The Shape of History

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Abstract: Some philosophers believe in improvement: they think that the world is a better place than it used to be, and that future generations will fare even better. Others see decline: they claim that the condition of humanity has deteriorated and will continue to do so. Much ink has also been spilt over what explains these historical patterns. These two disagreements about the shape of history concern largely *descriptive* issues. But there is also a third, purely *normative* question that has been neglected: is it better if a history features a pattern of improvement rather than deterioration, holding other things equal? This paper develops an answer to this normative question and explores some of its implications for matters related to the future of humanity.

1. Introduction

There are three core questions about the shape of history.

The first, 'what is it?', has been the subject of a long-standing debate. Some people believe in improvement: they think that the world is a better place than it used to be and that future generations will fare even better. For example, in his last philosophical publication, *The Conflict of the Faculties*, Immanuel Kant asserts empathically that "the human race has always been in progress toward the better and will continue to be so henceforth" (1798/1979, p. 159). Many other philosophers—including Augustine (c. 422/1998), G. W. F. Hegel (1807/1977), and

Karl Marx (1859/2000)—express similarly optimistic views.[1] And so do many contemporary economists, historians, and commentators. For instance, in a tellingly titled Vox article, 'Proof that life is getting better for humanity, in 5 charts', the economist Max Roser (2016) highlights dramatic improvements with respect to extreme poverty, child mortality, political freedom, basic literacy, and educational attainment that have occurred around the world in the past 200 years.[2]

Still, others believe in decline: they argue that the condition of humanity has deteriorated and will likely continue to do so. Famously, in *Works and Days*, the archaic poet-philosopher Hesiod describes a golden race that used to populate the earth and suggests that, unlike us, "they lived like gods, with carefree heart, remote from toil and misery" (c. 700 BCE/1988, p. 40). Pessimistic perspectives can also be found in the writings of Jean Jacques Rousseau (1755/1997), Arthur Schopenhauer (1844/2010), Friedrich Nietzsche (1833-5/1954), and Max Weber (1921-2/1978), among others. It appears to be the dominant outlook in many societies nowadays, too. According to a fairly recent survey, the share of people who think that the world is getting worse, all things considered, is as high as 81% in France, 70% in Australia, and 65% in the United States (YouGov 2016).

Much ink has also been spilt over a second question, 'what explains the shape of history?', and often by the same people. Augustine, for example, claims that humanity's history is the unfolding of a divinely ordained plan. Others account for historical patterns by appealing to some quality inherent to individuals or collectives, such as the drive towards freedom of thought and action emphasised by Hegel. Another popular idea is that the trajectory of humanity is the product of largely autonomous technological forces. Proponents of this view include Jacques Ellul (1954/1964) and Karl Marx, but also the likes of Marc Andreessen, the

[1] For comparative discussions of these views and their pessimistic counterparts, see Bury (1921), Arendt (1963), Nisbet (1980), and Lange (2011).

[2] For even more charts and a stronger conclusion, see Matthews (2014).

billionaire venture capitalist whose grandiose 'The Techno-Optimist Manifesto' (2023) recently made headlines in the United States, and Ted Kaczynski, known as the Unabomber, who offered to end his multi-year domestic terrorism campaign in exchange for wide circulation of a slightly more pessimistic treatise, 'Industrial Society and Its Future' (1995).[3]

Then there is a third question: does the shape of history matter in itself? In other words, is it better if the history of humanity features one trajectory rather than another, holding other things equal? Unlike the first two questions, which are largely descriptive, this third issue is purely normative, and so squarely within the scope of philosophical inquiry.[4] But surprisingly, compared to the first two questions, this third issue has received little attention in the philosophical literature.[5]

My aim in this paper is to rectify this situation and examine the evaluative significance of the shape of history. While there are many shapes that we could consider, I propose that we start with a basic case, which involves a comparison between improvement and decline. Even this simple comparison, as I will now suggest, quickly gives rise to an ethical puzzle. And reflecting on this puzzle, as I will

[3] This interpretation of Marx is developed by Cohen (1978). For media coverage of Andreessen's manifesto, see Klein (2023), Lashinski (2023), and Levy (2023).

[4] The first two questions are only 'largely' descriptive because any talk of improvement or deterioration inevitably involves some evaluative standard.

[5] For a couple of exceptions, see O'Brien (2022) and Knutzen (2023). O'Brien addresses a superficially similar issue in the context of conservatism. In his 'Mirrored Histories Case', a person has just woken up with memory loss, and the question is whether she has a reason to prefer to be in a course of history in which some non-instrumentally valuable object existed in the past, or in a course of history in which the same object exists now and will continue to exist in the future, holding the duration of existence of that object equal. O'Brien is mainly concerned with whether we have conservative reasons to regret the destruction of only presently existing or also 'independently' existing valuable things, and he does not systematically examine the evaluative significance of improvement or decline. Knutzen, on the other hand, discusses the value of societal progress, but dismisses conservatism as a viable explanation—an issue I will return to later.

explain later, leads to an insight that applies to a wide variety of possible shapes of history.

