

ANGELO CAMPODONICO

## MORAL PROGRESS

*The role of extended wisdom across and within boundaries*

Today there is a revival of the theme of moral progress. The aim of this essay is to explore the concept of moral progress and examine how a *Virtue Ethics*, particularly the one centred on Wisdom, is the most adequate at addressing it. Many philosophers in the field of *Virtue Ethics* emphasize the unifying role of wisdom among other virtues<sup>1</sup>. Why? In a new book on *phronesis* Kristjan Kristjánsson quotes Gilbert K. Chesterton:

«The vices are, indeed, let loose, and they wander and do damage. But the virtues are let loose also; and the virtues wander more wildly, and the virtues do more terrible damage. The modern world is full of the old Christian virtues gone mad. The virtues have gone mad because they have been isolated from each other and are wandering alone. Thus some scientists care for truth; and their truth is pitiless. Thus some humanitarians only care for pity; and their pity (I am sorry to say) is often untruthful»<sup>2</sup>.

The role of *phronesis*, or practical wisdom, is that of unifying the other virtues. I will adopt the term *Extended Wisdom* because, unlike other contemporary conceptions of practical wisdom, it is open not only to the motivating goal (flourishing), emotions and exemplars (both individual and communal), but also to certain moral evidence such as the principles of natural law or the *golden rule* as well as to the metaphysical and religious dimension<sup>3</sup>. This means rediscovering a profound quest for the meaning of life which unifies it<sup>4</sup>. As wisdom grows, so does

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<sup>1</sup> Cfr. K. Kristjánsson - J. Blaine Fowers, *Phronesis. Retrieving Practical Wisdom in Psychology, Philosophy and Education*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2024; M. De Caro - C. Navarini - M.S. Vaccarezza, *Why Practical Wisdom Cannot be Eliminated*, in «Topoi», March 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11245-024-10030-1>.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibi*, p. 15; G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, Grapevine, Mumbai 2023, p. 29.

<sup>3</sup> See among others C. Miller, *Flirting with Skepticism about practical wisdom*, in M. De Caro - M.S. Vaccarezza (eds.) *Practical wisdom: philosophical and psychological perspectives*, Routledge, London 2021, pp. 52-69.

<sup>4</sup> Cfr. J. Cottingham, *On the Meaning of Life*, Routledge, London 2003.

moral identity. There is a virtuous circle among these components. *Extended Wisdom* operates between past (wisdom as memory) and future (wisdom as *prudencia* from *providentia*) beyond established boundaries while cultivating a sense of openness and of limitation<sup>5</sup>.

What do we mean by moral progress? Firstly, the emergence of certain moral evidence throughout history, under specific circumstances, aligning with previously recognized principles<sup>6</sup>. This is the case with the rejection of slavery and the acknowledgment of equal dignity among all individuals, regardless of gender or nationality. Moral progress in these areas becomes possible when the actions of virtuous men are combined with favourable economic and social conditions<sup>7</sup>. Secondly, moral progress can be understood as the maturation of wisdom and of virtues associated with evolving insights, for example, virtues such as humility, curiosity, moral flexibility and intellectual courage. Progress in wisdom means moral perfection not in general, but rather in the here and now, integrating new moral and scientifically relevant acquisitions into our moral identity and virtuous conduct. We would like to briefly elaborate on this second aspect of progress concerning character development, in connection with the first, while considering the challenges of contemporary culture.

It is important to emphasize that while democratic egalitarianism as well as consumerism naturally favour moral progress in the sense of horizontality and inclusivism (to the point of including non-human animals themselves and even plants), it runs the risk of smoothing out the differences that do exist between the various cases under consideration, as the liberal democrat Tocqueville surprisingly foresaw more than 150 years ago<sup>8</sup>. Respecting everyone does not necessarily

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<sup>5</sup> Wisdom as *phronesis* is open to metaphysics (*Sophia*); see Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* vi, 1145a9; to first principles of natural law; see Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I-II, 94, 2; to exemplars, see H. Arendt, *Responsabilità e giudizio*, tr. it. di D. Tarizzo, Einaudi, Torino 2006, p. 111.

<sup>6</sup> Cfr. J. Maritain, *Nove lezioni sulla legge naturale*, a cura di F. Viola, Jaca Book, Milano 1985; A. Campodonico, *L'esperienza integrale. Filosofia dell'uomo, della morale e della religione*, vol. 1, Orthotes, Napoli 2016, pp. 293-309.

<sup>7</sup> Cfr. R. Buchanan - A. Powell, *The Evolution of Moral Progress: A Biocultural Theory*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2018; P. Kitcher, *Moral Progress*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2022.

