoven University of Technology, Atlas, PO Box 513, Eindhoven, 5600 MB, The Netherlands

Correspondence
Email: j.s.hermann@tue.nl

Abstract
Assuming that there is moral progress, and assuming that the abolition of slavery is an example of it, how does moral progress occur? Is it mainly driven by specific individuals who have gained new moral insights, or by changes in the socio-economic and epistemic conditions in which agents morally judge the norms and practices of their society, and act upon these judgements? In this paper, I argue that moral progress is a complex process in which changes at the level of belief and changes at the level of institutions and social practices are deeply intertwined, and that changes in the socio-economic and epistemic conditions of moral agency constitute the main motor of moral progress. I develop my view of moral progress by way of grappling with Michelle Moody-Adams’ prominent philosophical account of it. My view is less intellectualistic and individualistic than hers, does not presuppose metaethical moral realism, and blurs her distinction between moral progress in beliefs and moral progress in social practices. I point out the limits of humans to progress morally, which are partly grounded in our evolutionary history, and argue that moral progress is always of a ‘local’ nature.

KEYWORDS
evolution, Michelle Moody-Adams, moral progress, moral realism, slavery, social practices

1 | INTRODUCTION

Abraham Lincoln (1953) said: ‘If slavery is not wrong, then nothing is wrong’. Similarly, we might say: ‘If the abolition of slavery is not an instance of moral progress, then nothing is an instance of moral progress.’ The abolition
of slavery is the favourite example of philosophers who write about moral progress. Whether there is and can be moral progress is contested. The view that if there is moral progress, slavery must be an instance of it is not. Other popular examples of developments that are widely considered to constitute progress in human morality include the abolition of foot-binding, the emancipation of women and the development of a human rights regime.

Assuming that there is moral progress, and assuming that the abolition of slavery is an example of it, how does moral progress occur? What are the relevant moral changes involved (changes in moral beliefs, institutional changes, etc.), how are they related, and what is their main driving force? In particular, is moral progress mainly driven by specific individuals who have gained new moral insights, as Michelle Moody-Adams (1999) claims, or by the collective and changes in the socio-economic and epistemic conditions of moral agency, i.e., the conditions in which agents morally judge the norms and practices of their society, and act upon these judgements (see Pleasants, 2011)? These are the questions that occupy me in this paper.

According to the view of moral progress I defend, moral progress involves changes at the level of beliefs as well as changes at the level of institutions and social practices, which include changes in the socio-economic and epistemic conditions under which people make moral judgements. The changes at these different levels are deeply intertwined. I develop this view by way of grappling with one of the most prominent philosophical accounts of moral progress, that of Moody-Adams. Moody-Adams distinguishes between ‘moral progress in beliefs’ and ‘moral progress in social practices’ (Moody-Adams, 1999, p. 168). The former involves ‘deepening our grasp of existing moral concepts’, while the latter consists in ‘realizing deepened moral understandings in behaviour or social institutions’ (ibid., p. 168). This implies that moral progress in beliefs comes first.¹ Since I find the idea of moral progress as involving a process of deepening our grasp of moral concepts promising, I will adopt it, but I will flesh it out differently than Moody-Adams. My account of that process is less intellectualistic and individualistic, and not committed to meta-ethical moral realism.² I argue that we cannot neatly distinguish between moral progress in beliefs and moral progress in social practices, and that we cannot say that one precedes the other. According to my view, changes in the socio-economic and epistemic conditions of moral agency constitute the main motor of moral progress.

I do not attempt to provide an account of what makes developments such as the abolition of slavery instances of moral progress as opposed to moral regress, because I do not believe that we have to attempt to convince someone who denies that a world without slavery and foot-binding is morally better than a world in which there are these practices. I take the moral wrongness of slavery to be an example of something that competent moral agents (in our times, not prior to the mid-eighteenth century) cannot reasonably doubt (see Hermann, 2015). In cases that are contested, we have to make a good argument for why a particular development is an instance of moral progress, or why it is not. For example, arguing that the abolition of factory farming would amount to moral progress requires being able to show convincingly that by keeping animals in factory farms, we violate their rights or do not respect them in the way they deserve in virtue of being the animals they are. If factory farming is similar to slavery in the sense that in that practice certain beings are used as mere instruments and thus denied the respect we owe them, then abolishing that practice would amount to moral progress.

The structure of the paper is as follows. In sections 2 and 3, I grapple with Moody-Adams’ intriguing idea that moral progress involves deepening one’s understanding of existing moral concepts. After having presented what I take to be Moody-Adam’s understanding of that process (section 2), I lay out my own account of it (section 3), which leads me to the question about the main engine of moral progress (section 4). Who or what brings morally progressive changes about? Should a philosophical account of moral progress focus on the agency of particular

¹ Moody-Adams (1999, p. 183) acknowledges that moral progress in social practices can occur without prior moral progress in beliefs, but her conceptualisation of the two forms of moral progress entails that they occur in the reversed order.