To get a grip on the puzzle in question, consider two ways in which the condition of humanity could change over time:

> *Improvement*. Our history begins in the depths but has an upward trend: hardship in the early years, mixed fortune in the middle period, followed by flourishing at the end of our time.
>
> *Decline*. Our history begins at the heights but has a downward trend: an early period of flourishing, mixed fortune in the middle period, followed by hardship at the end of our time.

It is important to note a couple of things about these scenarios. First, I have used vague terms like 'hardship' and 'flourishing' to describe Improvement and Decline because the puzzle I am about to articulate arises for a wide range of theories of value. For the sake of concreteness, however, I will assume a pluralistic theory on which the goodness of a state of affairs is determined by aggregate well-being and by impersonal values, such as equality, accumulation of knowledge, existence of beautiful artworks, and biodiversity, among other things.[6] We should therefore think of an upward trend in Improvement as corresponding to an improvement in terms of one or more of these values, and conversely for Decline.

Second, the above description of Improvement and Decline divides the history of humanity into three periods. This is for convenience only. All that matters is that we consider some pattern of improvement and a corresponding pattern of decline. These changes could be from one decade to the next, or from one

[6] This view was popularised by Moore (1903). See also Temkin (2012).

millennium to the next. Because I want to start with a basic case, I am also assuming that the history of humanity has the same length in either case.

With these preliminaries in place, let's now compare the two scenarios. When confronted with a choice between Improvement and Decline, many people have a strong intuition that the former scenario is impersonally better. On that view, if a god were deciding which of these two worlds or divine plans to set in motion, they should opt for Improvement. And those of us without such causal powers should at least hope to discover that our history—or the history of any other civilisation, past or future, terrestrial or extra-terrestrial—is that of improvement rather than decline.[7]

But notice that this intuitive judgment is puzzling. As I have described them, these two scenarios are permutations of each other—in the sense that for every period of flourishing in one course of history, there is exactly one such period in the other, and so on. In fact, we could even imagine that exactly the same people exist in both scenarios and that they have exactly the same levels of well-being, just at different times. This, on another kind of view, strongly suggests that Improvement and Decline are equally good.

In what follows, my goal is to resolve this puzzle by developing a theoretical account that largely vindicates the initial intuition that Improvement is better than Decline and illuminates the evaluative significance of the shape of history in other cases. The discussion is structured as follows. In Section 2, I will argue that we cannot solve the novel puzzle about the shape of history simply by extending one of the popular answers to a structurally similar puzzle about the shape of a life. In Section 3, I will put forward an alternative solution. My central claim is that the shape of history matters just in case it has something to do with transmitting and

[7] As these examples illustrate, the intuition that Improvement is better than Decline does not appear to rely on the common bias towards the future, i.e. the preference for good (or better) things to be in our future and bad (or worse) things to be in our past.

sustaining certain non-instrumentally valuable elements of humanity's culture, such as important traditions, valuable collective endeavours, beautiful works of art, or relations of equality. Notably, this view implies that Improvement is typically better than Decline, but not always so, and this, as I will argue, is the correct verdict. Then, in Sections 4 and 5, I will defend the proposed account from a handful of objections. Finally, in Section 6, I will address the broader theoretical and practical significance of this account, including for matters related to the future of humanity.

2. Three candidate accounts

Although the puzzle about the shape of history has not yet been systematically discussed in the literature, a related puzzle about the significance of a life's shape has received considerable philosophical attention. This latter puzzle runs as follows. Consider two ways in which your life might go:

> *Improving Life*. Your life begins in the depths but has an upward trend: misery in the early years, mixed fortune in midlife, followed by flourishing in older age.
>
> *Deteriorating Life*. Your life begins at the heights but has a downward trend: an early period of flourishing, mixed fortune in midlife, and misery in older age.

These lives are permutations of each other—in the sense that for every period of flourishing in one life, there is exactly one such period in the other, and so on—which, on one kind of view, suggests that they are equally good. Still, many people

share the intuition that the former life would be better for you, and the challenge is to find a compelling account of this intuitive judgment.[8]

This puzzle about the shape of a life is related to the puzzle about the shape of history in two noteworthy ways. First, they are obviously structurally analogous. In one case, we are considering the relationship between the value of any given period and the value of an entire course of history, and in the other, the relationship between how good a person's life is at any given time and how good it is overall. Second, it is common to think about the history of humanity as if it were going through stages characteristic of a single life. For example, in a recent book on existential risk and the future of humanity, Toby Ord (2020) appeals to this sentiment in the following passage:

> Mammalian species typically survive for around one million years before they go extinct; our close relative, Homo erectus, survived for almost two million. If we think of one million years in terms of a single, eighty-year life, then today humanity would be in its adolescence—sixteen years old, just coming into our power; just old enough to get ourselves into serious trouble (p. 21).[9]

Given these two features, it is tempting to think that we can solve the new puzzle about the shape of history simply by extending our best account of the shape of a life. However, in the remainder of this section, I will argue that this approach

[8] In the literature, this intuition is shared by Slote (1983), Bigelow et al. (1990), Velleman (1991), Kamm (1998; 2003), Portmore (2007), Temkin (2012), Kauppinen (2012), Glasgow (2013), Dorsey (2015), and Hirose (2015).

