

Slavery, Carbon, and Moral Progress

Dale Jamieson¹

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Abstract My goal in this paper is to shed light on how moral progress actually occurs. I begin by restating a conception of moral progress that I set out in previous work, the “Naïve Conception,” and explain how it comports with various normative and metaethical views. I go on to develop an index of moral progress and show how judgments about moral progress can be made. I then discuss an example of moral progress from the past—the British abolition of the Atlantic slave trade—with a view to what can be learned from this for a contemporary struggle for moral progress: the movement to decarbonize the global economy. I close with some thoughts about how moral progress actually occurs.

Keywords Moral progress · Slavery · Climate change · Evolutionary ethics · Moral realism

1 Introduction

My goal in this paper is to shed light on how moral progress actually occurs. I begin by restating a conception of moral progress that I set out in previous work, the “Naïve Conception,” and explain how it comports with various normative and metaethical views (Jamieson 2002a, Ch. 1, Jamieson 2002b). I go on to develop an index of moral progress and show how judgments about moral progress can be made. I then discuss an example of moral progress from the past—the British abolition of the Atlantic slave trade—with a view to what can be learned from this for a contemporary struggle for moral progress: the movement to decarbonize the global economy. I close with some thoughts about how moral progress actually occurs.

✉ Dale Jamieson
Dwj3@nyu.edu

¹ Department of Environmental Studies, New York University, 285 Mercer Street, 10th floor, New York, NY 10003, USA

2 Moral Progress

Consider the following simple, abstract account of what moral progress consists in. The Naïve Conception holds that:

Moral progress occurs when a subsequent state of affairs is better than a preceding one, or when right acts become increasingly prevalent.¹

Consequentialists should be comfortable with an account of moral progress that rests on the ordering of states of affairs according to their goodness, and Deontologists should be satisfied by an account expressed in terms of the prevalence of right acts.²

When it comes to metaethical views it might be thought that the Naïve Conception is not so catholic. Moral realism, it might be thought, provides the natural explanation for how states of affairs can be ranked according to their goodness (Jamieson 2002a, Ch. 16). On such a realist view the point of moral beliefs is to correspond to the moral order, and the role of moral action is to respect or promote the moral order. From this perspective, moral progress is assessed on the basis of how well our moral thought and action reflect the moral order in temporally successive stages. Nonrealist views, such as expressivism and some versions of constructivism, which may be plausible in their own right, do not play well with the Naïve Conception, since they deny that there is a moral order that moral thought and language can reflect (or at least one of the right sort). If one is committed to one of these views, then one may be inclined to reject the Naïve Conception.

I reject this argument. I do not think that the Naïve Conception is biased towards realism—at least not to the extent that it should lead an expressivist or constructivist to reject it on this ground. In what follows I will tell a brief generic story about how the Naïve Conception might be brought together with a metaethical view that may be regarded as non-realist (see also Wilson 2010).

Generic alternatives to moral realism often begin with a story that sees morality as a human construction grounded in our evolutionary history (e.g., Singer 1981; Gibbard 1990; Nozick 2001; Street 2006; Kitcher 2011).³ On one version of such a view, morality is a behavioural system, with an attendant psychology, that has evolved among some social animals for the purposes of regulating their interactions. It might be thought that, from this perspective, there is no such thing as moral progress, or that there is nothing for moral progress to consist in except better-regulated social interactions.

But what does it mean for social interactions to be better regulated? It might be thought that on an evolutionary account this must ultimately be understood in terms of the primary currency of evolutionary theory: biological fitness.⁴ From here it may seem a short step to the view that

¹ A cautionary note: The Naïve Conception does not imply that claims about moral progress require a complete ordering of states of affairs within a universe of discourse; a partial ordering can be sufficient. For example, we may know that A is better than B, but be clueless about C's relation to either A or B, yet we could claim that moral progress had occurred in the transition from B to A.

² But what about Kantians and virtue theorists? Their favored objects of evaluation—the will and agents, respectively—do not directly figure in the Naïve Conception. I show how the Naïve Conception can provide a notion of moral progress that is consistent with their views in Jamieson 2002b.

³ Of course, it should also be acknowledged that many, perhaps most, moral realists also think that their metaethical views are compatible with an evolutionary story about how morality comes about (indeed, Singer himself now thinks of himself as a moral realist (see de Lazari-Radek and Singer 2012)). I doubt that such a view can be sustained on any robust understanding of what moral realism consists in, but I cannot argue that here.

⁴ A fairly standard definition of 'fitness' can be found in Mayr 1991, p. 189: "[t]he relative ability of an organism to survive and transmit its genes to the gene pool of the next generation" (some would omit the words 'survive and').

moral progress would consist in a behavioural system becoming ever more conducive to promoting the biological fitness of those who participate in it.

