

Achieving Moral Progress Despite Moral Regress

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Abstract: Moral progress and some of the conditions under which groups can make it is the focus of this paper. More specifically, I address a problem arising from the use of pluralistic criteria for determining moral progress. Pluralistic criteria can allow for judgments that moral progress has taken place where there is causally related moral regression. Indeed, an otherwise well-argued pluralistic theory put forward by Michelle Moody-Adams allows for such conflicting judgments. I argue, however, that the way in which Moody-Adams handles these conflicts can be made less counterintuitive. Ultimately, I limit the types of moral progress that arise in instances of value conflict. To demonstrate the attractiveness of my revision, I apply it to the content of a symposium on moral progress built around a John Lachs essay.

I. Introduction

This paper's general focus is on the idea of moral progress and some of the conditions under which groups can make it.¹ My specific concern is to address a problem arising from the use of pluralistic criteria for determining moral progress, because such criteria allow for judgments that moral progress has taken place where there is causally related moral regression. Any reasonable theory of moral progress, it will be argued, should have something constructive to say about handling these conflicts.

I begin with a few prefatory remarks regarding the idea of moral progress generally. Indeed, I first want to suggest what judgments of moral progress can amount to, and preliminarily considering the contemporary United States' moral progress can aid with this. Thus, consider how someone might argue that the contemporary U.S. frequently stands out as a morally advanced nation. Justifying such a claim could involve identifying hallmarks of the United States' moral progress, say, its embrace of democracy, its respect for human rights, and its tolerance of

religious pluralism. Such indicators of moral progress, though, seem to depend on more basic criteria for moral progress, since these aforementioned hallmarks are seemingly motivated by certain moral values, for example, alleviation of suffering and respect for autonomy/rights.

Notice that once necessary and sufficient conditions for measuring moral progress are identified, these criteria may be useful in providing answers to questions of moral progress across time or between societies. This is because the basic question regarding moral progress, "What is it for a society to make moral progress?" allows for, as Ruth Macklin has pointed out, epistemic restatements that are of cross-temporal and cross-cultural kinds.² The cross-temporal restatement is: "How do we justify cross-temporal judgments of the form: 'Nation Φ at time T1 is more morally progressed than nation Φ at time T2?'" For instance, people are inclined to make claims like: "The contemporary U.S. is more morally progressed (on balance) than it was in the year 1800," this latter year having seen the repugnant institution of slavery still in existence in the North and strongly entrenched in the South.

Whatever criteria one employs in settling cross-temporal claims of moral progress might help answer the cross-cultural reformulation of the moral progress question, namely, "How do we justify judgments that 'Group Φ has progressed morally further than Group Ψ ?'" That is, a person may feel justified in making a claim like, "The U.S. today exhibits a higher degree of moral progress than does the closed society of North Korea." Is this last claim of moral progress warranted, for example, when it is pointed out that the present-day U.S. has a better record of *respecting the rights* of its citizens than does N. Korea (e.g., respecting the general public's right to free expression)? Or is it that people *suffer less* in America than they do currently in N. Korea? Perhaps, as the weight of these examples seems to suggest, it may be that both *rights* and *suffering* are important considerations when it comes to measuring instances of moral progress. Appropriate criteria for moral progress, then, might be *pluralistic*.

This paper's contribution to answering when a society can reasonably lay claim to moral progress centers on the use of pluralistic criteria for measuring moral progress. It uses as a springboard a 2001 debate that focuses on whether humankind has progressed, morally, over history. The first essay found in this debate is written by John Lachs, and therein he argues that humans have in fact made moral progress over time, with such progress being largely due, he thinks, to those activities characteristic of first-world nations like the United States. Lachs's argument, however, is followed by four authors arguing in response that Lachs's conclusion is unsound. Analysis of the Lachs debate shows that some philosophers are wary of insisting that a single value criterion is what is necessary to support claims of moral progress. Instead, pluralistic criteria seemingly prove more attractive.

