

## SALVAGING MORAL PROGRESS

**P. Lance Ternasky**  
*Cornell University*

We live in a postmodern world, or so we are told. Within it, every group dictates its own standard of meaning and truth, and communication failures between such groups commonly result from the incommensurability of the languages upon which they rely. Given such a world, innumerable, contradictory systems seem likely — each characterized by its ethnocentrism and its difficulty handling cross-group, hard cases.

If this is the world we experience, can we expect the study of ethics to yield anything other than idiosyncrasy? And if this is the most we can expect, then the interminable debates between divergent theoretical camps may be principally viewed as entertainment for academics. While some may hope that that debate will periodically promote clarification, anyone foolish enough to claim that such exchanges could provide access to more universal moral truth would understandably expect derision.

Must we repudiate every vestige of universal moral truth? Must we accept either a variant of the many-worlds conception of morality or some rigid standard borne of the fear of skepticism? Must those who claim that certain moral questions can definitively be answered be said to suffer regrettably from latent absolutist tendencies and the unresolved desire for a “tidy world?”<sup>1</sup> Or is it possible that moral facts exist and that access to them contributes to moral progress?

This essay explores the possibility of moral progress. Such an effort requires a host theory conducive to the concept. A promising candidate is moral realism of the sort proposed by the current and independent work of Richard Boyd and Peter Railton.<sup>2</sup> I briefly sketch a realist account of morality and then suggest its impact on the notion of progress. I conclude by describing two benefits for moral education of the reunification of progress and morality.

### ONE REALIST MODEL

Contrary to the idea that moral language is possible only within the confines of distinct groups in which consensus can be reached, the realist argues that these extant moral languages often display substantive inter-group similarity. While this similarity may occur by chance, it may also suggest that these languages share a common foundation. This is more than a claim of resemblance, however, for the realist holds that certain moral judgments have ultimate truth values which are discernible within a real world. As such, these judgments constitute “moral facts” which are objective in that they are *independent of the opinions of those holding them*.

Upon hearing such a claim, one may ask whether the proponent realizes that logical positivism and foundationalism have been discredited. She might also inquire how such claims can be made when the theory-dependence of knowledge is widely accepted and the mere mention of objectivity is suspect. It would seem that one must ignore the evidence and collegial opinion in accepting realism. Fortunately, the realist account I am proposing rejects a foundationalist absolutism and embraces both theory-dependence and indeterminacy. This may appear contradictory. How can the realist speak of objective moral facts when theory-dependence and indeterminacy lend themselves so readily to multiple interpretation?

Boyd addresses this concern via the role of theory-dependence in science. He notes that there is no presupposition-free scientific method, and that science is dependent upon an array of theoretical assumptions which are embedded in scientific language. But given this, why should we believe that a theory-dependent methodology can tell us anything about a theory-independent reality?

The realist replies that only her account can explain the marked reliability and success of modern science. In lay terms, science works not because scientists have designed it to do so, but because it corresponds to the way things really are.<sup>3</sup> The theoretical assumptions serve not only to aid in explanation and prediction but to suggest ways in which a potentially mistaken theory can be corrected and under what circumstances it must be discarded.

This revisability is an anticipated consequence of an orientation which understands science as a cumulative process that seeks “successive approximations to the truth.” And if the operating background theories stand “relevantly, approximately, near the truth,” then it is reasonable to expect that they may by successive approximation move nearer the truth when bolstered by additional evidence.<sup>4</sup> Note that movement toward the truth is measured not by reference to the theory but by the strength of the corresponding evidence. Were this not the case, science would remain a static system locked in the circularity of its own thought, perpetually conflating activity with progress.