<sup>8</sup> Cfr. A. de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, III, 7: «When the conditions of society are becoming more equal, and each individual man becomes more like all the rest, more weak and more insignificant, a habit grows up of ceasing to notice the citizens to consider only the people, and of overlooking individuals to think only of their kind. At such times the human mind seeks to embrace a multitude of different objects at once; and it constantly strives to succeed in connecting a variety of consequences with a single cause. The idea of unity so possesses itself of man, and is sought for by him so universally, that if he thinks he has found it, he readily yields

mean levelling out differences. Egalitarianism, while promoting moral progress in terms of horizontal inclusivity, may sometimes risk oversimplification by overlooking inherent differences between individuals. Balancing inclusivism with attention to limits, qualitative differences, exceptions, and moral transformation is fundamental for achieving moral progress.

In the age of egalitarianism, it is noteworthy that there exists an involuntary, daily, and global dialogue among cultures, accompanied by a pervasive sense of uncertainty. This does not mean that all differences disappear; rather, individuals now fight for the recognition of the differences they consider relevant to their identity<sup>9</sup>. However, the human being as such is not fully defined by the new identities. In this sense, there is an inescapable and positive tension between liberalism with its defence of the rights of the individual and democratic egalitarianism with its levelling consequences, at least in some extreme cases. Cultivating and developing alongside the horizontal and inclusivist tension, the vertical one that means attention to limits, to duties and not only to rights, to qualitative differences, to special cases, to moral transformation is fundamental for moral progress. The risk otherwise is non-motivating moralism<sup>10</sup>.

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himself up to repose in that belief. Nor does he content himself with the discovery that nothing is in the world but a creation and a Creator; still embarrassed by this primary division of things, he seeks to expand and to simplify his conception by including God and the universe in one great whole. If there be a philosophical system which teaches that all things material and immaterial, visible and invisible, which the world contains, are only to be considered as the several parts of an immense Being, which alone remains un-changed amidst the continual change and ceaseless transformation of all that constitutes it, we may readily infer that such a system, although it destroy the individuality of man – nay, rather because it destroys that individuality – will have secret charms for men living in democracies. All their habits of thought prepare them to conceive it and predispose them to adopt it. It naturally attracts and fixes their imagination; it fosters the pride, whilst it soothes the indolence, of their minds. Amongst the different systems by whose aid philosophy endeavours to explain the universe, I believe pantheism to be one of those most fitted to seduce the human mind in democratic ages. Against it all who abide in their attachment to the true greatness of man should struggle and combine».

<sup>9</sup> Cfr. Y. Mounk, *The Identity Trap: A Story of Ideas and Power in Our Time*, Penguin, London 2023.

<sup>10</sup> Cfr. C. Taylor, *On Moralism, in Dilemmas and Connections. Selected Essays*, The Belknap Press, Cambridge 2011, pp. 347-366, in particular p. 362: «Hence the great weakness of modern moralism [...] that it sweeps dilemmas under the carpet, particularly the ones involving verticality. That is, it cannot take account of the importance of vertical movement, because it doesn't see the vertical dimension. This would pose one sort of problem if its view of the capacities of human nature were very low. But in fact, modern humanism very often makes an extremely high set of demands of people – a selective one, indeed, but very high in the areas selected. People are thought to be capable of a very strong sense of equality, an absence of discrimination on the basis

Global moral progress appears challenging, particularly in terms of progress in virtuous character. And this is not only because sometimes the exaltation of one virtue can detract from, or greatly diminish another, but also because the virtues require unification and harmonisation among themselves (see such succinct expressions as “What a good person!” or “What a wise person!”). Given the finite nature of the human being, one might think that gaining something in certain areas necessarily results in losing something on other equally important fronts. Even when certain virtues, as courage, once considered essentials, diminish due to an overall improvement in the economic and institutional conditions of a society, this is not necessarily an absolute good thing, not least because certain situations of the past may reappear in new forms and find us unprepared. Moreover, intellectual courage is always necessary. Wisdom is also required to be open to moral progress, continually assimilating new moral acquisitions favoured by factors such as scientific discoveries and the extension of democracy. However, this does not necessarily coincide with the sage’s adherence to all perspectives considered moral acquisitions at a given moment in history. On the other hand, a person who is harmonized with themselves, even if we do not entirely agree with their evaluations, can be more morally appealing than a person who makes many agreeable judgments but is not united around a unified sense of life. Otherwise, we might not be able to learn much that is morally significant, as is often the case, from a non-European individual who, in some respects, belongs to traditional cultures that might be considered at least partly outdated. Similarly, we might glean insights from figures from the past that exceed what we can learn from a contemporary Wasp who is proud of various recently acquired rights. Without a deep-rooted and lived ethics of *Extended Wisdom*, it is more difficult to learn from the past, or rather more difficult to learn tout court.