But are pluralistic criteria for moral progress reasonable? One philosopher who suggests that pluralistic criteria are reasonable is Michelle Moody-Adams. In a written piece separate from the Lachs debate, she expounds and defends a pluralistic theory of moral progress. Some might contend, however, that Moody-Adams's theory is too anemic to face a problem plaguing pluralistic theories generally. This problem centers upon the idea that privileging a number of values—where an increase in activity with respect to any single value represents moral progress—allows for greater conflict than monistic theories will encounter. Of specific concern is the reality that the promotion of one value may come at an unreasonable expense of another; thus, pluralistic theories can yield judgments that moral progress has taken place where there is sometimes an attending moral regress. Any adequate theory of moral progress should have something constructive to say about handling these conflicts.

Although Moody-Adams's theory negotiates such conflict by specifying separate value domains for moral progress (i.e., she says moral progress can take place with respect to one value, where stasis or regress occurs in another), her strategy appears counterintuitive—it assigns the positive label of 'morally progressive' to the proliferation of one value whose growth is *causally related* to the reduction of a different, yet similarly enfranchised value. The ultimate objective of this paper is to argue that Moody-Adams's pluralistic theory can be made less counterintuitive on this point.

II. The Lachs Debate Over Moral Progress

John Lachs's essay argues that humans today are better morally, on balance, than those who have lived in previous generations.³ And what he means by humans being "better" is that we contemporary humans "not only . . . do good things more often, but also that we are, on the whole, morally more admirable people."⁴ Lachs backs up what can be labeled here a 'cross-temporal judgment of moral progress' by citing a relationship between the moral progress in question and the proliferation of commerce that has taken place globally. In essence, he maintains that there is a strong connection between material advancement and moral progress. Affluence, he thinks, increases virtue.⁵

Lachs's argument for this relationship between affluence and virtue proceeds as follows. Virtuous behavior, he says, occurs more frequently in the absence of suffering; but suffering is itself lessened when there is greater material gain; thus, greater material gain fosters greater virtue.⁶ Moreover, Lachs thinks humans have, on balance, achieved greater material gain. Indeed, we humans do things now that he surmises "prior generations could hardly imagine the gods performing:" we communicate at any time of the day or night, we control the temperatures of our dwellings, and we grow food in inhospitable climates.⁷ Lachs observes that

the material security that this affluence provides is making virtues like generosity, courage, and magnanimity flow more readily; consequently, humans have made moral progress because of their becoming more virtuous in light of their wealth.⁸ Furthermore, he suggests that increases in well-being and decreases in suffering are also of intrinsic moral value, and therefore, they too should figure in our assessments of moral progress.⁹ Again, because the world is wealthier today than it has been previously, the well-being that this prosperity fosters supports, Lachs thinks, an additional positive claim regarding moral progress.

As was indicated, though, Lachs's arguments do not convince his interlocutors. In one reply, Cynthia Willet claims that Lachs's thesis ignores just how the so-called 'virtuous' first-world members of the middle-class acquire their wealth.¹⁰ She observes that certain continents plunder other continents, and this neocolonialism fosters the aggrandizement of goods at the expense of the impoverished, thus contributing to their living "lives of despair and degradation." The materially prosperous, then, far from being paragons of virtue, are morally culpable precisely because of how they derive their wealth. Willet further maintains that Lachs is incorrect in claiming that suffering is not the norm. Most persons in this world are not amongst the prosperous middle-class; they are the aforementioned impoverished who are poorly paid and whose lives could be made much better by those Lachs deems moral.¹¹ She thus concludes that Lachs's notion that this is a world teeming with virtue and well-being is simply false.

Dennis J. Schmidt responds to Lachs's essay by taking issue with the thought that material prosperity entails moral growth.¹² The former argues that the moral life of a person is centered on the value of freedom, and material prosperity does not invariably lead to more freedom; the kind of freedom that Schmidt hopes for is Nietzschean in flavor, where going beyond the calculus of good and evil is essential.¹³ Thus, in assessing moral progress, individuals, on Schmidt's account, ought not to be tied to conventional ideas of right and wrong; rather, they should become persons who set standards for themselves, measuring their progress relative to whether "the possibilities of freedom have been magnified." So, while Lachs is cheering on growth in both leisure and convenience, Schmidt warns that Lachs seems to confuse these lesser things with the true expansion of freedom.¹⁴ Moreover, Schmidt wants to call into question the notion that morality only concerns humans. Nature and animal life, he thinks, also shape problems of morality, and this is something Lachs seems *not* to recognize.