This is of course an implausible conception of moral progress. Whatever exactly moral progress amounts to, it certainly involves at least the following: the abolition of war and slavery, the reduction of poverty and class privilege, the extension of liberty, the empowerment of marginalized groups, and respect for animals and nature. If these concerns are not captured by an account of moral progress then I (and I think many of us) literally would not know what we are talking about when we talk about moral progress.⁵ In any case there is no reason to believe that a society that is morally progressive in these terms is on the way to the greater biological fitness of its members than one that is not. Nor is it plausible to suppose that a society whose members' genes are better represented in the next generation is one that we would regard as morally progressive (it may, for example, be a society that is characterized by a high incidence of rape).

Moreover, an evolutionary account of morality characterized in terms of fitness is really another version of moral realism. In this case the objective reality which morality is supposed to mirror is expressed by evolutionary biology, with the ultimate value being evolutionary fitness. But to reject realism is to reject altogether the idea that the function of morality is to mirror an external reality, whether supernatural or natural—and that progress is to be assessed by its success in conforming to the mirrored image. Insofar as the evolutionary story provides an alternative to moral realism, it must provide the makings of an account in which morality is autonomous, not a shadow of something external to itself. This requires a different understanding of the evolutionary account than the one we have been discussing.

We can begin to formulate this different understanding by distinguishing the project of explaining a phenomenon from characterizing its content, and both of these from the project of justification. The evolutionary account should be understood as explaining why morality evolved and persists among creatures like us, but it should not be construed as determining the content of morality. The explanation of why morality exists will surely refer to biological fitness but, once called into existence, morality has the power to issue its own imperatives. This is because the twin motors of morality, reason and sentiment, each have the power to be a source of moral prescriptions and to project concern beyond ourselves. Both embody, in different ways, impulses towards abstraction and impartiality.

Peter Singer emphasizes the role of reason in ethics. He suggests that reason evolved and has been sustained in creatures like us because of the advantages it confers in finding food and avoiding danger. But once a creature begins to reason, the results are unpredictable:

Beginning to reason is like stepping onto an escalator that leads upward and out of sight. Once we take the first step, the distance to be traveled is independent of our will and we cannot know in advance where we shall end.⁶

The reasoner may adopt new beliefs when they come to be seen as consequences of beliefs already held, or give up familiar beliefs that come to be viewed as resting on shaky grounds.

⁵ For further discussion (and limited defense) of these elements of moral progress see Section 3. I introduce these elements here in order to show by contrast that biological fitness is not the right currency for a plausible account of moral progress; the same point could be made about biological fitness by contrasting it with other plausible accounts of the elements of moral progress.

⁶ Singer 1981, p. 88. A more recent edition of this book has been published but all page references are to the 1981 edition.

The demands for coherence, consistency and the other features characteristic of reason can take the reasoner to surprising and unanticipated destinations.⁷

According to Singer (1981, p. 93) morality develops because of the role that reason plays in our social lives:

In a dispute between members of a cohesive group of reasoning beings, the demand for a reason is a demand for a justification that can be accepted by the group as a whole.⁸

Once we begin to respond to the demand for impersonal justifications of our behaviour, this can lead to moral change. This is exactly what Singer thinks has occurred from the time of the ancient Hebrews and Greeks to the present.

The idea of a disinterested defense of one's conduct emerges because of the social nature of human beings and the requirements of group living, but in the thought of reasoning beings, it takes on a logic of its own which leads to extensions beyond the bounds of the group (Singer 1981, p. 114). The result is an expanding circle of moral concern that progressively broadens "...from the family and tribe to the nation and race, and we are beginning to recognize that our obligations extend to all human beings" (Singer 1981, p. 120.)⁹ Eventually, Singer believes, this mechanism leads to encompassing all sentient beings in the circle of moral concern.¹⁰

If the story that Singer tells is plausible, then the evolutionary view of morality does not exclude the possibility of moral progress but neither does it ensure it. To suppose otherwise is to deny the autonomy of morality. It would be to fall into the old trap of thinking that evolution itself is inevitably progressive, taking life from the simpler and less valuable, to the grander and more complex (for discussion see Ruse 1991). It would also fall back into supposing that an evolutionary account of the origin and persistence of morality also provides an account of its content. Evolution may have brought morality into existence and established the parameters of what might constitute possible moralities for creatures like us, but the particular moral ideals that emerge can be quite various. Biology does not dictate the content of morality because morality is a human construction as well as an evolutionary phenomenon. Even if "selfish" genes construct us in order to further their own "interests," once constructed, we often act in ways that are contrary to the "interests" of our genes.¹¹ For example, one moral ideal that I share with many environmentalists is voluntary childlessness (or that, at most, people should

⁷ There are of course good questions about the source and status of these demands but I cannot address them here.

⁸ The idea that the demand for reasons is a demand for a justification that can be accepted by others is surprisingly similar to Thomas Scanlon's 1982 formulation of contractualism. In that paper Scanlon suggests that utilitarians have no account of distinctively moral reasons; he cites other writings of Singer's, but not his 1981. See also Scanlon 1998.