[9] By 'serious trouble', Ord means an existential catastrophe that annihilates humanity or destroys its long-term potential. He estimates the anthropogenic risk of such an event occurring within the next century to be 1/6. For analogies between histories and lives, see also Kavka (1978), MacAskill (2022), and for a critical perspective, Lenman (2002).

won't do. To that end, I will consider three influential accounts of the shape of a life, and argue that even though they each have coherent extensions to the shape of history, none of these extensions are plausible.

The first view I want to discuss is *the Temporal Location Account* proposed by Michael Slote (1983), to whom the contemporary literature on the shape of a life can be traced. He writes:

> When a personal benefit or good occurs may make a difference to how fortunate someone is … quite independently of the effects of such timing in producing other good things and of the greater importance we attach to the distinctive goals and interests of certain life periods. And I believe, in particular, that what happens late in life is naturally and automatically invested with greater significance and weight in determining the goodness of lives (p. 23).

In other words, Slote thinks that pleasant experiences, loving relationships, achievements, and any other prudential goods contribute more to one's well-being when they occur later in life. And this explains why an improving life, in which the best things happen late in life, is better than a deteriorating life.

Proponents of this view could suggest that something similar applies to the shape of history. In particular, they could assert that Improvement is better than Decline because what happens later in history (e.g., that people have happy lives, that relations of equality obtain between members of the moral community, or that people act justly) has greater weight in determining the overall value of a history.

Before we examine the plausibility of this account, let me introduce another popular view: *the Pattern Account*. One of its notable proponents, Frances Kamm (2003), characterises it as follows:

> I believe that where in a life story some event occurs can be important because the pattern of one's life can be important. … So it is better to start off badly in life and head toward improvement than to start off well and head toward decline, even when we hold constant all the goods and bads that are distributed in the two different patterns (p. 222).[10]

On this view, the fact that your life features an improvement is itself a source of well-being—quite independently of the causal relations between the underlying events and any attitudes that you might have towards this trend—and that's why an improving life is better than a deteriorating life.

Now, those attracted to the Pattern Account could likewise say that a pattern of improvement in terms of any value (e.g., aggregate well-being, equality, biodiversity, and aesthetic value) is in itself good simpliciter, and that explains why Improvement is better than Decline.[11]

An undeniable attraction of the Temporal Location Account and the Pattern Account is their simplicity. But I believe that this feature comes at the expense of extensional adequacy. To show that, I will present two case-based objections that apply to both accounts. In each case, we will hold some aspects of the condition of humanity constant, and then compare two variants: one involving improvement and another involving decline. I will suggest that the Temporal Location Account and the Pattern Account prove too much in these cases.

The first objection refers to an imaginative scenario invoked by Johann Frick (2017) in his discussion of our reasons to ensure the survival of humanity:

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[10] This view has also been endorsed by Temkin (2012), Glasgow (2013), and Hirose (2015).
[11] Brentano (1973) endorses this kind of general principle about the value of improvement and calls it 'bonum progressionis'.

> Imagine a world in which each generation of humans dies and vanishes without trace before the next one is born (perhaps, like mayflies, each generation of humans lays eggs before its death, but disappears before their offspring hatched) (p. 362).

Frick considers this scenario in an effort to determine the nature and scope of our reasons to prevent the extinction of humanity. But I believe that it also helps us appreciate something important about the significance of the shape of history.

The specific feature of this 'mayflies' world that I want to focus on is that the fate of each generation is entirely independent of the actions of the other generations. With this in mind, consider two possible histories of this world. In the first variant, members of the first generation have mediocre lives, but each successive generation fares better. In the second variant, it's the opposite: the first generation flourishes, but each next generation does less well. Now, assume that what's responsible for these different fates is, for example, the frequency of extreme weather events beyond human control. In the first variant, earthquakes, tornadoes, volcanic eruptions, and storms are initially quite common but then become less frequent, so people's lives improve. In the second variant, it's the opposite.

What should we think about this pair of cases? The Temporal Location Account and the Pattern Account imply that Improvement is better than Decline in this case. On these views, none of the colourful details presented above matter. The only thing that is important is the temporal location or order of the relevant goods in the course of history.

However, upon reflection, these two courses of history seem to me equally good. When the fate of each generation is completely independent of the actions of other generations, it does not matter that the best things occur later in history or that there is a discernible pattern of improvement. I will refer to this as *the Independence Objection*.

For the second objection, consider a world much more like ours: socially integrated and with a rich array of traditions, languages, works of art, and scientific projects. Suppose, however, that these bonds and engagements remain stable over time, and the only thing that changes is the hedonic aspect of people's lives. In the first course of history, early generations experience only a modest amount of pleasure, but each successive generation enjoys a bit more. To make things concrete, we could perhaps imagine that in the first course of history fruits and vegetables that make up people's diet are initially quite bland, but then become more delicious, so there is a discernible pattern of improvement. In the second course of history the opposite happens, so there is a pattern of deterioration.