Like Schmidt, Andrew Light disputes Lachs by suggesting that the scope of morality can and should be broadened to encompass non-humans, but Light also thinks it appropriate to extend moral consideration to future generations of humans as well.¹⁵ This expanded moral scope, Light urges, implies that many of the technologies Lachs touts as responsible for increases in material prosperity (and thus, on his account, responsible for increases in virtue) can be indicted as harmful,

precisely because so many people use them. This will be true whenever such broad use creates negative externalities that more than cancel out the immediate value for individual users (e.g., those users belonging to the middle-class).¹⁶

Finally, Russian philosopher Nikita Pokrovsky argues that the economic growth in his homeland has not led to moral progress through increased virtue.¹⁷ Pokrovsky observes that the very thing that Lachs touts as the engine of moral progress has caused the Russian people to merely “functionally interact” with each other and has left a vacuum where shared values and purposes used to dwell. Pokrovsky explains this last claim, writing: “No one [in Russia] wants a union of almost any kind with anyone else. Most interactions are limited to short-term, direct, and narrowly oriented contacts very often associated with either hidden or even open instrumental orientation.”¹⁸ Thus, Pokrovsky implies that those who have been fortunate enough to experience increases in wealth are not leading lives that Lachs would call ‘virtuous.’ Pokrovsky thus calls into question the causal relationship between material advancement and a concomitant moral progress through increased virtue.¹⁹

It is interesting to observe from this debate that neither Lachs nor his critics flat-out endorses a single value criterion for measuring moral progress; the latter either argue that the values Lachs identifies have not been adequately realized and thus moral progress has not occurred, or that the realization of those values has come at an unreasonable cost to other important values Lachs neglects to mention (i.e., there has been attending moral regress to go along with the supposed moral progress). Thus, the participants in this debate either endorse or presuppose pluralistic criteria for moral progress.

But is a pluralistic take on moral progress reasonable? This question arises fairly quickly, insofar as it is clear that favoring a number of values—where an increase in activity with respect to any single one represents moral progress—allows for greater conflict than a monistic theory. Promotion of one value, that is, may come at an expense of another, and thus pluralistic theories can produce judgments that moral progress has occurred where there is sometimes a simultaneous judgment that moral regress has also occurred. Absent a system of weighting the various values—a system that will surely be charged with arbitrariness—it appears that one is stuck with the reality of conflicting judgments.

Perhaps Pokrovsky’s Russia is a good example of a society that, upon analysis, yields conflicting judgments regarding moral progress, given pluralistic criteria. If Pokrovsky’s assessment of Russia is correct, then capitalism (or the perverted form Pokrovsky identifies as having taken root)²⁰ has brought more goods and services to some in post-Soviet Russia, contributing to increases in material well-being. But such reforms may also have led to persons treating each other with greater disrespect; individuals, that is, are seeing one another increasingly as mere means, rather than as ends also. If, however, the set of values for determining moral progress includes

both the promotion of well-being and the flourishing of virtues, as John Lachs would have it, then the supposed capitalistic reforms largely characterizing post-Soviet Russia are to be judged both as morally progressive and as morally regressive. That is to say, Lachs's pluralistic criteria allow for judgments that both moral progress and moral regress can result from the same set of reforms. Yet, doesn't allowing inconsistent judgments like these reflect poorly on pluralistic criteria generally?

III. Moody-Adams's Theory of Moral Progress

An author who argues for the reasonableness of pluralistic criteria for moral progress, even in light of this inconsistency problem, is Michelle Moody-Adams. Her article, "The Idea of Moral Progress," represents the sketching out of a pluralistic theory of moral progress coupled with a defense of its reasonableness. She suggests that moral progress can take two forms:

- (1) There can be moral progress in *belief*—this involves an intellectual progress, the manifestation of which is a deepened understanding of an existing moral concept.
- (2) There can be moral progress in *practice*—this involves taking a deepened understanding of a moral concept and effecting progressive change in behavior or social institutions.²¹

The moral concepts doing the work in these types of moral progress are, for her, fundamental (i.e., they are moral concepts that are basic to all peoples at all times). She identifies the moral concepts of righteousness, justice, and compassion as being amongst those moral ideas that she thinks to be surely basic.²² Thus, it is when humans examine their behavior and institutions to see if they reflect a concern for basic concepts like righteousness, justice, and compassion that they may deepen their understanding and effect positive change; again, moral progress occurs either when this deeper understanding of fundamental values is had or when that understanding effects greater realization of those values.