The question remains, though, how might one move from scientific objectivity to an objective morality? First, doubts about scientific objectivity have made claims of moral objectivity (with its less empirical subject matter and methods of verification) appear inventive. Second, the widespread acceptance of a fact/value split has made attempts to derive faith in moral objectivity from work in other fields appear incomprehensible. If, however, scientific objectivity can be rehabilitated by a non-positivistic realism, and if the substantive challenges by non-realists of a fact/value split are telling, then we have grounds for seeking certain similarities between science and ethics and for attempting a transfer of objectivity.<sup>5</sup>

Alone, dependence upon theories that provide epistemic access to an independent reality cannot explain science’s success, nor could it explain the origins of the original theories. Scientific progress depends, as well, on the scientific intuitions of the researcher. These intuitions have their roots in theory and practice and thus qualify as trained judgments. Consequently, if there is sufficient evidence that the theory stands relevantly, approximately near the truth, then the scientist’s *intuitions* can be counted objective.<sup>6</sup> If the underlying motivation of morality were, say, the articulation and execution of a robust conception of human flourishing, and if our evolving moral background theories stand relevantly, approximately, near the truth of that motivation, then we may expect to move nearer the truth as our intuitions are informed by additional social, scientific, and historical evidence. Note that the realist does not claim that morality begins near the truth; but as evolving, rational, social creatures concerned with more than mere survival, it is not unreasonable that we begin nearer the nature of human flourishing than probability alone would suggest.<sup>7</sup>

## ON MORAL PROGRESS

Even if one accepts this realist conception of objectivity, the question remains whether objectivity ineluctably connotes progress. Perhaps we possess objective knowledge but lack the mechanisms for effectively identifying and acting upon it. The skeptic may ponder why a plethora of contradictory moral systems operate if there exist moral facts in an independent reality; but need we expect consensus?

The expectation of such agreement actually has its roots in the acceptance of a monolithic ethical theory. If one believes (or undermines the beliefs of those who do) that the ethical standard is fixed and known, then she will justifiably question why it is not universally held, and she will encounter real disagreements between those immersed in conflicting systems. If, however, she takes a realist

stance, she will predict that differing social and environmental conditions will produce diverse moral theories in much the same way that the scientific explanations of divergent cultures initially differ.

Regardless of whether these conflicting moral systems operate between cultures or within them in the form of intractable disagreement, the realist may address the apparent irreconcilability similarly. Do the differences persist because of the imposition of notions foreign in a particular setting? Does the irresolvable quality actually come from an adversarial attitude that precludes systematic discussion of the issues? Are the perceived concerns in question really the source of the disagreement, or do they simply conceal underlying issues that are resolvable? Ethical literature is replete with examples of apparent disagreement that evaporate once the fundamental issues are perceived. At the very least, the realist's rejection of presupposition-free theory makes all moral assumptions, judgments, and theories subject to deliberation, and by not compelling morality to adhere to one, preeminent component of a single ethical theory — say, the rule of reason — the realist may find agreement among previously hostile parties.

While eventual agreement may result from the clarification of the real issue, it may be seen as the likely outcome of moral progress. For those arguing for progress, it comes as no surprise that the dominant ethical theories often disagree dramatically in principle but converge when making application to actual cases. It is at least conceivable that the explanation lies in a second-order disagreement regarding theoretical principles and a first-order agreement regarding purpose. In other words, the realist may assert that primary ethical theories actually concur that morality's ultimate, but often unarticulated, purpose is to secure human flourishing through the satisfaction of complex human needs; but separated from this admission, the theories generate principles that are both internally coherent and externally antagonistic.

Although objectivity need not embrace moral progress, the notion of progress fits comfortably with it. This results, in part, from the quite tenable role of progress in scientific realism. In science we find disagreement, but we do not expect it to be permanent, and the realist's position provides a plausible explanation for why not. In time, the competition between differing scientific conceptions ends, and the successful formulation is that which most closely approximates the truth. With few exceptions, and contrary to the notion of multiple realities, the more plausible and reliable alternative becomes part of the evolutionary scientific standard.

If moral progress is tied to the same image, it would seem that it suffers from the illusion of a systematic unfolding of truth by disregarding multiple counter-examples. Making the comparison again to scientific progress, the realist will agree that systematic unfolding is an illusion, but that it is one that has too often been attached to science by those outside it. Rather than progressing predictably and incrementally, science moves by spurts, and some of these represent mistakes that occasion sideways movement or retreat. The process may even appear chaotic to those unable to discern its general direction of motion. Science is better served by the image of the periodically halting and somewhat variable movement of a "thin line of flame advancing across a dry, autumnal field" than by any reference to a cutting edge.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, while instances of moral immobility or regression are unfortunate (and may well be instances of immorality), the case for moral progress is not damaged by them. If we understand objectivity to result from successive approximation to the truth, while we simultaneously hold a realistic image of how progress operates, we need only ask the direction in which the fire is burning.