⁹ Singer's 2002 story of the way reason brought him to his animal liberationist position is an instance of this narrative.

¹⁰ For sentimentalist alternatives to Singer's rationalist account of the motor of moral progress see Baier 1991 and Rorty 1998.

¹¹ The idea of the "selfish" gene was popularized by Richard Dawkins 1978. I place 'selfish' and 'interests' in shudder quotes because it is a *façon de parler* at best to suppose that genes have interests and are selfish. For discussion, see Singer 1981, pp. 126–133. For a recent account that puts the selfish gene in its place see Yanai and Lercher 2016.

have only one child; for discussion see McKibben 1998 and Conley 2015). In almost every case acting on this principle is to act against one's own biological fitness.¹²

How could evolution have produced creatures who act in such a way? Why have they not been extinguished in favor of those whose moralities support the pursuit of their own biological fitness?

These are some of the most difficult questions in evolutionary biology. Indeed, from the perspective of the "selfish gene," these questions may seem unanswerable. But with the rise of more complex and pluralist views about the units of selection, a range of possible answers begins to come into focus. I will provide a rough sketch of one account of how these questions could be answered.

Let us begin with Darwin:

...[A] tribe including many members who, from possessing in a high degree patriotism, fidelity, obedience, courage and sympathy, were always ready to aid one another, and to sacrifice themselves for the common good would be victorious over most other tribes, and this would be natural selection (Carroll 2003, p. 537).

This insight, regarded by some as a howler, was largely obscured for much of the last half of the twentieth century by a single-minded focus on the gene as the unit of selection, and the relative neglect of development, culture, and the importance of both the physical and social environments in evolutionary history. It now seems likely that selection operates on all sorts of units at different levels of organization, and that the relations between them matter (see, e.g. Sober and Wilson 1998; Boehm 1999, and Dupre' 2012. The key insight that makes Darwin's notion of group selection possible is that while altruists do badly in communities dominated by the selfish, they will often do better in altruistic communities than the selfish will do in selfish communities.¹³ For this to occur, the benefits of being selfish in a group must be relatively low, while the benefits of being part of a group with a high number of altruists must be relatively high. For groups dominated by altruists to sustain themselves, community policing is required (of which morality can be an instance), and altruistic individuals must be continuously recruited (the expanding circle).

How and whether this or other stories based on multi-level selection work in practice is highly sensitive to specific traits and features of the environment. There are also further complications in the case of complex social animals such as humans in which group membership is plural and flexible. Moreover, biological altruism is at most a single feature of morality and is more plausibly construed as a feature that subserves morality rather than as itself an element of morality. Particular moralities are best viewed, from the perspective that I am sketching, as largely cultural phenomena subserved by various capacities and dispositions, which are themselves complex products of development and genetics. They are sustained, in part, because they are constructed from multi-purpose devices that play various other roles in our lives. Flack and de Waal 2000 identify the capacities for empathy and sympathy, and

¹² However there are cases, some of which are predicted by Hamilton's theory of inclusive fitness, in which reducing fertility can increase biological fitness. Among humans this can occur when it enables parents to invest more heavily in fewer offspring, increasing the chances of each successfully reproducing, thus increasing the overall likelihood that the parents' genes will be represented in future generations. Despite these cases, it is clear that many instances of voluntary fertility reduction diminish agents' biological fitness. See Hamilton 1963.

¹³ I use 'altruist' in the generic biological sense to refer to any entity that provides fitness benefits to others at a cost to itself. For some complications, see Godfrey-Smith et al. 2004.

behaviours such as reciprocity, food-sharing, reconciliation, consolation, conflict intervention, and mediation as some of these building blocks of morality. Even without full-blown moralities, there is reason for such capacities and behaviours to evolve and persist. While there is little that we can say that is certain in this domain, we can generally say that autonomous moralities may evolve and survive because, under some conditions, they may confer fitness advantages; and their complexity in construction, and inter-group and intra-group relationships, make it difficult to eliminate them.

A great deal more would have to be said to develop (much less defend) the picture that I am sketching; but if it is at all plausible in conception, then we can begin to see how autonomous moralities could evolve and persist. It is thus open to us to endorse an evolutionary understanding of morality and still hold out the possibility of moral progress understood in the way that I have suggested: as involving the abolition of war and slavery, the reduction of poverty and class privilege, the extension of liberty, the empowerment of marginalized groups, and respect for animals and nature. Morality does not float free of its biological basis, but neither is it determined by it (for a sustained argument to a similar conclusion see Buchanan and Powell 2015).

Terms like ‘realism’ are contested, and some philosophers may count the generic view that I have sketched as consistent with or even perhaps an instance of moral realism. If they are right, then I will not even have gestured towards an account of how a nonrealist view can comport with the Naïve Conception. But viewing realism this expansively would be a big step in the direction of ablating the contrast between realism and its alternatives, thus mitigating the sting of the claim of metaethical bias in the Naïve Conception of moral progress. Since my primary aim is to see how the account of moral progress that I have given in earlier work can be brought together with some actual cases (slavery, decarbonization), I will not worry the details of the relation between the Naïve Conception and metaethics. Enough has been said, I hope, to defeat at least the objection that the Naïve Conception requires a commitment to some particularly extravagant version of moral realism.