Once again, the Temporal Location Account and the Pattern Account imply that *Improvement* is better than *Decline* in this case. But this verdict does not seem right either: it does not matter whether people enjoy what they eat more in (say) the second rather than the first millennium.[12] When the only variation between *Improvement* and *Decline* concerns simple pleasures, these courses of history strike me as equally good. Call this *the Simple Pleasures Objection*.[13]

I draw two lessons from these objections. The first lesson is simply that we should tentatively reject the Temporal Location Account and the Pattern Account, at least as they apply to the shape of history. Even if intuitions reported in this section are not universally shared, I think that they are common enough to prompt

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[12] Note that in this scenario the difference between Improvement and Decline in terms of how much pleasure is experienced in any given period need not be modest. On the contrary, because food is such a central part of our lives and many people can derive tremendous amounts of pleasure from it, the difference can be very substantial indeed.

[13] For an analogous objection to the Temporal Location Account and the Pattern Account as applied to the shape of a life, see Dorsey (2015). In response to this objection, proponents of these views could perhaps claim that only the location or pattern of non-hedonic values has evaluative significance, but this sort of restriction would require a principled justification and these views would still over-generate in variants of the Independence Objection involving non-hedonic goods.

us to look for an alternative. The second lesson is more general. The *original* intuition—that Improvement is better than Decline regardless of what happens in these two courses of history—appears to be incorrect. The *refined* intuition is that Improvement is *typically* better than Decline, and this is what we should ultimately try to explain. This, I think, is similar to how an inquiry into the badness of death tends to proceed. We might start with the intuition that death is always bad for the person who dies. But then we examine a range of cases and come to appreciate that death is only typically bad. In some cases, it can be neutral or even good for the person who dies, for example, if they stand to experience a lot of pain in the future. The task then shifts to explaining why death is bad *when it is*.[14]

Turn now to the third popular view about the significance of a life's shape: *the Narrative Account*. David Velleman (1991) characterises its core as follows:

> Intuitively speaking, the reason why well-being isn't additive is that how a person is faring at a particular moment is a temporally local matter, whereas the welfare value of a period in his life depends on the global features of that period. More specifically, the value of an extended period depends on

[14] For an overview of the literature on the badness of death, see Luper (2021). It's also worth acknowledging that proponents of the Temporal Location Account and the Pattern Account could, in principle, avoid the aforementioned objections by restricting the scope of their accounts. In particular, to avoid the Independence Objection, they could postulate that the temporal location or pattern affect the value of a history only when certain kinds of causal relations obtain between different generations. And to avoid the Simple Pleasures Objection, they could propose that the temporal location or pattern matter only with respect to non-hedonic goods. However, these restrictions seem ad hoc, and it's unlikely that authors such as Slote and Kamm would be willing to accept them anyway, given what they want to say about individual lives. For example, Kamm remarks at one point that "the incline is preferable even when there is no causal relation between the bad and the good, as when one wins the lottery after a bad marriage" (2003, p. 223). Of course, their considered accounts of the shape of a life and the shape of history could prove to be asymmetric, but such an asymmetry would call for an explanation.

> the overall order or structure of events—on what might be called their narrative or dramatic relations (p. 49).

Velleman goes on to give two examples of such narrative relations: learning from one's past mistakes, and turning one's efforts into a success rather than letting them go to waste. He illustrates the importance of the former as follows:

> A life in which one suffers a misfortune and then learns from it may find one equally well-off, at each moment, as a life in which one suffers a misfortune and then reads the encyclopedia. But the costs of the misfortune are merely offset when the value of the latter life is computed; whereas they are somehow cancelled entirely from the accounts of the former (p. 54).

Now, Velleman also suggests that these narrative relations are more often or more abundantly present in improving lives, and that's why an improving life is typically better than a deteriorating life.[15]

This account, too, could be extended to the shape of history. In particular, proponents of the Narrative Account could say that analogous relations—such as learning from the mistakes of earlier generations or turning the efforts of past generations into a success—affect the value of a history, that these relations are more represented in cases of Improvement, and that's why Improvement is typically better than Decline.

It is important to emphasise that the Narrative Account does not imply that Improvement is always better than Decline, and thus avoids proving too much in the two cases discussed above. In particular, there is no difference in terms of

[15] Variants of this view have also been endorsed by McMahan (2002), Portmore (2007), Kauppinen (2015), and Dorsey (2015).

learning from past mistakes or turning past struggles into a success when the fates of successive generations are independent of each other or when the only thing that changes over time is the hedonic aspect of people's lives. However, I believe that the Narrative Account faces three other problems.

The first issue is that, in a range of important cases, the Narrative Account appears to prove too little. That is, in some cases, an improving history strikes us as better than a deteriorating history, even though they do not differ in terms of the relevant narrative relations. Here is one example. Suppose that in *Found Equality*, humanity initially suffers from a high degree of inequality between members of the moral community, but each next generation becomes more equal, and this is attributable entirely to a serendipitous discovery of new resources that happen to benefit the worst-off primarily. By contrast, in *Lost Equality* there is initially a high degree of equality, but these relations are neglected and crumble over time. Let's also assume that these histories are otherwise similar: for example, these changes occur slowly enough that people do not appreciate that the world is getting less or more equal, or perhaps they do, but this realisation does not affect them. Here, narrative relations such as learning from past mistakes and turning past efforts into a success are present to the same extent in (or possibly even entirely absent from) both cases, and yet Found Equality seems better than Lost Equality. I will have more to say about why that is in the next section, but for now, let me just note that there seems to be something tragic or regrettable about the failure to maintain already existing relations of equality. We can refer to this as *the Incompleteness Objection*.