This image also dispels confusion about the goals and descriptions of science, for it would seem that if science were self-correctingly fallible, then any notion of progress which presupposed fixed ends would be contradictory. This paradox can be overcome if we acknowledge that science need not be "Nature's own language" to successfully point to a real world, and that success can be measured by the solution of particular problems rather than the stronger demand for complete correspondence with reality. Fortunately, progress need not connote the search for perfection.

When we examine general moral history, it is difficult to refute the claim that the movement has been in the direction of greater moral sophistication and clarity. This assertion rests not in an imagined theoretical homogeneity, but rests instead in the dramatic evidence of change. The physical manifestations (e.g., the emergence of rights, egalitarian sentiments, widespread call for social and distributive justice) associated with the last three centuries clearly rivals the growth of science during the same period. Given the resolution of certain pithy moral debates, the fact that the discord over, say, the issues of abortion and euthanasia appears irreconcilable after only a few decades of *active* debate leads one to question whether, placed within the proper temporal framework, these are truly examples of issues that cannot be settled.

Conversely, instances of moral progress abound. Consider the oft-cited example of conflict over chattel slavery in this country. While both factions considered their arguments coherent and compelling, one could, at best, describe as contentious their disagreement. And it is apparent that many viewed *this* debate as interminable.

Although the slavery issue was definitively settled at the level of policy during a relatively short period of time, and despite the facts that agreement came at gunpoint and that the sentiments underlying the conflict persisted for decades, it is not an overstatement that the argument for slavery can no longer be coherently made.

This is more than the trivial truth that such views are no longer popular. It is the stronger claim that persons can no longer accede to the beliefs required to endorse slavery. We can attribute this shift to the psychological or economic coercion visited upon the vanquished by the victors, but this would proscribe the sentiments only so long as the coercion was maintained. More likely, the union of moral reflection and empirical evidence inhibits the formation of pro-slavery belief. Once certain “knowledge” is discredited and key questions are raised, the materials can no longer be found for the construction of particular arguments.<sup>9</sup> Any attempt to resurrect such arguments would require proponents to claim that the enslaved were fundamentally different (e.g., intellectually, psychologically, spiritually) and therefore undeserving of comparable treatment. The critical point here is that the ensuing disagreement would not be moral but empirical in nature. The apologist could not justify slavery in terms of an alternative moral understanding, but would instead be forced to ground it in factual error. And once compelling evidence (or as in this instance, counter-evidence) is readily available, the most the apologist can desire is false consciousness — a consciousness motivated by the desire to deceive or corrupt his or her listeners.<sup>10</sup>

The critic may respond that while disagreement about the morality of slavery is no longer an issue, it *was* a real issue earlier in our history. We might be asked whether slave owners were morally accountable for the practice when they lacked the information we now have. One may even go a step further and ask how we should view slavery in ancient Greece or other cultures. Although the critic is unlikely to suggest it for our history, it may even be asserted that, given specific physical and temporal circumstances, the practice was morally acceptable within certain ancient societies.

If we take the stance that slavery has always contradicted any coherent notion of human flourishing, then we may state that the ancients were in error when they practiced slavery, regardless of what they believed about the matter. While it would be absurd to hold anyone accountable to unknown standards and concepts, moral culpability does follow from the intentional rejection of the evidence that destroys one’s justification for a practice. If one persists in a practice when there are no longer defensible reasons for it, then one cannot claim access to the truth or to the right to a contrary opinion. Were he given what we now know about slavery, Aristotle could be counted wrongheaded if he refused to reject the practice. The more likely outcome is that, given the fuller picture, he would be compelled by the evidence to view his earlier stance more from the perspective of observer than holder — noting what he once believed, but being incapable of believing it any longer.

It may seem presumptuous to suggest that Aristotle would invariably find the evidence convincing *and* that he could free himself from societal and temporal features that colored his understanding of

his world. The idea that we are products of our own time and consequently unable to extricate ourselves from its dominion contributes to the belief that the realist and Aristotle would simply “talk past each other.” But contrary to the image of persons bound by their own paradigms, history and experience tell us that we have regularly crossed this border.