3 An Index of Moral Progress

It is one thing to say that an evolutionary account of morality does not exclude the Naïve Conception of moral progress, but it is another to say that the index of moral progress should appeal to such considerations as the abolition of war and slavery, the reduction of poverty and class privilege, the extension of liberty, the empowerment of marginalized groups, and respect for animals and nature. Why should we think that moral progress can be assessed in these terms?

One audacious idea is that moral progress consists in the increasing dominance of objective, impersonal, or agent-neutral reasons for action over subjective, personal, or agent-relative reasons.¹⁴ Seen from this perspective, the values that appear on my index of moral progress are landmarks on the road to objectivity, since they demand a relatively large universe of moral concern (including, e.g., animals and nature) and specify a relatively high degree of other-regarding behaviour (e.g., the reduction of poverty and class privilege, and the empowerment of marginalized groups). This accords nicely with Singer’s view of reason as an escalator that leads one to expand the circle of moral concern. From this perspective moral progress involves

¹⁴ Thomas Nagel 1986, Ch. 9, Sec. 6 discusses such a possibility. There is a point to distinguishing between the various terms that I use above in spelling out this view, but for present purposes we can be fairly relaxed in our usage without causing much trouble.

moving from a tribal morality, for example, to a more universal one, and this can be seen as a move towards greater objectivity, impersonality, and so forth. On such a view moral progress would come to an end only with the complete conquest of personal reasons by impersonal ones.¹⁵

However, there are evolutionary considerations that suggest that the impersonal point of view can never win a complete and decisive victory over its rivals. If morality evolves and persists because of group selection, and group selection requires competition between groups, then distinctions between groups must persist for morality to persist. A fully impersonal morality would efface the distinctions between groups, thus disabling group selection, leading to the extinction of morality. Or so one might speculate.

Still, the failure of a fully impersonal morality would not threaten the plausibility of my index of moral progress. These values can be defended (and indeed have been defended) short of embracing a fully impersonal morality. Different thinkers might reject one or more of the elements or give different interpretations and weights to them. Yet, regardless of philosophical orientation, in some form or another these elements persist as the common currency of progressive thought.

A wide variety of theorists would be able to endorse the elements of the index of moral progress that I have announced, but the index would not be acceptable to everyone. It would be rejected by some who believe that moral values are constituted by religious values, and that moral progress consists in the spread of Christianity or Buddhism, or increasing fidelity to the Koran or Torah.¹⁶ Others might loftily object that the index is ethnocentric. War, slavery, hierarchy, paternalism, and the domination of nature are central to the ways of life of various cultures around the world. Who am I to denounce them?

A full answer to the charge of ethnocentrism would be a large undertaking. I will confine myself to only two brief observations. First, most cultures are not simple, unbreakable units whose participants are single-minded in their support of prevailing practices. Intra-cultural diversity is as ubiquitous among humans as inter-cultural diversity. Most slave cultures have probably had their dissenters. There were abolitionists, anti-racists, and proletarian revolutionaries even among the soldiers who imposed European domination on the New World (Linebaugh and Marcus 2001). Second, the goods that appear on my index are both extremely important and general, and a variety of reasons for valuing them become manifest as soon as one begins to think impartially about them. Perhaps there is something ethnocentric about impartiality itself, but without taking up some such perspective it is difficult to see how a serious moral charge of ethnocentrism could be lodged in the first place. From the perspective of a thoroughgoing relativism, my ethnocentric philosophizing should be seen as simply expressing the attitudes of my culture, thus immune from the universalistic moral denunciations of those who would condemn me.¹⁷

In the end I see no way to fully defend an index of moral progress short of defending the range of normative theories which find a place for the values it expresses. About all one can do in defending a normative theory, in my opinion, is to appeal to its intrinsic plausibility, and then demonstrate that it suffers from fewer and less severe infirmities and failures than alternative views.

¹⁵ Perhaps this is analogous to the idea that science will come to an end with the completion of the true picture of the universe (see Horgan 1996).

¹⁶ For an amusing attack on such views see Blackburn 2001.

¹⁷ In addition to those who would object to my index on these grounds, there are those within the western philosophical tradition who would reject it as well. For discussion, see Jamieson 1991.

4 Judgments about Moral Progress

Judgments about moral progress are comparative judgments about the value of states of affairs or the prevalence of right actions, but not all such comparative judgments are judgments about moral progress. For this reason it is clear that the Naïve Conception must be qualified. While I shall not attempt to refine the Naïve Conception into an exceptionless account of the necessary and sufficient conditions for moral progress, some observations are in order.