This brings us to the second problem for the Narrative Account. Proponents of this view might try to fend off the Incompleteness Objection by postulating some further narrative relation that can explain why Found Equality is better than Lost Equality. But I think that this approach runs the risk of foregoing the important theoretical virtue of explanatory unity. Notice that even the two narrative relations invoked by Velleman appear to lack a normatively significant

common ground. To be sure, learning from past mistakes and turning struggles into a success do have something in common: for example, they are aggregates of discrete events in a person's life or a course of history. But not all such aggregates of events have evaluative significance. For example, the badness of the pain I experienced when I stubbed my toe yesterday is not cancelled by the fact that I had a delicious kale salad for lunch today. So there must be some further, more specific feature that confers evaluative significance on learning from past mistakes and turning struggles into a success. It is unclear from Velleman's discussion what this feature is. We can call this *the Explanatory Unity Objection*.[16]

Antti Kauppinen (2015), who is attracted to the Narrative Account, partially anticipates this latter charge. In particular, Kauppinen acknowledges that Velleman offers "no systematic theory of what makes a life story prudentially good" (p. 201) and proceeds to fill this gap. On his preferred version of the view, narrative significance has to do with pursuing one's goals: "events that comprise the agent's life gain in intrinsic value for the agent when they contribute to merited success in pursuit of valuable goals" (p. 218). This allows us to draw a line between some of the examples listed earlier: learning from past mistakes and overcoming struggles are among the things that at least tend to play an important role in goal-directed pursuits, whereas stubbing one's toe before lunch doesn't.[17]

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[16] Another possible objection to the Narrative Account as it applies to the shape of history is that, while there is a clear subject of a life, there is no clear subject of a history, and thus it is difficult to see why narrative structure would have evaluative significance in the latter case (O'Brien 2022, p. 160).

[17] See also Dorsey (2015, p. 312-3) who writes that Velleman punts on the question of which narrative relations contribute positively to one's welfare, and offers a suggestion similar to Kauppinen's. One might expect to find a theory of what makes a life story prudentially good in Velleman's later paper 'Narrative Explanation' (2003). But as far as I can tell, Velleman's concern there is with a different issue: what makes a description of events a narrative, what kinds of understanding do narratives convey, and how. He does not mention the evaluative significance of narrative or a life's shape, or even cite 'Well-being and Time' (1991).

This elaboration notwithstanding, the Narrative Account faces a dilemma in the context of the shape of history. To see that, note that even the refined version of the Narrative Account has no answer to the Incompleteness Objection. As noted earlier, Found Equality seems better than Lost Equality even if the improvement witnessed in the former case is not a product of humanity's pursuit of egalitarian goals, but rather a serendipitous discovery of new resources that happen to benefit the worst-off primarily. Indeed, as I have already alluded to, what seems salient about this pair of cases is not so much that equality was *found* in one course of history, but rather that it was *lost* in the other. Thus, to respond to the Incompleteness Objection, proponents of the Narrative Account would have to search for sources of narrative significance unrelated to the pursuit of one's goals. But that risks sacrificing their newfound explanatory unity. In short, the Narrative Account appears to be trapped between the Incompleteness Objection and the Explanatory Unity Objection.

There is also a more fundamental problem with the Narrative Account, one that has to do not with its ability to explain the significance of a history's shape, but rather with the nature of the relevant narrative relations. Take learning from past mistakes. Even if it is plausible that learning something important from *your own* misfortune cancels its badness, as Velleman claims in the passage cited earlier, it is much less plausible that learning something important from *other people's* misfortunes cancels their badness. Think about the centuries of race-based and gender-based discrimination. It is difficult to deny that our generation has learned many valuable lessons from these events about the banality of evil, the lived experience of oppression, the role of science and education in challenging stereotypes, and the power of collective action. And yet, it would be implausible to suggest that this cancels the badness of the misfortunes suffered by our ancestors. So, the Narrative Account might not even apply to entire civilisations or histories in the first place.

To summarise, although the Temporal Location Account, the Pattern Account, and the Narrative Account all have coherent extensions to the shape of history, none of these extensions strike me as plausible. The first two accounts prove too much, whereas the third has unpalatable implications and either proves too little or lacks sufficient explanatory unity. We should search for an alternative.