We can no more imagine a reflective Aristotle discounting two millennia of debate on slavery than we can imagine Ptolemy rejecting modern astronomy were he offered access to the instruments and insights of the past five centuries. This is not to suggest that either would immediately note their error, but that neither could continue to hold their original views once confronted with evidence that more nearly approximates the truth. One may ask why the realist demands a stronger truth claim here, rather than simply a claim stating that most civilized persons now reject slavery. The weakness in the latter claim is that it fails to reveal the permanence of the verdict on slavery. The transition from one view of an issue to its inverse based on a much more complete sense of the evidence precludes reverting to one’s original position. Without resorting to a mechanistic image of a moral pawl and ratchet wheel, reversion is possible only if the agent abandons the desire to act on the basis of good reasons. Successive approximations to the truth prevent moral return trips. Thus, while slavery could reappear and even be officially sanctioned, this could only occur by rejecting a rich conception of human flourishing and by dismantling our evolving moral system.

Finally, the circumstance that moral development has not been uniform or that countless examples of inhumanity persist does not weaken the claim for moral progress. In both the moral and scientific realms, agents may behave improperly and their actions may simply be wrong. Were unfortunate circumstances capable of discrediting moral realism, however, mistaken views of the physical world would invalidate science.

Note that the representation of moral progress proffered here is not one that claims “every day, in every way, we’re getting better and better.” Although it predicts a trend toward progress, it is silent on the relative rate of movement. In correspondence with scientific realism, the argument for moral objectivity predicts that mistakes will be made, but further expects that errors when discovered will play a role in selecting their successors rather than in defending their standing as permanently ensconced in some supernal theory. And again, the “facts” are often elusive, always subject to prejudice, and sometimes only definitively identified after centuries of debate; nevertheless, a progressive objectivism proposes that there is often eventually a fact of the matter.

## TWO EDUCATIONAL BENEFITS OF MORAL PROGRESS

What are the implications for moral education of a realist account bolstered by the prospect of objectivity and progress? Consider two. First, this account successfully challenges popular relativism as a leading contender for the moral language of the school, and it does this even as it challenges the dogmatic absolutism which in large part prompted the relativistic arguments. While my account does not summarily dismiss either, it reintroduces a tenable alternative which must be included in the debate.

This is an important contribution, for although the common forms of relativism and absolutism suffer from fatal flaws, both exert marked influence on moral discourse. The “everything is relative” attitude is not easily challenged by philosophical positions which lament the subjective quality of *all* knowledge, but it is vulnerable to the claim that there may actually be a moral fact of the matter. We can argue that it is conceivably an empirical matter what human flourishing consists in and which conditions promote or hinder its development. And in contrast to the fashionable declaration that one can never *really* know what’s right, progressive exploration may well yield moral universals.

While realism’s confrontation with dogmatic forms of absolutism yields less dramatic results, it serves to inhibit the latter’s more fearsome traits. One may ask how this is possible when realism may appear absolutist. In its defense, the realist will remind that objectivity requires the acceptance of theory-dependence and indeterminacy. This prohibits the *a priori* justification for moral or

scientific fact which mistakes an extant world with complete and immediate access to its nature. Conversely, the realist seeks the best *a posteriori* account of this world — one directed by the evidential record rather than by dogmatic pronouncements.

The realist challenge of other ethical models is not meant to silence any opposition. The model adumbrated in this essay is a response to the legitimate criticism of earlier realist forms. If one is truly utilizing experimental intelligence in the search for that which moves us closer to the truth, then conflict and contradiction speak not of failure of logic or of the project or of knowledge but speak instead of the need for observation and investigation and investment. This is what permits Dewey to call conflict the “gadfly of thought” and Whitehead to view contradiction as the “first step in progress towards a victory...in the evolution of real knowledge. [This being] one great reason for the utmost toleration of a variety of opinion.”<sup>11</sup>

The second implication is that a defensible progress reintroduces justifiable moral action. One of the monumental contributions of scientific progress was that it terminated the image of one’s life as the reiteration of that of her parents. Scientific progress revealed that life could change dramatically over a short span of time. While science’s progeny displayed an ability for tackling perennial problems, it also contributed mindlessly to new difficulties; but regardless, one could no longer confidently assert that the future would closely resemble the past. And for young science an uncertain future was an open future — one ready for the making.