Moody-Adams is herself reluctant to identify a "destination" toward which all morally progressive beliefs and practices must head. This reluctance is due to her conviction that moral concepts, due to their complexity, have an indefinite "semantic depth."²³ Thus, Moody-Adams subscribes to a notion of moral progress that connotes a progressive building upon of older moral concepts, whose meanings, implications, and ramifications have exceeded our grasp and implementation. So, for example, the moral philosopher interested in moral progress cannot, according to Moody-Adams, identify the end-all, be-all concept of 'justice' and subsequently, on the basis of that identification, point society in the right direction by advocating certain changes. Rather, the moral philosopher will probe the semantic depth of the concept of justice and upon finding some new consistency,

advocate social change. The moral philosopher does this knowing that some new understanding or realization of justice may be found in the future that expands the concept even further.

It is also because of the indefinite semantic depth of basic moral concepts, writes Moody-Adams, that one ought not to expect morally progressive notions to be consistent with some one moral theory.²⁴ I take this point to mean, for example, that the implications of some basic concept like justice could, in some circumstances, be consequentialist whereas in others they could be deontological (even though negative consequences might at times ensue when we act deontologically). So, we can suppose that the concept of justice may require an individual to possess morally good intentions in some circumstance where those intentions have nothing to do with bringing about good consequences. Alternatively, we can imagine that another aspect of justice may require the provision of goods in a certain circumstance, and thus what is important here are consequences and nothing more. After acting we may find that even further exploration of the semantic depth of justice may yield other judgments that are in agreement with aspects of either consequentialism or deontology, or perhaps neither. The upshot here is that any enrichment of a basic value that takes the form of either a new belief, or actions taken on behalf of that new belief, can provide for moral progress without being consistent with some one moral theory.

Now, it is also possible, thinks Moody-Adams, that because moral progress takes place in "relatively circumscribed domains of concern," that you can have moral progress in one domain with accompanying moral regress in a "neighboring" one.²⁵ For example, moral progress that consists of being more compassionate to some persons but which comes at the expense of coercing others could cause a regress in the domain of justice. Such incompatibility seems inevitable to her, given the plurality of values embraced and the tendency for those values to recommend, at times, conflicting courses of action. According to Moody-Adams, though, the number of basic values is fixed, and so conflict is limited to the actualization of a finite set of values.

Moody-Adams's explanation of how a pluralistic theory of moral progress can reasonably be conceived seems, for the most part, attractive: it allows for moral progress in both idea and action; it spells out the necessary and sufficient conditions for such progress; and the values at work in these conditions largely map onto the intuitively appealing values discussed by major moral theories (i.e., compassion hearkens to utility/well being, righteousness to virtue, and justice to autonomy/rights). Indeed, it is also noteworthy that the moral concepts, identified by her as "basic" and as having "indefinite semantic depth," accommodate quite well most of the values discussed in the Lachs debate.

Notice too that Moody-Adams's point regarding moral progress taking place in "relatively circumscribed domains of concern" potentially helps someone like

John Lachs answer several of his critics. For example, even if Lachs concedes that the moral progress he argues for (i.e., that represented by the proliferation of well-being and virtue) came at the expense of other important values (e.g., Schmidt's Nietzschean freedom), he can still avail himself of the notion that there *really is* moral progress with respect to those domains, despite the regress elsewhere. That is, embracing Moody-Adams's conceptual separation of moral domains allows him to acknowledge moral progress in one domain while recognizing moral regress in another.

Would Lachs, however, really benefit from using Moody-Adams's theory like this? Separating moral progress into different domains, as rigidly as she does, allows for positively assessing some value's advancement when this progression is causally related to the devaluation of another. This causal connection can make things awkward, I think, as the reality of attending moral regresses can dampen the positive connotation one would expect from a judgment of moral progress. The criticism here is that the moral domains carved out by basic values aren't so "circumscribed" that regardless of what happens outside some domain Φ , progress with respect to domain Φ is able to be *morally evaluated* simply in terms of those things narrowly consistent with Φ . This is because presumably there is some shared conceptual or emotive element that qualifies each basic value as a *moral* one rather than as something belonging to a different conceptual sphere.