3. The Conservationist Account

The cases discussed in the previous section lead me to the following conjecture: the shape of history matters just in case it has something to do with transmitting and sustaining certain non-instrumentally valuable elements of humanity's culture, such as relations of equality between members of the moral community, valuable collective endeavours, beautiful works of art, and important traditions. If that's right, we should be able to explain the significance of the shape of history by appealing to a view that emphasises the importance of preserving those sorts of things.[18]

The view that strikes me as especially promising in this regard is *Conservatism about Value*, which holds that we have a distinctive moral reason to conserve certain non-instrumentally valuable things even when a superior replacement is available. For example, we seem to have a moral reason to preserve the marvellous Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco, even if we could build a more impressive structure in its place. By contrast, we have no moral reason to preserve an ordinary $10 bill when it could be replaced with another $10 bill. In the literature, this view has been discussed in contexts such as immigration and cultural change (Scheffler 2007); creation and preservation of artworks and traditions (Cohen 2012); cognitive enhancement (Nebel 2015); and the possibility of human extinction (Frick 2017;

[18] For simplicity, I treat humanity's culture as unified and also set aside the possibility of the existence of other, non-human cultures. But more precisely, my claim is that the shape of history matters just in case it has something to do with transmitting and sustaining certain non-instrumentally valuable elements of *some* culture, human or non-human, unified or differentiated, global or local.

Scheffler 2018). But its relevance for matters related to the shape of history is yet to be appreciated.[19]

Conservatism about Value has several features that are worth briefly explaining at the outset. First, what kinds of things do we have a moral reason to conserve? In my view, there are many non-instrumentally valuable things like that: not only beautiful works of architecture but also unique languages, important traditions, valuable collective endeavours, or relations of equality. That said, not all non-instrumentally valuable things make the list. For example, some works of art (such as a firework display or graffiti) have an ephemeral character, and we should not try to preserve them indefinitely. To determine whether we have a reason to conserve something, we must examine whether doing so would be a fitting response to its value and nature.[20]

Second, conservative reasons are pro tanto reasons. If a new work of art, tradition, or endeavour would be vastly more valuable (and not just slightly so), then we might have overall reason to create or pursue it at the expense of the old one. After all, the prospective value of the potential replacement also confers a reason on us, which might prove stronger.

Third, conservative reasons are moral and agent-neutral reasons. It's not just me who appreciates the beauty of the Golden Gate Bridge that has a reason to prevent its destruction, but everyone—even people who have not seen it and have no plans to do so.

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[19] Some authors suggest that this conservative view, most prominently articulated by Cohen (2012), should, or at least could, be understood in axiological terms. See, for example, Bader (2013) and O'Brien (2022). Here, I adopt the standard deontological formulation.

[20] This view is close to Cohen's (2012) and Frick's (2017). Somewhat different takes on the scope and ground of conservative reasons are offered by Scheffler (2018), who grounds conservative reasons in our valuing attitudes, and Nebel (2022), who grounds them in the concern for the good of the valuable thing itself. Since each of these views could support my account of the shape of history (albeit with slightly different extensions), I won't evaluate their relative merits here.

Fourth, we don't always have a reason to preserve a valuable object exactly in its current condition. Any valuable object is composed of many features, and we only have a reason to preserve those that are value-conferring. For example, we have no reason to preserve a layer of dust or varnish that covers Picasso's *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*. Moreover, even with respect to the value-conferring features, it can sometimes be appropriate to allow them to change to some degree. For instance, languages naturally evolve, and stopping this process would threaten their very essence and survival.[21] So much for the gist of Conservatism about Value. This is the first element of the proposed solution to the puzzle about the shape of history.

The second element is a principle that bridges the gap between what we have moral reasons to do and what makes a state of affairs impersonally valuable (henceforth just 'valuable'). After all, Conservatism about Value is spelled out in deontic terms, and the significance of the shape of history is an axiological issue. This gap may seem large at first, but it disappears once we adopt a less restrictive view about what makes a state of affairs impersonally valuable. For example, Larry Temkin (2012) and Derek Parfit (2016) discuss the view that certain acts are intrinsically bad. As they point out, it seems to make a state of affairs in one respect bad when people deceive each other, act unjustly, or break promises even when these acts have no further bad effects. I share this sentiment, and I want to take it one step further. To my mind, what Temkin and Parfit discuss is only one instance of a broader issue. Just as it is intrinsically bad when we deceive and coerce people, it is also intrinsically bad when we destroy or neglect certain non-instrumentally valuable elements of our culture. Thus, on the proposed view, it's not just that we have a moral reason not to destroy the Golden Gate Bridge; it is also intrinsically bad to do so. I will refer to this as *the Bad Acts Thesis*.

[21] For an insightful discussion of cultural change, to which I will return later in this essay, see Scheffler (2007).

Of course, more would have to be said to establish the truth of each of these views, Conservatism about Value and the Bad Acts Thesis. However, my aim in this paper is not to defend them in isolation, but rather to demonstrate that when combined, they provide the best explanation of the significance of the shape of history.

According to *the Conservationist Account* I propose, Improvement is better than Decline just in case these courses of history differ in terms of whether certain valuable elements of our culture—such as important traditions, unique languages, collective endeavours, relations of equality, or beautiful artworks—have been conserved over time.[22] In cases of Decline, the extent of the failure to conserve these valuable elements of our culture is typically greater than in cases of Improvement, and such failures are intrinsically bad. So, Improvement is typically better than Decline.[23]

This Conservationist Account offers a better explanation of the significance of a history's shape than the candidate accounts discussed in the previous section. To see that, let's first consider how it handles the objections levelled against the Temporal Location Account and the Pattern Account. Take the Independence Objection. In the 'mayflies' world, in which each generation inevitably disappears without trace before the next one is born, no valuable elements of humanity's culture can be transmitted to the next generation anyway. So, there is no

[22] I want to emphasise the agential character of this view. For the shape of history to matter, the continued existence or disappearance of non-instrumentally valuable elements of our culture must be appropriately linked to the actions and attitudes of some agent or agents.