Generally, claims about moral progress presuppose that some significant relations obtain between the states of affairs being compared.¹⁸ Specifically, for the language of progress to take hold, at least the following must be true: there must be close causal, cultural, and temporal connections between the states of affairs in question. State of affairs A may be better than state of affairs B, but if there is no causal connection between A and B, then the transition from B to A cannot be said to constitute progress.¹⁹ For this reason it would make little sense to assert that any relations of moral progress obtain between classical Athens and the Inca Empire. Although there were causal relations between Europe and Africa, there would be little point in making claims about moral progress on the basis of comparing sixteenth century Lisbon with twentieth century Maputo: they lack a common cultural milieu. Even if we suppose that causal and cultural connections run from fourth century BCE Athens to twenty-first century CE Washington, it may still not be possible to assess in a meaningful way whether or not moral progress has occurred in this case: the relevant states of affairs are too temporally remote from each other.²⁰ Finally, there is a general problem with sweeping claims about moral progress from epoch to epoch or society to society: there are an indefinite number of dimensions on which such judgments might be made, and no obvious way of aggregating them.²¹

Of course, it is often contestable whether or not a judgment about moral progress can be made with respect to the relation between two states of affairs. This is because for states of affairs to figure in such judgments, they must be relevantly similar and, as Nelson Goodman 1972 taught us, very little of general interest can be said about what constitutes relevant similarity. Similarity is not given to us by the formal features of what is being compared, but is deeply affected by our interests and purposes, and these can shift from moment to moment. Indeed, a great deal of practical argument about moral progress turns on whether states of affairs are similar enough for judgments about moral progress to be meaningful.

¹⁸ Similar qualifications are required about the prevalence of right actions as well, but for purposes of demonstration I will focus only on the first disjunct of the Naïve Conception.

¹⁹ Nor will any old causal relation do. Suppose that all the same people exist at the same levels of happiness in state of affairs A and its consequent, state of affairs B, but that there is an additional slightly happy person who also exists in B. This would not be sufficient for supposing that the transition from A to B constitutes moral progress. We cannot simply breed our way to moral progress.

²⁰ There are other complications regarding the temporal dimensions of judgments of moral progress. Suppose, for example, that the world is getting very bad, very fast, but at one point it improves slightly, but that this improvement is a necessary condition for the world becoming so bad, so fast. I doubt that we would say that this brief bump up constitutes moral progress. Some of these complications are also addressed in Jamieson and Elliot 2009.

²¹ But couldn't we say that morality had advanced to a higher level in fifth century BCE Athens than in fifteenth century BCE Peru? Perhaps, if we are talking about the sophistication of reflection on morality, but if this is a claim about comparative moral development then it will face some of the same difficulties that attach to comparative claims about moral progress and also invite some new objections. While the idea of moral progress with respect to a dimension can be made reasonably clear, those who speak in metaphors of 'higher' and 'lower' moralities 'advancing' and 'receding' have got some explaining to do.

The upshot is that judgments about moral progress are, in some sense, local and pragmatic. They are not expressions of a “view from nowhere” (though sometimes they purport to be). We want to know whether or not moral progress has occurred for specific reasons that serve particular purposes. Often what will be worth comparing are particular practices within communities over relatively restricted periods of time.

Recognizing the pragmatic and local nature of claims about moral progress may help put to rest a nagging suspicion that those who make such claims on behalf of themselves or their societies are arrogant because they imply that they are morally better than those who have come before them. Putting aside complications involved in moving from claims about states of affairs and right actions to claims about agents, the most that could be said about such people is that they are claiming that they are better on some dimensions by their own lights than those who have come before. This is a suitably modest claim.

The view that I am urging may disappoint those who lust for a grand narrative about moral progress, one that would sweep through time, space, and society, leaving a vision of clarified humanity in its wake. Such a grand narrative would not only in my opinion be false, but we should also be sensitive to the fact that grand narratives themselves are often sources of staggering amounts of human misery.²²

5 How Does Moral Progress Occur?

In this section I discuss a moral challenge that we currently face: abolishing the use of fossil fuels. If you need convincing that this is a great moral challenge I will not try to convince you here. Nor will I advert to papal authority (although I could).²³ Instead I will simply point out that according to the best estimates, the human alteration of the climate may kill hundreds of millions of people over the next century and drive 40 % or more of all species to extinction.²⁴ (If this isn’t enough to move you we’ll have to talk some other time.) Also in this section I will discuss one clear example of moral progress: the British abolition of the Atlantic slave trade in 1807, and the subsequent struggle to abolish slavery itself. I will not try to compare these evils. My interest is in what the movement to abolish carbon can learn from the movement to stop the Atlantic slave trade.²⁵

What is immediately striking about these cases is the extent to which both slavery and emitting carbon were “naturalized.”²⁶ During their heyday each seemed to be a necessary, sometimes unremarkable, fact about human life. Slavery goes so far back in human prehistory that we have no account of its origins (Drescher 2009). The systematic (as opposed to occasional) use of fossil fuels is much more recent, but for most of my lifetime nothing could have seemed more natural than filling up the car with gasoline or flying off in a Boeing 747.