Technological and economic revolutions have historically had morally ambivalent consequences. While these changes may lead to positive outcomes in the long run, their rapid pace can uproot individuals from communities, create societal divisions, and prompt reactive responses. Navigating these changes requires moral and political mediation, be-

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of gender, race, and so forth, and to be able to eschew violence and violent reactions, and so on. On the other side, they are not seen to be susceptible to a radical change in their motivation. They are thought to be ready as they are, given appropriate training and institutions, to reach a very high standard on the “liberal” requirements».

tween demands for change and the preservation of cultural rootedness. The reactive dimension has always been present in social changes, but it is more present when these changes are faster and occur more frequently, as is the case after the advent of technology. Good morality and politics should mediate between just demands for change, in the name of moral evidence that imposes itself at least initially on some, and communitarian instances of rootedness. These instances also have their reasons rooted in the structure of the human being, in their symbolic needs, and in their constitutive “betweenness” of the past and the future.

To navigate successfully between past (wisdom as memory) and future (wisdom as providence), it is not necessary to make moral progress an idol, but an ideal, a component of flourishing, not a separate goal. This requires a particular and rare form of balance, between progressive radicalism and traditionalism closed to all novelty. It requires wise individuals capable of escaping radicalization, able to relativize when appropriate, endowed with a sense of reality, a true human and philosophical virtue that does not coincide with a cynical realism. They are capable of continuous dialogue with others and with different cultural and political positions. Multiple factors can foster this virtue of moderation. These factors include a religious vision of life that can contemplate not only earthly progress in a horizontal sense, but also an awareness of the role of limits (e.g., in classicism and Christianity, as well as in the insights of modern thinkers such as Montaigne, and Kant). Additionally, a sense of wisdom, balance, measure, and empathy seems to be innate in some people, regardless of their philosophical and religious views. The tendency to overly radicalize oppositions in moral and political spheres often arises from a human deficiency, from a need to find meaning in life when better alternatives are lacking. It can be emphasized that in moral and political matters, mediation or a sense of balance is a virtue not because it is good to be balanced or impartial, but because it signifies attention to human and social reality in its actual complexity. This reality is characterized by an intrinsic polar structure, comprised of oppositions of contrariety rather than contradiction<sup>11</sup>. The human ideal may lie in a life capable of embracing the tension between opposites, remaining faithful to the structure of human and social reality.

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<sup>11</sup> Cfr. R. Guardini, *L'opposizione polare. Saggio per una filosofia del concreto vivente*, Morcelliana, Brescia 2022.

As noted, on the one hand, there are the horizontal, egalitarian, synchronic, inclusivist, ecologist, and animalist tendencies. On the other hand, we have the vertical, qualitative, diachronic tendencies. To gain a comprehensive understanding of humanity, it is essential to consider both aspects. The wise person occupies the intersection of horizontality and verticality, acting as a navigator “between” polarities, while looking ahead. This capacity is also expressed by using a certain type of irony. Only a wise person can successfully balance the horizontal tendency to extend inclusivist attention to everything and everyone, extending rights and care to other living beings, thereby expanding the horizons of morality. Simultaneously, they can navigate the vertical tendency to differentiate on a case-by-case basis, potentially valuing the qualitative dimension, individual and exceptional events, the memory of the past, and the rights of future generations, not just the present, and cultivating a sense of limitation. This attitude represents a middle ground between extremes, akin to Aristotle’s “mesotes” which adjusts to varying situations.

Finally, we may ask ourselves: are there any moral regressions? The ethics of *Extended Wisdom* and virtues is more inclusive than the others because, while recognising moral progress in certain areas, it recognises that sometimes there is no moral progress tout court or sometimes regress. Certain acquired values may be momentarily forgotten and betrayed, but complete oblivion is less likely. Virtues that require freedom, continuous education, and appropriate contexts are more susceptible to regressions. In this sense, one should favour in a pluralist society the existence of a plurality of communities and associations (starting with the family or whatever you want to call it) where people can be educated in moral competence from a very young age. Nothing, in fact, can replace self-commitment, the following of humanly significant exemplars, and direct knowledge of people, maximums belonging to social and cultural spheres other than one’s own<sup>12</sup>. Here wisdom proceeds pragmatically by anticipating the condition of others (“putting oneself in their shoes”), trying to learn from reality, empathising with various personal situations of suffering and

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<sup>12</sup> The most accurate understanding of people comes from *synesis* or moral judgement, a part of *phronesis*. Therefore, the intellectual (one who essentially engages with intellectual work), as such, does not necessarily possess it more than others despite their knowledge of metaethics, scientific discoveries and statistics that can certainly broaden the scope of reason.