[23] Note that this view is asymmetric. I claim that failing to conserve a valuable thing is intrinsically bad, but I deny that successfully conserving a valuable thing is intrinsically good. The latter claim is not needed to solve the puzzle about the shape of history, and has some implications that are at odds with the spirit of conservatism about value. In particular, if successful conservation were intrinsically good, we would have a moral reason to create some valuable object just so that we could later conserve it. But that does not seem right, just as it does not seem right that one would have a moral reason to make a promise just because they would be later able to keep it (cf. Smith 1997).

conservative difference between these instances of Improvement and Decline, and this aligns with the intuitive judgment that neither of these courses of history are better. Next, recall the Simple Pleasures Objection. There, we looked at a pair of cases in which only the hedonic aspect of people's lives changed over time. Because pleasant experiences are not the kinds of things that we have conservative reasons (or even means) to preserve, the Conservationist Account avoids the implication that Improvement is better than Decline in this case.

Turn now to the problems faced by the Narrative Account, starting with the Incompleteness Objection. Unlike the Narrative Account, which focuses on what's happening in Improvement, the Conservationist Account turns to the features of Decline to explain why Improvement is better than Decline. In particular, in Lost Equality, but not in Found Equality, later generations fail to maintain the non-instrumentally valuable relations of equality between members of the moral community, and that is intrinsically bad. Thus, even if these two courses of history feature equivalently long periods of equality and inequality, and there is no difference in terms of narrative relations such as learning from the mistakes of earlier generations or turning their efforts into success, the Conservationist Account correctly implies that Found Equality is better than Lost Equality, and thus avoids proving too little.[24] Further, the Conservationist Account identifies a single evaluatively significant feature in all relevant comparisons. In particular, Improvement is better than Decline just in case certain non-instrumentally valuable elements of our culture have been conserved to a greater extent in the former course of history than in the latter. And lastly, unlike the Narrative Account, the

[24] Now that the Conservationist Account is in view, it should be easy to see that the comparison between Lost Equality and Found Equality is just one counterexample to the Narrative Account. Others are easy to come by: we just need to substitute equality for some other non-instrumentally valuable element of our culture that is worth preserving irrespectively of anyone's goals.

Conservationist Account does not implausibly imply that lessons learned from other people's misfortunes cancel their badness.

The above considerations lead me to believe that the Conservationist Account offers a better explanation of the significance of the shape of history than the Narrative Account. But it is also worth taking a moment to further clarify the relationship between these accounts. There are a couple of possible misconceptions here. First, one might think that the Conservationist Account is just a part of the Narrative Account, in the sense that failing to conserve is just a further narrative relation, in addition to learning from the mistakes of earlier generations and turning their efforts into a success. That's not correct. We do not need (or want, because of the implausible implications described above) to appeal to the latter two relations to explain our intuitions about the shape of history and its significance. Second, one might also think that the Conservationist Account is just a version of the Narrative Account, in the sense that the former recognises alternative narrative relations as evaluatively significant, or as significant in a different way. This characterisation is admissible, but unhelpful. While both views seek to identify some sequence of events that typically renders Improvement better than Decline, failing to conserve a valuable cultural artefact is not a paradigmatic 'narrative' relation. And, regardless, to insist that the Conservationist Account is just a version of the Narrative Account would be like to insist that, for example, hedonism is just a version of the objective list theory of well-being. As they are typically characterised, hedonism and the objective list theory are motivated by different sets of considerations and have divergent implications, and so they merit to be recognised as genuine alternatives and under separate names.[25] And so do the Conservationist Account and the Narrative Account.

[25] For a recent overview of the literature on hedonism and the objective list theory, see Lin (2022).

4. The allure of improvement

Having presented a positive case for the Conservationist Account, in this and the next section I would like to address a handful of objections that can be raised against this view. While none ultimately succeed, this discussion should enhance our understanding of the commitments and implications of the proposed account.

The first issue that I want to discuss concerns technological revolutions. There were several moments in history when humanity truly made a leap: the Agricultural Revolution around 12,000 years ago, the Industrial Revolution of the 18th and 19th centuries, and the Information Revolution that started in the 1990s. When we reflect on these events, however, it is clear they were occasioned by the destruction or overhaul of many valuable elements of our culture. The Industrial Revolution, for example, transformed virtually every aspect of our society and daily life, ranging from political and economic arrangements to the nature of work and pastime. In virtue of this, it looks like proponents of the Conservationist Account must regard the Industrial Revolution as something that we should regret. But, for many people (Ted Kaczynski excluded), this seems to be a highly welcome episode in the history of humanity. We can refer to this as *the Technological Revolutions Challenge*.

