

## SCIENTIFIC PROGRESS AND MORAL PROGRESS

**Allen T. Pearson**  
*University of Alberta*

Ternasky has provided us with a challenging and intriguing defense of the possibility of moral realism and moral progress. His intention is not to provide us with a detailed account of either of these; rather his concern is to show us the possibility of each. He wants, at least in this paper, to add moral realism to our moral discussions and repertoire. What this can contribute to moral discussions and moral education is the possibility of justified moral action. Let me recap how Ternasky gets to this strong and currently unpopular position.

First, he needs a theory that will be conducive to moral progress, for not much headway can be made if we start with a theory that denies the possibility of such. The position that meets his need is moral realism, which holds that there are moral facts which are objective in “that they are independent of the opinions of those holding them.” He sketches a view of moral realism that “rejects foundationalism and embraces theory-dependency and indeterminacy.” Just as science has been able to maintain the objectivity of its claims without having a foundationalist epistemology and despite recognizing both theory-dependency and indeterminacy, so too can there be objective moral facts. Science works, he argues, because its claims correspond to the way things are. The theoretical assumptions of science that allow for the revisability of scientific claims are a result of its orientation, which sees it as a cumulative process that “seeks successive approximations to the truth.”

This view of objectivity is then transferred to morality. As our moral intuitions are informed by social and historical evidence, we move closer to the truth of moral claims and to a conception of human flourishing which stands as both the end and the test of our moral claims. This movement towards the conception of human flourishing constitutes moral progress. The realist is not committed to the view that there is one moral outlook, because differing views are to be expected, given the different social and environmental conditions under which they arise. But the moral realist sees that different theories and positions will sometimes, even often, converge on particular moral judgments. Instances of moral progress are easy to find. Ternasky uses the most common of these: the elimination of chattel slavery as a morally justifiable position. Although it still exists, there are no arguments that can be adduced to defend it. Those, like Aristotle, who defended slavery could no longer do so if they were to have the information that is available to us.

Finally, two implications of this position for moral education are given. The first is that it challenges both relativism and dogmatic absolutism. It challenges relativism by allowing us to discuss what the moral facts might be and what might constitute human flourishing. It challenges dogmatic absolutism by making the concept of human flourishing one that is discovered through moral discussion rather than being an unquestioned given. The second implication is that it reintroduces justifiable moral action. Our moral hypotheses are tested against our tentative conception of the human good. Insofar as these hypotheses withstand the test, they move us towards this conception and so are justified. This allows us to work towards a “thicker civil moral language.”

In order to raise some questions and issues about this position, I must first note that the notions of moral progress and moral realism are presented as possibilities or plausible options for our consideration. So one cannot argue against the paper on the grounds that some other view is the

correct view. What can be done to test and, perhaps, strengthen the paper is to raise some questions about the plausibility of these positions. I want to raise two such questions.

My first question concerns Ternasky's conception of objectivity. His most explicit formulation is that statements are objective if they are independent of the opinions of those holding them. This seems to me to be too weak, in that it would make some clearly non-objective statements count as objective. I was born under the sign of Scorpio. I once found the following claim in a book on astrology: "Scorpians [sic] are the most highly sexed of all the signs and, with their tendency to do nothing by halves, any frustration or suppression of this sexual energy can lead to unpleasant behavior. In extreme cases they can be cruel or violent."<sup>1</sup> I hasten to add that this is a false description of me. But as the claim is independent of my opinions, it would count as objective. In general, the meaning of a claim is independent of the opinions of those who make it. The meanings of words and claims come from shared public understandings; they are not private phenomena. So it is hard to see how any claim would not count as being objective.

This is surely not what Ternasky intends. What he needs is a view of objectivity that makes it clear that the grounds for a claim are independent of the persons holding the claim. One suggestion comes from Phillips's discussion of objectivity: "'Objectivity' seems to be a label that we apply to inquiries that meet certain procedural standards, but objectivity does not guarantee that the results of inquiries have any certainty."<sup>2</sup> What Ternasky needs to show, I believe, is that there are or can be procedures that one follows when making moral decisions that are public and subject to debate and revision and are not just the idiosyncratic opinions of certain persons. When we know what the procedural rules for making moral claims are, we know what it would mean to be morally objective. To fill this notion out requires much more detail on moral realism than we are given here.