² With the label ‘moral realism’ I refer to the meta-ethical view that moral statements are true or false independently of what human beings think about them (Erdur, 2018, p. 227). Realists hold that moral facts or truths are mind-independent and that moral belief aims at representing those facts correctly (see e.g. Enoch, 2011; Shafer-Landau, 2003). I use the term ‘mind-independent’ in the sense of ‘independent of what human beings say, think and feel’.
individuals, or rather on the socio-economic and epistemic conditions of agency? Here my discussion focuses on the case of slavery. I argue that moral progress is mainly driven by changes in the conditions of moral agency. In section 5, I argue that evolutionary theory can contribute to our understanding of the kind of changes that are conducive to moral progress, and I point out limitations of moral progress. In section 6, I conclude.

2 | MORAL PROGRESS IN BELIEFS: DEEPENING ONE’S UNDERSTANDING OF EXISTING MORAL CONCEPTS

Moody-Adams seems to hold that in a paradigmatic case of moral progress, people gain new moral insights, which then inform changes at the level of institutions and practices. Gaining new moral insights requires overcoming the widespread human resistance to critical scrutiny, and the dissemination of these insights involves getting people to give up their ‘affected ignorance’. By ‘affected ignorance’, a notion that she borrows from Aquinas, Moody-Adams means the phenomenon of ‘choosing not to know what one can and should know’ (Moody-Adams, 1997, p. 101). Affected ignorance takes many different forms and is, according to her, always morally culpable ‘because it involves a choice not to know something that is morally important and that would be easy to know but for that choice’ (ibid., p. 102).

According to Moody-Adams, moral progress in beliefs is a matter of gaining a deeper understanding of an already existing moral concept, not a question of coming up with novel moral concepts. As she convincingly argues, “[n]ew moral insights can be ‘assimilated’ [i.e., incorporated into our moral belief system; J.H.] only if they can somehow be expressed in terms of familiar moral concepts’ (Moody-Adams, 1999, p. 170). A radically new moral idea, i.e., an idea that we can only grasp and express if we have novel moral concepts at our disposal, could not be recognised as constituting moral progress.

On Moody-Adams’ account, the relevant moral changes that occurred during the abolition of slavery involved people gaining a more profound understanding of concepts such as equality, liberty and justice. While I find this idea prima facie attractive, I would not want to adopt it in case it committed me to a realist account of moral progress, i.e., one that conceives of moral progress as the process in which our moral beliefs come to depict more accurately a mind-independent moral reality. Such a view faces serious difficulties, such as having to explain what moral facts are, to argue for the claim that these facts exist and to explain how human beings can have access to them.3 Since Moody-Adams explains her notion of deepening our grasp of moral concepts by reference to Mark Platts’ concept of ‘semantic depth’ (Platts, 1988, p. 287), and since Platts explains the semantic depth of moral concepts in realist terms, I need to show that we can make sense of this process of deepening our grasp of moral concepts without endorsing moral realism.4

As a first step, then, let us look at how Platts and Moody-Adams understand the notion of semantic depth. Platts uses the concept in the context of his attempt to extend his realistic view of language to moral discourse (see note 4). More precisely, he uses it within an argument against moral relativism, which is the view that ‘the authority of moral norms is relative to time and place’ (Lukes, 2008, p. 18). Platts argues that moral realists are able to account for differences in moral views and norms by referring to the ‘semantic depth’ of moral concepts, which he explains thus: ‘Starting from our grasp upon them [moral concepts; J.H.] through our knowledge of the austere truth-conditions of sentences containing them, we have to struggle to improve our sensitivity to particular instantiations

3 I will not argue against realist accounts of moral progress in this paper. For non-realist accounts of moral progress see e.g. Kitcher, 2011; Wilson, 2010.

4 The essay by Platts to which Moody-Adams refers was originally published as chapter 10 of his book Ways of Meaning (1979). Platts considers an extension of his realistic view of language to moral discourse. He does not go as far as fully endorsing the resulting version of moral realism, which is a form of epistemological moral intuitionism, but admits that he finds it highly attractive (Platts, 1988, p. 300). Epistemological moral intuitionism is the view that ‘some people are non-inferentially justified in believing some moral propositions’ (Sinnott-Armstrong, 2011, p. 13). The most prominent contemporary advocate of such a view is Robert Audi (see Audi, 2004).
of them’ (Platts, 1988, p. 287). 5 Moral concepts pick out features of the independent world that are ‘of indefinite complexity in ways that transcend our practical understanding’ (ibid., p. 299). 6 We can improve ‘our moral beliefs about the world’ and ‘our sensitivity to the presence of instances of the moral concepts that figure in these beliefs’ by paying ‘careful attention to the world’ (ibid., p. 285; my italics).