²² See Glover 1999, pt. 5. Of course, excessive ‘localism’ is not itself without risk. What is wanted (as usual) is something ‘just right’.

²³ See *Laudato Si*, available at <https://laudatosi.com/watch>, and Jamieson 2015.

²⁴ For human mortality figures visit <http://daraint.org/climate-vulnerability-monitor/climate-vulnerability-monitor-2012/report/>. The 40 % extinction number is from pp. 13–14 of the “Summary for Policymakers” of the 2007 IPCC report (available at https://www.ipcc.ch/pdf/assessment-report/ar4/syr/ar4_syr_spm.pdf). For more recent extinction estimates, see Urban 2015.

²⁵ Others have compared these two movements as well. See <http://www.thenation.com/article/179461/new-abolitionism>, and Klein 2014. I will not engage directly with these claims and arguments:

²⁶ For a subtle account see Pleasants 2011.

Indeed, the cheap and plentiful energy provided by fossil fuels has made much of what we consider modern life possible.

The fact that slavery and emitting carbon were naturalized does not mean that they did not face persistent criticism. Even Aristotle mentioned contemporary opponents of slavery, though he did not name names.²⁷ And since its rise in the nineteenth century, the fossil fuel economy has always had its critics.²⁸ Those who opposed prevailing practices were often viewed as cranks, fanatics, or lunatics rather than as sober dissenters. Indeed, many of them were cranks and fanatics (e.g., John Brown), and perhaps some were even lunatics (e.g., John Ruskin). It should not be surprising that many of those who oppose practices seen as natural by most people would be deviant along multiple dimensions.

The critics of these naturalized practices often see themselves as mounting external assaults on alien systems of thought and action that support oppressive regimes. As Rorty (1998, p. 204) points out, those who mount such external assaults often sound “crazy”—until (and unless) they succeed. Some abolitionists were so frustrated by their inability to move the supporters of slavery by rational argument or appeals to shared conceptions of human decency that they turned to something more like attempts at religious conversion, which they saw as the only hope for changing people who had been so corrupted by slavery. Critics of the carbon economy often position themselves as critics of capitalism or even as rejecting modernity itself.

Despite often seeing themselves as outsiders, in many cases these critics are also insiders. Early abolitionists were disproportionately religious non-conformists, therefore outside of the British establishment for which membership in the Church of England was a necessary condition; yet they were often prosperous, and more closely attuned to the values and desires of the emerging middle class than the establishment itself. William Wilberforce, the popular face of British abolitionism, was a staunchly conservative member of this establishment. He became an evangelical Christian in his thirties and thereafter an advocate for the abolition of slavery, yet he never left the Church of England. The most active opponents of the carbon economy are often associated with elite institutions (e.g., Bill McKibben, Harvard class of 1982, founder of 350.org), yet they often advocate or practice radically low-consumption lifestyles, at least by the standards of their fellow citizens.²⁹ Still, it is not surprising that these insiders sometimes make insider as well as outside arguments, for example when they portray fossil fuel deposits as “stranded assets” that will in the medium-term damage corporations and the global economy.³⁰

Another example of this Janus-faced nature of movements for social change can be seen in the American civil rights movement of the 1960s. Malcolm X was the external critic, rejecting Christianity in favor of Islam, and advocating social and political change “by any means necessary.” He said:

Being here in America doesn't make you an American.... No I'm not an American, I'm one of the 22 million black people who are the victims of Americanism...I'm speaking as a victim of this American system... I don't see any American dream; I see an American nightmare.³¹

²⁷ <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01440398708574925>

²⁸ See, for example, John Ruskin's 1884 lecture “The Storm Cloud of the Nineteenth Century,” available at https://www.wvnorton.com/college/english/nael/noa/pdf/27636_Vict_U08_Ruskin.pdf

²⁹ Visit, for example, <http://colinbeavan.com/books/>

³⁰ See, e.g., <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/97ba13d4-6772-11e5-97d0-1456a776a4f5.html#axzz4AEg8GIYY>

³¹ Available at <http://www.malcolm-x.org/quotes.htm>

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., on the other hand, was an internal critic of American apartheid, challenging the United States to live up to its own declared values. Yet even within Malcolm X one can sometimes find the voice of the internal critic, and in Martin Luther King Jr. the voice of the alienated outsider.

This dual identity as both insiders and outsiders is related to the strangeness of some early abolitionists and some of those who want to move us beyond carbon. Many of those who worked to abolish the Atlantic slave trade, like some contemporary environmentalists, were extremely paternalistic and moralistic. It was these attitudes that led to “back to Africa” projects such as the establishment of Sierra Leone and in some cases a strong aversion to racial integration, and among environmentalists a barely disguised contempt for the ways that many ordinary people choose to live their lives.