My second question deals with the analogy that is at the heart of his argument. Because science can be seen to be progressive when it is seen in the light of non-foundational epistemology and theory-dependence and indeterminacy, so too should morality be able to be progressive. There is a standard which shows whether scientific claims are progressive or not, and this standard is, in lay terms, that the claim describes things the way they are. The standard for deciding whether moral claims are progressive would seem to be a robust conception of human flourishing. Now many questions could be raised about the view of science here, but I shall assume for the sake of argument that Ternasky is right. I want to ask if the analogy works. Suppose that we have two different hypotheses on the effect of increased amounts of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere that lead to different predictions: one predicts a gradual increase in the Earth's average temperature, the other predicts a gradual decrease. We know how to determine which, if either, is to be rejected. What we have to do is to observe temperatures in the future (assuming that there is a clear and noncontroversial way of doing this). This will help determine which of the two hypotheses comes closer to describing the actual state of affairs that we observe. This simple-minded test will not show either hypothesis to be correct, but it will show which, if either, comes closer to the truth. If it turns out that the average temperature does go up, we are able to decide which theory comes closer to describing the way things are.

Now, is there an analogous process for moral claims? In spite of any objections that might be raised to the notion of the way things are, it does seem to me that this notion is much clearer than "a robust conception of human flourishing." In the scientific case we have two different hypotheses that make predictions about the way things are, but there is agreement on what will constitute an accurate rendering of an actual state of affairs. We are able to decide between hypotheses on global warming because we can tell which comes closer to the actual state of affairs that we observe. For the analogy to hold we should be able to decide between two moral hypotheses by showing which comes closer to the conception of human flourishing. This seems to require that the conception of human flourishing be a settled matter or a moral fact. This is precisely what many would want to question.

We can agree, I think, that a conception of human flourishing does not allow that persons be chattel slaves. We can also agree that those who defended chattel slavery as morally justifiable no longer can do so if they know what we know. Undoubtedly there has been moral progress on this matter. But is the standard by which we judge moral progress the same as the standard by which we measure scientific progress? A conception of human flourishing is a human construction. It is based on decisions that people have made and reasoning that they have engaged in. It is not to be found in the world as something that already exists. In my example of hypotheses on global warming, the temperature that we find is not a human construction, even though the procedure for determining temperature is. In the moral example the conception of human flourishing is completely a matter of convention. So moral progress is relative to some human convention of what counts as flourishing. Because it is a human convention, it can be unmade by people. A conception of human flourishing can be changed by people in a way that the average temperature of the planet cannot. We can do things that will affect the temperature, but we cannot decide that the temperature be other than it is. However, we can decide that a conception of human flourishing be other than it is. So moral progress is relative to a conception that can be changed by people. If it is changed then what once seemed to be progress will not longer count as progress. If human flourishing consists in autonomy and rights, the changes we have seen in Eastern Europe will count as progress. If human flourishing consists in adequate and affordable food, housing, education and the opportunity to work, then what has happened cannot count as progress. It seems to me that the analogy with science breaks down because the standard by which we measure progress in science is logically very different from the standard we use in morality.

Ternasky might respond to this point in the following way. I have set up the concept of human flourishing as an *a priori* concept, that is, one that is given at the outset before moral deliberations begin. His view is that the concept of human flourishing is *a posteriori*, one that arises out of our moral deliberations. If we learn that no argument can be produced to defend chattel slavery, then the concept of human flourishing cannot include slavery. If we discover in the future that no argument can be produced to deny people of sound mind the right to have their lives terminated, then euthanasia will be part of the concept of human flourishing. Does this save the analogy? I think not, as the conception of human flourishing is still a human construction in a way that “the way things are” is not.

I have tried to raise some questions to show how Ternasky’s argument needs amplification. I hope that he will be able in time to provide the further detail I have mentioned, because a strength of his essay is his discussion of the implications of moral realism and moral progress for moral education. The problems he identifies are real, and he is persuasive in suggesting that moral realism can help us to deal with those issues. But my support must be tentative until we are given a more thorough account of how moral realism will deal with those issues.

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<sup>1</sup> Derek and Julia Parker, *The Compleat Astrologer* (Toronto, Bantam Books, 1975), 27.

<sup>2</sup> D. C. Phillips, *The Social Scientist’s Bestiary* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1992), 67.