Moody-Adams (1999, p. 169) describes the process of gaining a deeper understanding of a moral concept as involving ‘coming to appreciate more fully the richness and the range of application of a particular moral concept (or a linked set of concepts), as well as understanding how some newly deepened account of a moral concept – some new moral conception – more adequately captures features of experience which the concept aims to pick out’. She takes the example of justice and emphasises that no single conception of that concept can ‘adequately capture its semantic depth’ (ibid., p. 173). I take ‘richness’ of a concept to refer to the variety of human experiences that fall under it. In the case of injustice, one could think of women’s experiences of being oppressed, workers’ experiences of being exploited, unfair treatment experienced by the members of a particular profession, and so forth. There is also significant variation within these different experiences of injustice, i.e., within women’s experiences of being oppressed and so forth.

How can we come to appreciate more fully the richness of a concept? Moody-Adams argues that moral inquiry needs to ‘alter some of the constituent beliefs and affective associations that structure important patterns of situational meanings’ (ibid., p. 175). Here she draws on the work of Gestalt theorists such as Karl Duncker, who emphasise that any subject of moral evaluation is embedded in a ‘concrete pattern of situational meanings’ (Duncker, 1939, p. 43). 7 She mentions five argumentative strategies through which changes in these patterns can be effected. The fifth, most important strategy consists in trying ‘to break down the common human resistance to self-scrutiny’ (Moody-Adams, 1999, p. 175). Moody-Adams sees ‘the tendency to widespread affected ignorance of what can and should be already known’ as the main obstacle to moral progress (ibid., p. 180).

While philosophers can contribute to promoting moral progress in beliefs, a much more important role is played by the methods employed by ‘engaged moral inquirers’, who are typically not philosophers (ibid., pp. 176f.). Such inquirers disseminate their moral insights through offering their own lives and practice as moral examples, through non-violent protests, and through works of art (ibid., pp. 176f.). She mentions civil rights workers and Chinese students advocating democracy in Tiananmen Square as examples of engaged moral inquirers (ibid., p. 178). According to Moody-Adams, the advocacy of such persons is the main engine of moral progress (ibid., p. 179). They disseminate their moral insights, thereby bringing it about that a society gains a deeper moral understanding. For moral progress in beliefs to occur, not just particular individuals but society at large must have reached a more profound moral understanding. This requires that people give up their affective ignorance.

3 | A NON-REALIST UNDERSTANDING OF THE SEMANTIC DEPTH OF MORAL CONCEPTS

Let us now, in a second step, sketch a plausible way of conceiving of the semantic depth of moral concepts and of the corresponding process of deepening our grasp of them that does not commit us to moral realism. According to the interpretation of the process that I have in mind, the complexity of moral concepts, their ‘semantic depth’, is due to the complexity of human practices. The complexity of the concept ‘justice’, for instance, reflects the

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5 One of the three positive characteristics of the form of ethical intuitionism that Platts considers is being ‘austerely realistic’ (Platts, 1988, p. 282). Terms expressing moral notions are treated in an austere, realistic manner (ibid., p. 288).

6 Platts does not use the term ‘mind-independent’. I assume that by ‘independent’ he means first and foremost ‘independent of (linguistic) conventions’ (see e.g. Platts, 1988, pp. 283f. and 286).

7 A ‘pattern of situational meanings’ is ‘a complex set of factual beliefs about, and affective associations concerning, some action, entity, institution or state of affairs’ (Moody-Adams, 1999, pp. 174f.).
complexity of the human relations that raise issues of justice. No single conception of justice can ‘adequately capture [the concept’s] semantic depth’ (Moody-Adams, 1999, p. 173) because it could not possibly account for the whole range of situations in which concerns about justice are relevant. There are numerous dimensions of justice, some of which, like epistemic justice (Fricker, 2007) or linguistic justice, have only recently been recognised. It is possible to reasonably disagree about whether something raises issues of justice. There is, for instance, disagreement among political philosophers about whether global poverty is a problem of justice (see e.g. Pogge, 2004; Rawls, 2001). Closely connected to the numerous dimensions of justice are the various experiences of (in)justice (see section 2). In addition, there will always occur novel situations in which factors combine in a hitherto unknown way, thus prompting us to revise any given conception of justice.

Deepening our understanding of the concept of justice means coming to understand more of the nuances of the concept by, for instance, coming to see new aspects of human life as constituting problems of justice. This should not be understood in purely individualistic terms. It requires working out not only individually, but also collectively what justice means in different human affairs. This involves identifying instances of injustice, as well as thinking about and trying out different possible ways of counteracting them. Experiences of injustice, for instance of oppression or discrimination, constitute an important source of deepened moral understandings. Such experiences have a collective dimension in the sense that a person experiences being discriminated against in virtue of being a member of a certain group. For instance, a woman who has lost her job after having told her boss that she is pregnant feels discriminated against in virtue of being a woman.