joy, confronting oneself with the living memory of the past, finding analogies and differences. Only this confrontation with others “in the flesh” (tending to be with all others or at least through the mediation of others) guarantees solid and not superficial, ideological and flag-waving moral progress. But this moral progress is in fact possible precisely because of *Extended Wisdom* even if *Virtue Ethics* has not much thematised it and taken it for granted. Indeed, how has moral progress matured concerning people-dependent aspects? Through forms of empathy, sharing, processes based on analogical reasoning (such as: if this one has dignity and deserves respect, why not this one too?), ultimately through the application of the *Golden Rule* (« do not do unto others what you would not want done to you » or « do unto others [...] »). The *Golden Rule* is structurally part of a dynamic ethics of *Extended Wisdom* that recognises the constitutive intersubjective dimension of the human being<sup>13</sup>. The only convincing and solid moral progress is based on the practice of this rule, which requires first and foremost true self-love, because it is rooted in the virtuous character of individuals, which develops and strengthens over time.

In summary, the assessment of moral progress is based on an ideal of human flourishing or meaningfulness in people’s lives, that requires the exercise of freedom of choice. However, it’s crucial to note that moral progress isn’t solely determined by freedom of choice, as reducing it to this aspect risks descending into nihilism or violence. Freedom of choice, the ability of freely shape one’s own life, which is rightly perceived today as fundamental and inalienable, must be accompanied by morally and humanly good ends. Hence, the maturation of *Extended Wisdom*, which already has a normative dimension. Different ideals of human flourishing may exist, but not all implementations of freedom necessarily uphold human dignity or are inherently good. This ideal of flourishing then presupposes a certain anthropology, a certain conception of the I-other relationship. Moral progress cannot be isolated from human progress, from issues such as the very subsistence of the human species, health, the communication of life, education, and the cultivation of rationality in its various dimensions, especially those concerning the ultimate meaning of existence.

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<sup>13</sup> Cfr. C. Vigna, *Universalità umana, riconoscimento, reciprocità*, in *Universalismo ed etica pubblica*, ed. F. Botturi - F. Totaro, Vita e Pensiero, Milano 2006, pp. 14-15.

*Extended Wisdom* in fact nourishes and sustains the acquisitions of moral progress (as some rights which may have different origins), fostering attention to novelties and sifting them, evaluating them as such in their peculiar dignity, assimilating them with elasticity, integrating them into the unity of the person. It puts them in context, carefully distinguishing between different cases, adapting them with finesse to various situations, motivating defenders, and avoiding simplifications, rigidity, and the Manichaeism that some meta-ethical positions (such as ethics of rights, duties, or utilitarianism), if considered exclusively, could more easily favour. *Extended Wisdom* draws upon the living memory of the past, fostering hope for the future while remaining attentive to the present. It enables the filling of gaps in character and the addressing of moral and political biases. Technological advancement, with its inherent ambivalence, along with moral progress itself, can, when only focused on particular, at times excessively absolutized domains, reveal shortcomings in both individual and societal realms, as well as in the cultural fabric of a given historical epoch. Fundamentally, moral advancement necessitates a comprehensive examination of the well-being of individuals within the broader social and cultural framework of society. *Phronesis* as *Extended Wisdom* also has a political dimension.

Finally, the theme of human flourishing encourages a balanced approach, combining personal growth with a genuine interest in the well-being of others. Overemphasis on hope and utopia without practical indications and experiential guidance, may be counterproductive. The *Golden Rule*, rooted in right self-love, remains central to moral progress and is an integral part of *Extended Wisdom*.

Progress in wisdom requires strengthening certain character traits, striving for the unification of virtues, possessing a capacity for creativity and elasticity in the face of circumstances, and having an awareness of the possible limits and one-sidedness inherent in any progress, including moral progress, if confined to certain circumscribed areas. In addition, wisdom education is made possible by individual and community exemplars and is fostered by political and institutional conditions. The fact that *Extended Wisdom* can mature in certain areas through communication via education, through institutions or even epigenetic transmission to future generations can certainly lead to progress in moral character. Although as noted, it is problematic to speak of an overall development of virtues or wisdom in all spheres. From this perspective, on one hand, accentuating the theme of moral progress without

emphasizing that of *Extended Wisdom* runs the risk of non-motivating moralism and the exaltation of unduly absolutized particulars. On the other hand, *Extended Wisdom* without contemplating moral progress runs the risk of not truly being itself, becoming rigid, and neglecting the constantly evolving historical reality.

## ABSTRACT

*In this essay, my primary aim is to delve into the concept of moral progress, both generally and within the domain of virtues. Additionally, I intend to scrutinize how an ethical framework, which I term Extended Wisdom, is best equipped to address this notion across various boundaries.*

KEYWORDS: Moral Progress; Wisdom; Virtues.