That is to say, whatever this metaethical element is that underwrites each value as moral, it is also likely to be the cause of apprehension in attributing progress in morality where that progress is caused by a belief or practice that also causes regress in morality, unless, of course, this conceptual or emotive element also entails a system of weighting its privileged values, such that increases in so many units of one value clearly outweigh the decreases in so many units of another. Yet, any proposed system of weighting endorsed by this metaethical element is sure to be charged with arbitrariness. Again, without such a system it is permissible for groups to bring about progress in one domain of morality while causing deficiencies, even gross deficiencies, in other moral domains, all the while doing so, and doing so sincerely, in the name of moral progress.

I want to suggest that Moody-Adams's theory, with some modifications, can be made less counterintuitive on this issue of judging moral progress when there is an attendant regress. In order to show this, I look to the ideas of another scholar, Patricia Marino. Certain themes found in her work, centering on the relationship between moral dilemmas and moral progress, are of great help.

IV. Patricia Marino On Moral Dilemmas

Patricia Marino has argued that a residue account of moral dilemmas helps us make sense of moral progress. Utilizing Ruth Marcus's work on moral dilemmas, Marino

explains that such dilemmas come about as a result of conflicting moral obligations. A moral dilemma arises when "I ought to perform act A, and I ought to perform act B, and I cannot perform both A and B."²⁶ When either act, then, is embraced to the exclusion of the other, there is a "moral remainder" or "moral residue" left by the unfulfilled obligation. Marino argues that when the moral agent or the society in which she lives recognizes the moral importance of the residue and tries to minimize future instances of it, moral progress occurs.²⁷

Marino's specific discussion of the relationship between the minimization of dilemmas and moral progress mentions nothing about pluralistic criteria for moral progress, but some of the surrounding discussion potentially has implications for such criteria. For example, consider her response to the objection that moral dilemmas may require us to judge rather harshly those who do the best they can morally. In responding to this objection, Marino invokes the work of yet another scholar, Patricia Greenspan. Being stuck with the moral residue of a dilemma, Marino urges, does not make an agent as guilty as someone who is willfully negligent; Greenspan's "perspectival approach to emotion," she thinks, is useful in showing this.

Claiming that there is an evaluative element to our emotions, Greenspan contends we can judge the appropriateness of a given emotion by contextualizing it with appropriate background information. We do this so as to find out if our emotions are appropriate or not, whether they "fit" the world in a suitable way. In dealing with moral dilemmas, Greenspan herself claims that these give rise to "appropriate moral guilt without full moral responsibility."²⁸ That is, a person can feel appropriate moral guilt that he has not done his full moral duty, even though circumstances that made fulfilling that duty impossible render him not morally responsible for his moral shortcoming. Applying Greenspan's ideas, Marino writes the following regarding the actions of an ideal moral agent:

An agent who has suffered a dilemma will suffer a moral taint, an objective guilt, since there really was a moral law that he transgressed; the agent's reaction, then, is to redescribe the events, both to himself and to his community, to try to highlight the particular aspects of the evidence that show that he made the best choice he could have under the circumstances. This redescription might convince us, and we might conclude that there is no justifiable reason to consider this person blameworthy, that is, that it is not appropriate to blame him, or to feel anger.²⁹

Although the moral agent, then, can assuage self-directed and other-directed criticisms of his dilemma-inspired behavior, he still recognizes the fact that he has fallen short of the appropriate moral ideal. And it is this recognition, Marino explains, that can cause him to arrange his future so that the chances of encountering similar dilemmas are minimized. Again, Marino further contends that it is this change in the sense of one's obligations over time engendered by past experiences with dilemmas that gives rise to the idea that one has improved morally, that one has made moral progress.³⁰ Moreover, if the scale of the needed changes is large

enough (pointing, perhaps, to collective responsibility for the dilemma in the first place), one's society may pick up the mantle of institutional change to ensure the minimization of these dilemmas.³¹

I want to highlight Marino's point that a person's status as moral need not invariably track her having acted in an ideal moral manner. A person, that is, can do the best she can, given the circumstances, and still have acted morally enough to be blameless; *doing one's full moral duty* and *being a moral person* come apart in relevant circumstances. Again, Marino's claim is that it is possible for a moral agent in choosing one horn of a dilemma, a choice that is causally related to an immoral action (i.e., the other horn of the dilemma), to emerge from the choice blameless but morally improved by being motivated to minimize the chances of future dilemmas. I think that this idea can be useful in modifying Moody-Adams's theory.