Trying out different ways of realising justice on the whiteboard would not take us very far; this has to be done in practice. It can for instance take the form of drafting new laws, modifying existing regulations, and experimenting with innovative policy measures, such as an unconditional basic income. Any new moral idea has to be tried out in practice before its real moral worth can be judged, since it can be realised in a number of ways, and since it is impossible to take into account all relevant factors while reflecting on the white board. Take the idea that an unconditional basic income will lead to a more just society. Here much hangs on details such as how high that income will be, how people with special needs are treated, who will be entitled to that income, whether it will have a negative effect on people’s motivation to work, etc. The details have to be filled out in practice, since we cannot predict exactly how particular measures will affect society. Moreover, the realisation of a moral idea might bring about a morally better state of affairs in one society or context, but not in another. We can only judge retrospectively whether a particular change in moral beliefs was morally progressive, once we know the state of affairs that constitutes a morally better state of affairs in one society or context, but not in another. We can only judge retrospectively whether a particular change in moral beliefs was morally progressive, once we know the state of affairs that resulted from a combination of changes at the different levels.

Deepening our grasp of a moral concept is thus not a purely intellectual activity. It is a complex process in which our moral concepts become indeed ever more ‘experientially enriched’ (Platts, 1988, p. 299), although not in the realist’s sense, i.e., not in the sense of capturing more adequately features of moral reality, as a result of people having paid careful attention to that reality. We arrive at more experientially enriched moral concepts by being actively engaged in human social life, thereby experiencing (un)freedom, (in)justice, (in)equality and so forth.

Understood in this way, moral progress in beliefs is not neatly separable from ‘the slow and steady work of persons whose actions can directly reshape social practices and institutions’ and from ‘morally progressive social experiments’, as Moody-Adams (1999, p. 179) seems to think. The distinction between progress at the level of

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10 At the experiential level, the focus is on injustice rather than justice. Experiences of injustice trigger strong emotions and have the power to motivate actions aimed at attaining or restoring justice. What makes an experience one of injustice as opposed to, say, inequality? An experience of injustice is characterised by the feeling that somebody (oneself, another person or a group of people) is treated unfairly. This unfair treatment could, but does not have to, manifest itself in some form of inequality (unequal distribution, unequal opportunities, unequal rights etc.). An experience of inequality could lack the feeling that distinguishes the experience of injustice, although experiences of inequality are presumably accompanied by that feeling most of the time. I thank an anonymous reviewer for asking me to consider this question.

9 It might be asked what the person with wider experience is gaining, on a non-realist account. I think that she is likely to understand better what actions are aimed at attaining or restoring justice. What makes an experience one of injustice as opposed to, say, inequality? An experience of injustice is characterised by the feeling that somebody (oneself, another person or a group of people) is treated unfairly. This unfair treatment could, but does not have to, manifest itself in some form of inequality (unequal distribution, unequal opportunities, unequal rights etc.). An experience of inequality could lack the feeling that distinguishes the experience of injustice, although experiences of inequality are presumably accompanied by that feeling most of the time. I thank an anonymous reviewer for asking me to consider this question.

10 I thank Wouter Kalf for asking me to clarify this.
beliefs and progress at the practical level is blurred. In order to know whether a change is for the better, we have to try it out in practice. Practical changes are thus an integral part of gaining deeper moral understanding. Engaged moral inquirers do not gain a deeper grasp of a moral concept independently of the steps taken by political leaders, policymakers, educators, parents, religious leaders, doctors, hospital administrators, lawyers and judges to reshape social practices and institutions (ibid.). The ‘slow and steady work’ of those people, ‘whose actions can directly reshape social practices and institutions’, are part of what makes us, as a society, gain new moral insights in the first place. As argued above, any new moral idea has to be tried out in practice before its real moral worth can be judged. Moreover, in exercising their various roles, policymakers, educators and so forth can encounter (new) forms of injustice and gain new moral insights that affect how they continue their work. We should thus conceive of the changes happening at the level of belief and the changes happening at the practical and institutional level as deeply intertwined, and consequently reject Moody-Adams’ distinction between moral progress in beliefs and moral progress in social practices. I illustrate this in the following section by means of the example of slavery.

4 | THE MAIN ENGINE OF MORAL PROGRESS: AGENCY OR CONDITIONS OF AGENCY?