But once this uncertain future was coupled with epistemological questions regarding the place and privilege of knowledge, we were left with neither the predictable, cyclical life prospects of our progenitors nor the perhaps wishful thinking of the Enlightenment. Instead, many found themselves morally immobilized, unable to act, and hobbled by doubt and fear of offense. From this position of moral apprehension, actors developed moral myopia. Since they could no longer speak of right and wrong, their moral code was confined to the protection of interests. The *assessment* of conflicting means and ends was abandoned as the parties negotiated for their respective concerns, and the compromises eventually reached often less reflected the desirable than the achievable.

This trade-off is not in itself troublesome. The intelligence which requires that we judge better from worse may well opt for achievability over a presently unattainable ideal. The difficulty is, however, that compromise need not necessarily yield a better result, for under these circumstances what we typically get in the moral realm is precisely what is criticized in the modern business environment: shortsightedness. The absence of progress militates against any coherent delayed political or social gratification, and in their stead we find only a competition for limited resources.

In contrast, while an *a posteriori* account of human flourishing seemingly also demands hesitation from moral actors, the realist need not idly await the absolute and final word on an issue. Starting from the knowledge that there may ultimately be a moral fact of the matter, and granting that she will act more confidently when the evidence corresponds well with her theory’s projections, the realist, like her scientific counterpart, understands that novel problems require that we initially work only with hypotheses. This permits us to move beyond noting error or demanding the protection of our pursuits and possessions, to speculate on as yet uncertain moral fact. Based on its history of contributing to human flourishing, a potential moral truth may be treated *as if* it were established. Fortunately, with progress we are not condemned to choose between temerity and timidity, for being bold demands a careful examination of our past and of the present we create.

The goal of progressive realism is neither ethical homogeneity nor an impoverished image of human flourishing which intrudes on individual or cultural diversity. It is the desire for a platform, albeit shifting, from which to access pressing concerns. As such, it contains the seeds for a morality which is more than rules for rule-following or a paltry system offering too little guidance or an incongruent adult ethic with conflicting requirements destined to be imposed on our youth.

In conclusion, the union of a defensible objectivity and progress ultimately permits the development of trust in moral dialogue: the belief that we are not reduced solely to bargaining for our *reputedly* disparate interests and that we can transcend our moral anxieties to seek a thicker civil moral language. And this is the crucial feature, for without trust we cannot expect the schools to play any substantive role in moral education, nor should we anticipate greater coherence between students' moral knowledge and their actions. Without trust born of a believable and applicable account of morality, the most our schools will offer students are the skills necessary to become successful moral arbiters. The more likely and more distressing outcome is that students will suffer instead from moral illiteracy or "terminal wistfulness."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Elliot Eisner, "Anastasia Might Still be Alive, But the Monarchy is Dead," *Educational Researcher* 12, no. 5 (1983): 13-24.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Boyd, "How to be a Moral Realist," in *Essays on Moral Realism*, ed. Geoffrey Sayre-McCord (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1988), 181-228; and Peter Railton, "Moral Realism," *The Philosophical Review* 95, no. 2 (1986): 163-207.

<sup>3</sup> Boyd, 189.

<sup>4</sup> Boyd, 207.

<sup>5</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 51-61.

<sup>6</sup> Boyd, 193.

<sup>7</sup> For a more complete picture of how moral objectivity may be derived from the model considered, see P. Lance Ternasky, "Moral Realism Revisited: On Achievable Morality," *Educational Theory* 42, no. 3 (1992): 201-16.

<sup>8</sup> William James, "A World of Pure Experience," *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1976), 42.

<sup>9</sup> Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1985), ch. 9.

<sup>10</sup> See Jeffrey Stout, *Ethics after Babel: The Languages of Morals and Their Discontents* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988), 52-53.

<sup>11</sup> Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (New York: Macmillan, 1960), 267.

<sup>12</sup> Stout, 232.