To demonstrate the usefulness of the above for Moody-Adams, consider the following. Imagine that in pursuing some morally progressive policy, a moral regression also occurs. Further imagine that this is either due to morally non-negligent ignorance that such a regression would result or due to a type of bad luck (i.e., it was known that a regression might accompany the progress, but it was, for good reasons, deemed highly unlikely—unfortunately, though, the improbable happens). I propose that these situations mirror Marino's dilemma case.

As with dilemmas, here too a morally unhappy result obtains in the process of attempting to bring about something moral. And just as with Marino's dilemmas, the mitigating circumstances can affect our assessments of these states of affairs. Specifically, in a case where well-intentioned moral progress occurs at the expense of unintentional moral regress, the group responsible appears morally blameless. Indeed, just as in Marino's case, the moral agent has done as well as the circumstances allowed. A conclusion that can be reached from all this is that some semblance of a moral progress judgment should be preserved in the face of such blamelessness.

However, even if blamelessness is not sufficient to preserve the moral progress judgment—because talk of expectations, intentions, and sincere efforts does not reflect, say, a robust enough concern for consequences—then I would add that an inadvertent type of moral progress is also possible in these situations, a type different from what was intended. I have in mind here a kind of moral progress represented by *the gaining of new moral knowledge*, knowledge of how particular ways of bringing about moral progress lead to moral regress. For example, in the scenario where a group is hitherto ignorant of their actions leading to moral regress, here the group gains a new awareness that the policies they thought were uniquely morally progressive have unintended consequences. New knowledge arises similarly in the case where a group thought a regression was possible but improbable, if after acting they come to realize either that their assessments of the odds were flawed and/or become more aware of the causal web linking their efforts to the mixed results.

I call attention to the consequential value of this new knowledge, because it has the potential for encouraging revised practices that minimize the likelihood of the conflicts that result in moral residues. The new knowledge that I am arguing is morally progressive can be labeled, and here I borrow from Moody-Adams, 'moral progress in belief.' This new knowledge adds to the semantic depths of those values involved in the conflict, since it becomes clearer which practices and policies are involved in either the likely promotion or likely hindrance of each value.

These unexpected or inadvertent instances of moral progress are analogous to a type of scientific progress, I think. Certain kinds of failures in scientific experiments (e.g., demonstrating a hypothesis to be false, when the expectations were otherwise) are often useful in adding to the body of scientific knowledge. Indeed, perhaps the best analogy derivable from scientific experimentation, given the details of what I am here labeling 'inadvertent moral progress,' is where a single scientific experiment confirms part of a hypothesis but disconfirms another part. Although such mixed results may frustrate, the scientific community still benefits in the form of revised understandings and modification of practices—scientific progress, that is, is still made. The epistemic parallel is that from unwanted circumstances resulting from either ignorance of causal change or from misfortune, one can often learn valuable lessons regarding what went wrong.

V. Integrating the Ideas of Marino and Moody-Adams

It is time to start meshing these Marino-inspired observations with Moody-Adams's notion of moral progress. First, as was suggested previously, it seems wise to jettison Moody-Adams's idea that moral progress is present *whenever* the promotion of one value comes via the expense of a different value. Recall that the justification for getting rid of this universal claim centers on how the causally implicated moral regress can strip the positive connotation of the moral progress judgment. Instead, I suggest limiting regress-causing instances of moral progress to those cases where the intention of some new policy is to bring about progress in one value without regress in another, but where non-negligent ignorance or bad-luck brings the regress anyway.

As with Marino's dilemma cases, mitigating circumstances can affect our assessments of moral situations, and in instances where there is moral progress with an attending regress, it is possible to acknowledge that the group responsible for both the progress and the regress is blameless due to mitigating circumstances, while acknowledging that their actions were flawed. I do not think Moody-Adams, given her theory, would object to the blamelessness of such a group. Recall that amongst her fundamental values is a concern for both righteousness and justice. Thus, she should be sympathetic to the idea that persons of good character sometimes make well-intentioned mistakes and, consequently, ought not to be thought of as blameworthy in the same way as irresponsible or pernicious acting persons.³²