While Moody-Adams sees the advocacy of engaged moral inquirers as the main engine of moral progress, others take changes in the conditions of moral agency to be its main driving force.¹¹ The conditions of moral agency include socio-economic factors, epistemic factors, psychological characteristics of human beings, and technological development, among others. Nigel Pleasants (2011, p. 141) questions the primary explanatory role of agency for the case of slavery (as for cases of ‘institutional wrongdoing’ in general), and emphasises the social, economic and epistemic context of moral agency. I will present his position and incorporate some of his insights into my account of moral progress. In his explanation of why slavery could endure for so long and why it was abolished when it was, Pleasants stresses the fact that the practice of slavery was for many centuries seen as natural and indispensable.¹² According to Pleasants (2011, p. 144), the best explanation of the persistence of slavery is not the affected ignorance of those who lived complicitly with it (Moody-Adams, 1999, p. 180), but ‘practical barriers to conceiving its dispensability’.

Pleasants makes a useful distinction between two types of wrongdoing: individual wrongdoing and institutional wrongdoing. Affective ignorance can be involved in cases of the former type, but not in cases of the latter. The case of slavery is one of institutional wrongdoing, which Pleasants describes as the kind of wrongdoing whereby ‘[i]ndividuals, acting in accordance with the laws, rules, norms and values of their society, participate in, support, or collude with, practices that yield actual or perceived goods for members of dominant groups, the pursuit of which causes pain, suffering or untimely death to those subordinate to the practices’ (Pleasants, 2008, p. 96; my italics). Thus, ‘it was not ignorance of the inherent moral status of slavery that maintained people’s complicity with it, but practical barriers to conceiving its dispensability’ (Pleasants, 2011, p. 144). These people are not rightly described as having refused to subject the practice of slavery to critical scrutiny (see Moody-Adams, 1999, p. 168). Due to certain aspects of the ‘psychological and epistemic conditions under which people are required to form and maintain judgements on the permissibility and justness of their society’s institutionalised practices’ (Pleasants, 2011, p. 144), it was extremely difficult for people to doubt the necessity of slavery. The contextual factors that made it so difficult had to do with the fact that there was a consensus on the indispensability of slavery and that no epistemic authority questioned the practice, and with human beings’ inherent psychological attachment to familiarity, continuity, and normality (ibid., p. 151).¹³ For a long time, the ‘judgemental situation’ of people was such

¹¹ For the role of conditions of agency in morally progressive developments see also Hermann, 2017.


¹³ By ‘epistemic authority’ I mean members of society who were regarded as authoritative with regard to what to believe.
that they could not easily have known that slavery was wrong and therefore are not adequately described as culpably ignorant (Pleasants, 2008, p. 97). This is not to deny that there were always critical voices, including those of parts of the enslaved.\(^\text{14}\) However, since the slaves had no epistemic authority, the fact that some of them questioned the moral acceptability of slavery did not change the context to the extent that it would have become easier for free people to doubt the moral legitimacy of the practice.

Those who lived complicitly with slavery suffered from the inability to see slavery as morally wrong or unjust (Pleasants, 2008, p. 110). Pleasants uses Wittgenstein’s discussion of ‘seeing-as’ (Wittgenstein, 1968, pp. 193–208) to explain what it is that those whom he calls ‘institutional wrongdoers’ (Pleasants, 2011, p. 97) lack. This suggests an understanding of moral progress as involving the acquisition of the ability to see such a harmful institutionalised practice as morally wrong, which adds to my account of the process of deepening our grasp of existing moral concepts. The process of deepening then involves expanding one’s moral perception, i.e., acquiring the ability to see a practice in a new way, which requires a prior change in the judgemental situation. What often stands in the way of a deeper understanding of moral concepts is the appearance of a practice as natural and indispensable. Gaining a deeper grasp of moral concepts then requires that this ‘veneer of naturalization [be] cracked’ (Jamieson, 2017, p. 180), i.e., that the practice no longer appears to be indispensable. The veneer does not crack as a direct consequence of individual human action. It cracks as a result of changes in the conditions under which human beings make judgements about their society’s institutionalised practices. This means that the actions of individuals can only indirectly contribute to its cracking, by contributing to relevant changes in the judgemental situation.

I suggest conceiving of the process in which people acquire the ability to see a practice such as slavery as morally wrong as a progressive change in moral perception, and thus interpreting the new moral perception – the perception of the practice as wrong – as more adequate. This, however, could be taken to imply belief in the existence of a mind-independent reality in virtue of which moral perception is adequate or inadequate. Moral realists in general and epistemological moral intuitionists in particular often use the visual metaphor. Platts (1988, p. 285) emphasises that we ‘detect moral aspects in the same way we detect (nearly all) other aspects: by looking and seeing’. He talks about different ‘system[s] of moral perception’, thereby employing the terminology of ‘seeing as’ (ibid., p. 286). Therefore, when speaking in these terms, we have to explicitly distance ourselves from these views, emphasising that we use the word ‘seeing’ in a purely metaphorical way and that seeing the moral wrongness of a practice does not mean that we rationally intuit a mind-independent moral truth.