Despite their often grand rhetoric, many of the abolitionists had, what seems to us from our point of view, gaping moral blind spots. Some of the early abolitionists were quite dismissive of the working classes (which they sometimes called the “lower orders”), and were quite insensitive to other forms of coercive labor such as indentured servitude, wage slavery, and so on.³² They were implicated in the societies in which they lived just as we are implicated in ours. Carbon, like slavery, is an element in a highly sophisticated global system that is implicated in almost everything we do and consume. Even the most passionate advocate of climate justice is deeply enmeshed in the anthropogenically perturbed carbon cycle.

In both cases it is (and was) difficult for the moral revolutionaries themselves to envision a future in which the naturalized practices and institutions that they are (and were) trying to overthrow actually disappear. Some abolitionists imagined the plantation system continuing to run off free labor, just as some climate activists imagine our present economic system remaining in place but running off of renewables. Others fantasized a new garden of Eden. Failures of imagination regarding the future are endemic to humanity, but they are particularly striking when displayed by those who are so vigorously at war with the present.

Weaving together these observations we can say that even radical critiques of existing practices are to a great extent imminent.³³ This may seem surprising since moral revolutionaries often declare their independence from prevailing moral outlooks, see themselves as breaking with a corrupt past, and even declare themselves moral revolutionaries.³⁴ Such claims are often mobilized to serve the interests of those who make them, and our interests in moral progress are not always the same as those of the historical actors who make such claims. Actors often tell a story about the inexorable march of moral progress in the hope that creating a sense of inevitability will help bring about the desired moral change. But moral progress is often tentative and contingent, and as likely to lurch into reverse as to go full speed ahead. France abolished slavery in 1794 and restored it in 1802. It was one of the first countries to adopt universal suffrage for men, but women did not vote in France until 1945.

On the account of moral progress that I have given, the imminence of most critiques of existing practices should not be surprising. I have emphasized the societal embeddedness of moral revolutionaries, even to the extent of claiming that the truth of their judgments of moral progress is fundamentally indexed to their own values and interests. Still, these imminent

³² This charge was made contemporaneously by radical labor leaders such as William Cobbett, Richard Oastler, and Bronterre O’Brien, and later taken up by Marx. See Haskell 1985, p. 350 n. 29; and Davis 1999.

³³ Here I signal my general agreement with accounts of social criticism given by such theorists as Michael Walzer 1987 and elsewhere.

³⁴ Henry Salt, who campaigned for socialism, womens’ rights, animal rights, and much more besides, entitled his autobiography, *70 years Among Savages*.

critiques can lead to broad changes that most of us would agree constitute moral progress. Seen up close, however, this progress is often surprisingly tentative, incremental, localized, and even one-dimensional. Moral revolutions are announced in utopian manifestos, celebrated in funeral orations and memoirs, and recorded as facts in history books. They are not always so obvious in the mire of everyday life and politics. A moral revolution, like a renaissance, is more clearly seen from afar.³⁵

Indeed, once the veneer of naturalization has been cracked, defenders of the status quo themselves often deploy the language of moral progress. Slavery was portrayed by its defenders as part of a great civilizing project, both because it brought pagan Africans to Christianity and also because it provided the only means for settling wild and desolate parts of the world (Davis 1986). Some plantation owners compared themselves favorably with British and New England capitalists who paid their workers a pittance in wages and took no further interest in their material or moral welfare. The slave-owner, on the other hand, provided for all of the slaves' material needs and also focused on improving their character. Slavery's defenders argued that the moral sentiments of the abolitionists were partial, focusing on the Africans, but neglecting the white workers living in urban squalor. The abolitionists were not only hypocrites but they were confused hypocrites. Similarly, today we see advertisements brought to us by fossil fuel companies telling us that their selfless work producing electricity makes civilization possible. The "greenies" want to pull the plug and plunge us all into a dark age of misery and squalor. And of course it is the most unfortunate classes that will suffer most, and it is their interests that are closest to the heart of the fossil fuel industry.³⁶

While slave-owners may have found their arguments persuasive, no one else much did; and they were soon thrown further on to the defensive, as I think is also the case today with the fossil fuel industry. The next line of defense went like this. Yes, slavery (and carbon emissions) are regrettable but there is no escaping them. We are locked into this system. This was the argument of America's most progressive slave-owning president, Thomas Jefferson, and it remains a persuasive argument today regarding fossil fuels.³⁷ I know people who have been reduced to tears when they become convinced that emitting carbon is a grievous moral wrong because they see no way to liberate themselves, much less all of society, from reliance on fossil fuels.³⁸ And so it was with Britain and the Atlantic slave trade. Yet change did occur and the country that had the most to lose led it.

Britain dominated both the seas, and the international slave trade right up to the moment they abolished it. In 1805–6, just before its abolition, the value of British West Indian sugar production constituted about 4 % of Britain's national income. The abolition of the slave trade cost the British nearly 2 % of their national income annually for nearly 60 years. It also cost more than 5000 lives, as they set out to enforce their values on others (Kauffmann and Pape 1999). Claims made by abolitionists, that free labor is more productive than slave labor and so the plantations would thrive without slavery, turned out to be about as true as

³⁵ The consolidation of claims about moral progress is a lot like the consolidation of claims about certainty in science. For discussion of the latter, see MacKenzie 1990. For a more accessible account of the salient points see Jamieson 1996.