As for the new moral knowledge emerging from instances of what I have dubbed 'inadvertent moral progress,' this knowledge should represent, in Moody Adams's terms, moral progress in belief. That is, this knowledge adds to the semantic depth of those conflicting moral domains involved, because it becomes known how certain arrangements of circumstances promote and hinder conflicts among the relevant values. Of course, this knowledge only came about because of something negative (i.e., because of the moral regress that came along with the intended moral progress). Yet, the regression was unintended *and* the new knowledge of how the regression came about puts a group into a position to make it less likely that such conflict will be had in the future—it instructs them either on how to undo things or how to avoid making the same mistake again. In a sense, this new knowledge prepares groups for the road to moral improvement. Identifying this type of moral progress in belief, then, puts us in a position to claim that when a group really does make it less likely that there is future value conflict, they make additional moral progress, or borrowing terminology from Moody-Adams once again, they make moral progress "in practice."

VI. Conclusion

In this paper, I committed myself to arguing that Moody-Adams's pluralistic theory can be modified to soften the counterintuitive nature of identifying regress-causing instances of moral progress. I hope I have achieved this goal by limiting regress-causing instances of moral progress to instances where the responsible party's blamelessness diminishes the negative connotation of any attending moral regress; or if blamelessness is not sufficient, limit regress-causing instances of moral progress to when the 'inadvertent' type of moral progress is made, where it is not only the party's blamelessness that changes things, but new moral knowledge is also delivered, knowledge which includes improvement-making possibilities. Indeed, to instill confidence in the efficaciousness of inadvertent moral progress, I conclude by briefly applying this notion to the Lachs debate, demonstrating its potential for enhancing the arguments therein.

Both Lachs and his critics could seize on the idea of inadvertent moral progress to help defend their claims. For example, Lachs might acknowledge that some of his critics are correct in pointing out instances of moral regress in our contemporary world (e.g., regresses in well-being, virtue, and if he were willing, regresses in other values too). However, he can further explain that many of these instances of moral regress largely came about in the course of humanity's well-intentioned pursuit of moral progress. In particular, the criticisms brought by Andrew Light and Dennis Schmidt, those emphasizing the reality of environmental harms, are good candidates for this rejoinder. Lachs, that is, might explain that these environmental harms really were unintended, and that they came about as persons sought, and actu-

ally achieved, morally significant increases in their material well-being. Moreover, when knowledge of these harms was gained, society made a kind of moral progress, namely moral progress in belief. The idea being invoked here is that many groups (e.g., governments) became conscientious as a result of this knowledge (witness, for example, the ratification of the Kyoto Treaty by scores of governments). Lachs, then, could pursue this line of argumentation to try and reduce the poignancy of whatever moral regresses are lobbed at him, attempting to preserve either his claim of net moral progress or, by being more domain specific, limiting talk of moral progress to specific values.

I daresay, however, that Lachs's critics would be more than well-armed with numerous examples of how groups, having made inadvertent moral progress previously, subsequently failed to use their new knowledge so as to avoid frequently making the same mistakes (i.e., they did not become truly conscientious). For it is appropriate that the new knowledge brought by inadvertent moral progress makes groups morally culpable when they fail to act in accordance with that new knowledge in the future (witness, for example, the failure of the United States to ratify the Kyoto Treaty). Thus, some claims of moral progress, where there is causally-related moral regress, cannot reasonably benefit from either claims about good intentions and expectations or claims about new knowledge emerging from moral failures.³³

The constructive upshot of adding both unintended, regress-causing instances of moral progress and inadvertent moral progress to an overall theory of moral progress is to provide further distinctions useful to discussants. The hope is that Moody-Adams's theory can benefit by such additions, making her already attractive theory a bit more intuitive. Perhaps the brief application of inadvertent moral progress to the Lachs debate begins demonstrating the promise of discussing these types of moral progress.

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Notes

For providing helpful comments, the author thanks his audience at the 21st International Social Philosophy Conference, Creighton University, Omaha, NE, July 29–31, 2004. Similar thanks are owed to Donald Scherer, Christopher Metivier, John Rowan, and two anonymous referees.