If Pleasants’ explanation of why slavery was commonly accepted for such a long time is sound, the advocacy of engaged moral inquirers cannot have been the main engine of the abolition of slavery. These people’s ability to effectively disseminate their new moral insights requires certain changes in the socio-economic environment. On his alternative explanation, not the criticism of particular individuals, but the social collective played the crucial role, as it did also for the long endurance of slavery. Although they both emphasise the importance of social movements, Moody-Adams ascribes a significant explanatory role to the ideas and actions of particular individuals, whereas Pleasants ascribes such a role to the collective and to the conditions under which these movements gain influence.

So which changes in the economic, social, psychological and epistemic conditions of moral agency made moral progress in the case of slavery possible, according to Pleasants? The most relevant change in the economic and social conditions was the development of capitalism. In the epistemic conditions, it was the transformation of the criticism of slavery from ‘merely moralistic expression’ into ‘efficacious radical social criticism’ (Pleasants, 2011, p. 156). With the arrival of the anti-slavery movement, criticism of slavery became ‘widespread, organised, serious, and respectable’ (ibid., p. 153). There had always been criticism of slavery, but prior to the mid-eighteenth century, the criticism was ‘abstract, theoretical, irresolute and inconsequential’ (ibid., p. 145). The social movement

\(^{14}\) Pleasants (2008, p. 100) suggests thinking of some kind of criticism of a harmful institutionalised practice as emerging at the same time as the institutionalisation of that practice.
contributed significantly to this change in epistemic conditions. On the one hand, that movement could only be created and become influential under certain conditions. Here the emergence of the system of wage labour is crucial. Prior to the emergence of wage labour, there was no plausible alternative to slavery that abolitionists could portray as being better for everyone in the long run (see ibid., p. 156).

On the other hand, the social movement contributed to a change in the epistemic conditions that made it easier for everyone to question the necessity of slavery. Criticism of slavery acquired a different status. It became relevant and was voiced by people with epistemic authority. The psychological conditions (attachment to familiarity, continuity and normality) did not change, but given the changes in the other conditions, they no longer prevented people from recognising that slavery was actually not indispensable. The veneer of naturalisation had been cracked.

On my account of moral progress, the emergence of the system of wage labour should be seen as contributing to a deeper understanding of moral concepts such as ‘equality’ and ‘personal liberty’. At that point in time, an alternative to an unjust institutionalised practice was taking shape. The development of that alternative was not motivated by a desire to promote moral progress, but nevertheless contributed to such progress. Arguably, new moral insights played some (minor) role in this economic development, but the main driving force were surely ‘considerations of social expediency and enlightened self-interest’ (Moody-Adams, 1999, p. 183). Yet it is not the case that there was first moral progress in beliefs and then moral progress in social practices. Neither is it the case that moral progress in social practices preceded progress in beliefs. The example shows how changes in practices and institutions affect moral beliefs and vice versa. We might want to say that the two co-shape each other. The emergence of the system of wage labour, which came to be regarded as morally superior to slavery, was prior to the emergence of widespread criticism of slavery and to the widespread recognition of slavery as morally unacceptable. This recognition, in turn, led to the main change in social practices, namely the abolition of the criticised practice. Only after the practice had been abolished can we truly speak about a deepened understanding of moral concepts, in particular of liberty, equality and justice, and about moral progress proper.

It can be added to Pleasants’ account of the role of naturalisation (the phenomenon that an institutionalised practice seems natural and indispensable) that harmful social practices are often also defended by explicit appeals to naturalness. The discrimination of homosexuality, for instance, has been defended by appeals to the naturalness of heterosexuality and the non-naturalness of homosexuality. Similarly, the oppression of women has been justified by appeal to women’s natural inferiority. The same holds for different forms of racism. Here is a quote from Aristotle’s Politics (1912/2009, 1.5): ‘[…] so is it naturally with the male and the female; the one is superior, the other inferior; the one governs, the other is governed.’ Naturalness thus plays a double role: (i) it is often appealed to by the defenders of a given harmful social practice with the aim to fend off any attempt to criticise or change the practice. (ii) As an appearance that results from certain economic, social, psychological and epistemic conditions, it prevents people from recognising the moral wrongness of a social practice in the first place. Explicit appeals to naturalness can strengthen the veneer of naturalisation. When made after that veneer was cracked, such appeals can be seen as attempts to restore it.

5 | THE LIMITATIONS OF MORAL PROGRESS

The example of slavery not only shows the intricate ways in which changes at different levels are related, it also demonstrates that moral progress is never complete. In this section, I point out the limits of humans to progress morally, which are partly grounded in our evolutionary history, and argue that moral progress is always of a ‘local’ nature. I discuss Allen Buchanan and Russell Powell’s thesis about the environmental conditions that favour moral progress (Buchanan & Powell, 2015, 2016), thereby adding another dimension to what I have said so far about the conditions of moral agency. I also discuss some examples of current developments that could qualify as moral progress or regress.