³⁶ There are many such advertisements that can be viewed on the internet. See, for example, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6A6j1r3Kbuo>; and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PKH75yDqekk>.

³⁷ As Jefferson wrote to John Holmes near the end of his life about slavery, "we have the wolf by the ear, and we can neither hold him, nor safely let him go, justice is in one scale, and self-preservation in the other" (<http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/98-01-02-1234>).

³⁸ There are now support groups in the UK to help people face climate change. Visit <http://www.carbonconversations.org/>

environmentalists' claims that rapid decarbonization will be an immediate net economic positive and lead to a plethora of green jobs.³⁹ Oil and gas contributes about 7.5 % of America's GDP and up to 40 % of the GDP of some states. Coal is the soft target. Its GDP contribution is less than 1 %.⁴⁰

There are important differences between slavery and the problem of fossil fuels. Fossil fuels were a good idea; we just used them too much and for too long. We overshoot. There was no overshooting with slavery. It was always a bad idea. Like the use of fossil fuels, slavery caused death and suffering, but there was another element to the critique of slavery that is largely absent from the critique of the use of fossil fuels. Slavery is dehumanizing. It treats people as if they were mere things. A purely consequentialist critique of slavery seems to leave out an important dimension of its wrongness, though such an account may be plausible for carbon emissions.⁴¹ Climate campaigners do talk about our energy policy discounting the interests of future people and low-emitters, but carbon's assault on what it is to be a person seems less deep, direct, visceral and even true than slavery's assault on our shared notions of humanity. Another important difference is that the harms caused by slavery are direct, while those caused by carbon emissions are indirect.⁴² There is no atmosphere mediating the suffering of the slave and the institution itself. The master and slave were often in immediate proximity.⁴³

This point about indirectness suggests what is perhaps the most important lesson climate campaigners can learn from the movement to abolish the Atlantic slave trade. For people to support moral change in a world in which there is a rupture in space, time, or scale between a cause and a harm, they must somehow be reconnected in people's consciousness. Abolitionism succeeded because it closed the circuit between the near and the far, the proximate and the distal.⁴⁴ After Parliament rejected an abolition bill in 1791, the abolitionists launched the "blood sugar" campaign which resulted in at least 300,000 people boycotting Britain's largest import. Pamphlets were written, speeches were made, and organizations were created. One of the most powerful statements of the case for the boycotting the products of slave labor was made by William Fox:

so necessarily connected are our consumption of the commodity the misery resulting from it, that in every pound of sugar used, (the produce of slaves imported from Africa), we may be considered as consuming two ounces of human flesh.⁴⁵

The fundamental challenge faced by fossil fuel abolitionists is to connect the harms of climate change with the use of fossil fuels. Since carbon dioxide is an invisible, odorless, tasteless gas, and climate change damages are highly mediated by nature, society, space, and time, this is a daunting task, but there is some reason to believe that it is beginning to succeed.⁴⁶

³⁹ For some of the difficulties involved in assessing the number and value of green jobs in the United States visit http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Series/resources/0713_clean_economy.pdf

⁴⁰ Visit http://west.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/Rural_West_Working_Paper_1_July_2011c.pdf

⁴¹ But see Hare 1979.

⁴² For more on the indirectness of the harms caused by climate change see Jamieson 2014, Ch. 5.

⁴³ Though of course it should be remembered that slavery's tentacles were so extended that when parliament voted compensation in 1833 (to former slave owners rather than the slaves themselves) the Church of England received £8823 8 s 9d, for the loss of slave labor on its plantation in Barbados. Individual churchmen received even more in some cases. For details see Hochschild 2005.

⁴⁴ Hochschild 2005, p. 6.

⁴⁵ Visit <https://archive.org/details/addressstopeople00foxw>

⁴⁶ See Jacquet and Jamieson 2016.

6 Concluding Remarks

In this paper I have provided an account of moral progress, and brought it to bear on two (brief) case studies: the eighteenth and nineteenth century movement to abolish the Atlantic slave trade, and the contemporary movement to abolish the use of fossil fuels. I have discussed similarities and differences between these practices and movements, and focused on one important requirement for success: the need to connect the causes and harms in the minds of those who can make change; to close the circuit between the near and the far, the proximate and the distal.

The account of moral progress that I have given may seem modest and unambitious to some. But we live short lives compared to human history, and in small neighborhoods compared to the global community. It is from this local point of view that our lives are lived and our motivation is drawn. Moral progress begins here, and then may spread out over the world. This may not satisfy those who are in thrall to grand visions, but I find a kind of sublimity in the fact that such aspirations and even successes can spring from such limited creatures as us.

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