1. Such an investigation is especially timely, because this paper is being written while the United States and its allies, nations that many would identify as evidencing some of the greatest amounts of moral progress, are now at war in what was the ancient region of Mesopotamia, the land where civilization first took root. It is ironic that these morally advanced

nations find themselves in civilization's cradle, solving their problems by means of war—one of the costliest activities, morally, of which civilizations are capable. The ironies associated with this situation, though, are perhaps softened when it becomes clearer whether or not these invading nations really can be labeled morally progressed. Indeed, the conclusions of this paper have implications for assessing such statuses. So, in addition to discussing here what is, I think, an interesting topic otherwise (i.e., the idea of moral progress), the subject matter of this essay is also apropos.

2. Ruth Macklin's identification of the general forms judgments of moral progress often take (i.e., the historical form and the cross-cultural type) can be found in her "Moral Progress," *Ethics* 87 (July, 1977), 370.
3. John Lachs, "Both Better Off and Better: Moral Progress amid Continuing Carnage," *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 15 (2001), 173–183.
4. *Ibid.*, 182.
5. *Ibid.*, 181–182.
6. *Ibid.*, 178–179.
7. *Ibid.*, 176
8. *Ibid.*, 178–179.
9. *Ibid.*, 175–176.
10. Cynthia Willet, "The Pyramid That the Slaves Built: A Response to John Lachs," *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 15 (2001), 184–189.
11. *Ibid.*, 185–186.
12. Dennis J. Schmidt, "Scales: Human and Otherwise—on Moral and Material Complexity," *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 15 (2001), 190–194.
13. *Ibid.*, 190–192.
14. *Ibid.*, 193.
15. Andrew Light, "Moral Progress amid Technological Change," *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 15 (2001), 195–200.
16. *Ibid.*, 197.
17. Nikita Pokrovsky, "Material Progress and the New Morality: Russia as Proving Ground," *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 15 (2001), 201–213.
18. *Ibid.*, 202.
19. It ought to be noted that Pokrovsky also thinks Russia is developing a globalized, postmodern character where constant change is its only defining trait. In fact, he maintains that such flux may become the major sociological feature of the entire world's emerging globalized culture. In light of this, he wonders if the appropriate question for Lachs should

be: "Aren't we [i.e., Russia] and the world becoming so new and different that there is no way at all to measure today's morality and notion of moral progress with old measurements and old notions of moral amelioration?" (203).

20. Pokrovsky thinks the system of private property ownership in Russia is more like feudalism than capitalism (211–213).

21. Michelle Moody-Adams, "The Idea of Moral Progress," *Metaphilosophy* 30 (July 1999), 169.

22. *Ibid.*, 181. I take Moody-Adams's notion of "righteousness" to mean something like "personal virtue," because she makes clear that indispensable to the meaning of righteousness is "the ideal of the examined life" (181). As for her justification that humans have a set of values that they hold as basic, which includes righteousness, she writes: if there were not a finite and fixed set of basic values, cross-cultural disagreements would not even be possible; but such disagreements are possible; thus, there is a finite and fixed set of values. Moody-Adams explains that "[e]ven in the most serious cross-cultural moral disagreement there is always substantial agreement about the basic concepts that ought to shape any reflection properly deemed moral." Thus, according to Moody-Adams, new moral insights must themselves fit within existing patterns of belief and judgment if they are intelligible enough to be assimilated (173).

23. *Ibid.*, 169.

24. *Ibid.*

25. *Ibid.*, 169–170.

26. Patricia Marino, "Moral Dilemmas, Collective Responsibility, and Moral Progress," *Philosophical Studies* 104 (2001), 204.

27. *Ibid.*, 217–219. Moody-Adams, in her book, *Fieldwork in Familiar Places: Morality, Culture, & Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1997), also discusses the role of dilemmas in moral reasoning. See especially 125–130.

28. Quoted in Marino, 208.

29. *Ibid.*, 208.

30. *Ibid.*, 217.

31. *Ibid.*, 218.

32. In Moody-Adams's aforementioned book, *Fieldwork in Familiar Places* (see endnote 28), she explicitly acknowledges the possibility of a person rightly taking some moral action that also sacrifices something else of moral import. Similar to Marino's talk of moral residues being left in such situations, Moody-Adams also thinks there to be morally significant regret that moral agents in these situations should feel.

33. It is beyond the scope of this paper to address in any substantive way the issue of "net" moral progress, although my ideas here have implications for such an assessment, especially my stripping the weight of some instances of moral regression (i.e., where that regression is