15 The italics are mine.
While the abolitionists ‘perceive[d] with naked clarity the evils of faraway slavery, [...] they failed to see the suffering endured by workers in their own country as an evil at all’ (Pleasants, 2011, p. 155). They saw wage labour ‘as the consensual and uncoerced exchange of goods and services among equal agents’ and failed to acknowledge ‘the apparently obvious similarity in moral badness of the suffering caused by New World slavery and British industrial labour’ (ibid.). Pleasants explains this in similar terms as the long-enduring widespread acceptance of slavery. Today, we witness new forms of slavery, and the abolition of those seems to lie rather far in the future (see Bales, 2012). Unlike the old forms of slavery, modern slavery is illegal and its moral wrongness widely acknowledged. Nevertheless, it is indirectly supported by everyday consumer practices.

Moreover, it looks as if certain attitudes have survived the abolition of New World slavery. Especially in big corporations it seems as if employees are granted just as much rights and freedom as is necessary for ensuring their functioning. They are entitled to holidays, for instance, and in some professions it is now common for employees to work (partly) from home, but employees are also often required to respond to emails and answer phone calls in their ‘free’ time, have their working hours and activities strictly monitored (surveillance systems in the workplace), or they are expected to work for very low wages, whilst the company makes great profits and the managers receive high bonuses. One gets the impression that here human beings are treated not as ends in themselves, as Kant’s Categorical Imperative demands, but merely as means. Since in the current economic system the majority of people works for big corporations, it looks as if it is a characteristic of that system that millions of employees are denied the respect required by their human dignity. This diagnosis stands in sharp contrast to the development of a human rights regime in the aftermath of World War II. While Amazon drivers in Germany are better off than women producing clothes for H&M in Bangladesh, the working conditions of both are a reason not to be complacent about the status of moral development of liberal Western societies.

What I have said in the previous two paragraphs makes me believe that we have to refrain from making ‘global’ judgements about the occurrence of moral progress. Contra to Michael Huemer (2016) and Steven Pinker (2018), I would not dare to say that globally speaking, humanity has made moral progress over the last centuries. The most we can do is argue for ‘local’ claims about the occurrence of moral progress or moral regress, such as the claims that the abolition of New World slavery constitutes an instance of moral progress and the recent rise of right-wing populism in many European countries and in the United States an instance of moral regress.

How far can the process of deepening moral understanding go? Are there evolutionary constraints? Some historical developments in the understanding of concepts such as justice, equality and freedom could be interpreted as moving us beyond certain tendencies that can be explained by reference to natural selection, such as the tendency to act altruistically only towards members of one’s in-group and to deny that all human beings have equal moral standing. As Moody-Adams (1999, p. 174) points out, a central task of constructive moral inquiry is ‘to show us when and how we must sometimes enlarge the class of things – entities, actions, institutions, or states of affairs – to which some fundamental moral concept applies’. Such an enlargement tends to be seen as eluding evolutionary explanations (see Buchanan & Powell, 2015, p. 51).

However, as Buchanan and Powell argue, moral progress in the form of greater inclusiveness – the form on which their research focuses – is not against our evolved human nature. As they define it, ‘[m]oral progress in the form of increasingly inclusivist moralities consists in expansions of the moral community [...] beyond tribal boundaries and the mutually self-serving cooperative relationships between groups’ (Buchanan & Powell, 2016, p. 987). A famous metaphor for this dimension of moral progress is the ‘expanding circle of moral concern’ (see e.g.
Singer, 2011). Buchanan and Powell (2016, pp. 988f.) assume that much of what they say about this dimension of moral progress is true also of other dimensions, such as improvements in moral concepts and moral reasoning, ‘proper demoralisation’ and ‘proper moralisation’.

Inclusivist moralities appear to be in sharp conflict with our knowledge of the environment in which the main contours of human morality are supposed to have emerged. The harsh conditions of this ‘environment of evolutionary adaptation’ must have strongly favoured ‘exclusivist moralities’, which are characterized by ‘robust moral commitments among group members’, while outsiders are either (a) denied moral standing, (b) regarded as morally inferior, or c) assigned moral standing ‘contingent on strategic (self-serving) considerations’ (ibid., pp. 989f.). The harsh conditions of the environment of evolutionary adaptation included: (i) severe competition for resources among scattered, weakly genetically related groups, (ii) absence of institutions to facilitate peaceful, beneficial cooperation among groups, and (iii) high risk of infection by biological and social parasites (ibid., p. 990). Under such conditions, psychological traits such as in-group/out-group biases were adaptive. However, human beings are able to overcome their evolved exclusivist tendencies, given that the environmental conditions are highly favourable. They are moreover capable of contributing to the conditions becoming favourable, thanks to their ‘capacity for cultural innovations’ (ibid., p. 995). Buchanan and Powell conceive of what they call ‘exclusivist moral psychology’ as an ‘adaptively plastic trait’, i.e., a trait that allows organisms ‘to conditionally express alternative character states, depending on which state is most appropriate for the environment at hand’ (ibid., p. 998). Thus, there are ‘evolved psychological obstacles to moral progress’, but these are conditional on a social environment (ibid., pp. 985 and 998).

According to Buchanan and Powell, under highly favourable conditions such as little competition for resources, the existence of institutions that facilitate inter-group cooperation, and low risk of infection, inclusivist moral shifts can happen. But when the conditions change and come to closely resemble the harsh conditions of the environment of evolutionary adaptation, the inclusivist gains are reversed. Unfortunately, human beings are not only able to shape the social environment in ways that favour an inclusivist moral psychology. They are also able to shape it in exactly the opposite way, by using ‘techniques to foster people’s exclusivist tendencies’. One such technique is the ‘dehumanisation of the other’, which was famously deployed by the Nazis (ibid., p. 1008). In order for a reversal of inclusivist gains to occur, it does not have to be the case that the social environment actually resembles the environment of evolutionary adaptation in relevant respects. It is enough that people believe the conditions to be such, for example that they (falsely) believe that there is a high risk of infection due to immigration (see ibid., p. 1004).

Recent developments in Europe seem to support this theory. Arguably we are witnessing a development towards more exclusivist tendencies. To name only a few examples: Hungary has erected a fence to prevent refugees from entering the country. So far, every attempt to find a European solution to the refugee crisis has failed. The current Italian government is the first in Western Europe that consists entirely of populists and anti-Europeans. Right-wing populists succeed in making people believe that refugees, in particular if they are Muslims, pose a serious threat and therefore ought to be denied access, and that the EU has no right to interfere with national politics. Hostility towards refugees and aversion against supra-national regulation can be interpreted as instances of moral regression in the sense of greater moral exclusiveness.

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19 ‘Demoralisation’ refers to the process in which a behaviour that was for some time regarded as immoral comes to be seen as morally neutral. An example is premarital sex. ‘Moralisation’, in turn, refers to the opposite process. Sexual harassment in the workplace provides an example of this (see Buchanan & Powell, 2016, p. 988).

20 Social parasites are members of other groups who threaten to disturb social cohesion.

21 An anonymous reviewer asked me to clarify in what sense the exclusivist setting involves some kind of loss. Exclusive morality involves regarding outsiders as morally inferior, treating them merely as means or even denying them moral standing altogether. A society whose morality becomes more exclusivist in this way loses important moral achievements of human civilisation such as the recognition of the equal moral status of all human beings. The evolved exclusivist tendencies that had temporally been overcome have taken hold again.
In this paper, I enquired into the changes involved in morally progressive developments, the relationship between them and their main driving force. Starting from Moody-Adams’ idea that moral progress involves deepening our grasp of moral concepts, I developed an account of moral progress as a complex process in which changes at the level of belief and changes that occur at the practical and institutional level are deeply intertwined. My account of the process of gaining deeper moral understanding emphasises its practical and collective dimension and is thus less intellectualistic and individualistic than that of Moody-Adams. Gaining a more profound understanding of justice, equality, liberty, fairness, hospitality, generosity and so forth involves experimenting with different laws and policies as well as the experiences and actions of educators, hospital administrators and so on. This account of the process is acceptable for non-realists, and it blurs Moody-Adams’ distinction between moral progress in beliefs and moral progress in social practices. Moral progress proper requires changes at both levels and its occurrence can only be established retrospectively.

Drawing on Pleasants’ work on slavery and institutional wrongdoing, I emphasised the explanatory role of the conditions of agency for moral progress. It depends on the social, economic and epistemic conditions whether people are able to see a harmful institutionalised practice such as slavery, child labour, female genital mutilation or factory farming ‘in the way advocated by its dissident critics: as a morally wrong state of affairs’ (Pleasants 2008, p. 110). Changes in these conditions constitute the main motor of moral progress. In some cases, Buchanan and Powell’s thesis about the environmental conditions resembling or not resembling the conditions of the environment of evolutionary adaptation can help to explain why moral progress or regress has occurred. That thesis also sheds light on the limitations of moral progress. I argued that moral progress is always local.

I used Pleasants’ insight that those who lived complicitly with slavery were unable to see that practice as morally wrong to further enrich my account of moral progress. Deepening one’s understanding of the concept of justice, for instance, may involve coming to see a harmful institutionalised practice as unjust, where one had not been able to see it in this way before. In order for this new moral perception to be possible, there need to be changes in the judgmental situation of the people that bring it about that the veneer of naturalisation is cracked. The example of slavery has played a prominent role in my discussion, but much of what has been said applies to other morally progressive changes concerning institutional wrongdoing as well. Showing this would be the task of another paper.

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ORCID

Julia Hermann  
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3232-1656

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