My response to this objection has three components. First, I'd like to emphasise that many elements of the pre-industrial world were not non-instrumentally valuable: for example, widespread illiteracy, pervasive malnutrition, and feudalism. From the conservationist point of view, there is no reason to regret the disappearance of these things. Only some of the many aspects of the transformation brought about by the Industrial Revolution are worthy of regret: for example, the erosion of children's and women's rights in the early industrial years, linguistic standardisation, or destruction of the natural environment.

Second, we must remember that conservative reasons are pro tanto reasons. This means that proponents of the Conservationist Account can judge technological

revolutions as bad in one respect but good overall when the new ways of life are significantly better than the old ones. Indeed, in virtue of alleviating poverty alone, the Industrial Revolution appears to have brought about improvements to the human condition so profound as to trump the destruction of some valuable modes of existence.[26] So, the conservationist critique of the Industrial Revolution does not amount to its rejection.

Finally, I think that on deeper reflection we rarely endorse technological revolutions categorically, even in their grandest instances. Instead, our outlook on events such as the Industrial Revolution is inherently divided. We regret the destruction of some ways of life and welcome the appearance of others, even when the new ways of life are significantly better. The Conservationist Account explains this evaluative ambivalence.

The second challenge latches on to the fact that the Conservationist Account solves the puzzle about the shape of history in an asymmetric way. As we saw in the previous section, this account holds that Improvement is better than Decline just in case there is something bad about Decline: it involves a failure to conserve certain non-instrumentally valuable elements of our culture. But one might think that there must also be something good about Improvement. To make this vivid, we might contrast Improvement with a new scenario, *Plateau*, in which humanity's fortune is mixed at the beginning of history and stays roughly at the same level for the remainder of our time. Now, the objection goes, Improvement seems better than Plateau, and the Conservationist Account fails to explain that. Call this *the Plateau Challenge*.

This objection rests on a common misconception about the content of conservative reasons. Some non-instrumentally valuable things—for example, the

[26] In 1820, an estimated 83.9% of the world population lived in extreme poverty (Bourguignon and Morrison 2002). Nowadays, it's less than 10% (World Bank 2020).

Mona Lisa or the Grand Canyon—call upon us to preserve them in the current condition, as much as possible. In the case of the Grand Canyon, we presumably have a reason to prevent people from turning it into a landfill or motocross park, but we do not have a reason to make it deeper or more sublime. But other non-instrumentally valuable things—including many elements of our culture—call for a different response that is at once more permissive and more involved.

Samuel Scheffler (2007) makes the latter observation in his discussion of the attempts to justify severe immigration restrictions by appealing to the importance of preserving national identity:

> Change is essential to culture and to cultural survival, so that to prevent a culture from changing, if such a thing were possible, would not be to preserve the culture but rather to destroy it. (pp. 107-8)

Scheffler emphasises that culture is a living and breathing thing sustained by its continued interpretation, application, and modification. Accordingly, what we have a reason to do is not to place it in a jar of formaldehyde, but rather to secure the conditions under which people can engage with it in those ways:

> Any culture that survives will have changed over time: it will have assimilated new experiences, absorbed new influences, reaffirmed some prior practices and ideas, modified others, and dispensed altogether with still others. Survival is successful change. A reasonable cultural preservationism strives to achieve such change rather than seeking to preserve the past unaltered. (p. 108)

It's disputable whether culture in general is the appropriate object of conservative concern, but Scheffler's analysis applies equally well to its particular

valuable elements. For example, take the practice of creating and appreciating art. Ensuring that this practice continues into the future involves protecting people's opportunities to engage with and explore both existing and novel artistic forms, techniques, subject matters, as well as contexts of creative expression, as opposed to merely preserving or making more copies of the existing artworks. Likewise, consider the example of the fight against malaria, an intergenerational and international project to eradicate a disease that kills over half a million people every year. The continuation of this valuable collective endeavour necessitates not halting it in its tracks, but rather securing favourable conditions for its further development, such as the pursuit of novel treatment methods, enhancements to healthcare facilities in the affected regions, and initiatives to educate individuals about the available prevention measures.

Crucially, when such efforts to adequately conserve valuable cultural practices and collective endeavours are undertaken, they will typically lead to improvements in the relevant aspects of the condition of humanity. For example, we should expect the efforts to provide opportunities for people to engage with and explore forms of artistic expression to lead to the emergence of new objects of aesthetic value and the expansion of their audience. Likewise, we should presume the efforts to secure the conditions under which the fight against malaria can continue and flourish will reduce the incidence or burden of that disease, or at least lay foundations for future breakthroughs in that domain. Of course, there is no guarantee that these improvements will eventuate, but as the old adage goes, eighty percent of success is just showing up. Conversely, if we witness no improvement in the condition of humanity over many generations, this indicates that certain valuable elements of our culture have not been adequately conserved, and that's why Improvement strikes us as better than Plateau.

In short, Improvement is *typically* better than Plateau not because there is something good about improvement, but rather when and because there is

something bad about its absence in Plateau: namely, the failure to adequately conserve certain non-instrumentally valuable elements of our culture that would otherwise have likely led to improvements to the condition of humanity.

It's worth emphasising, however, that Improvement is not always better than Plateau, for roughly the same reasons that Improvement is not always better than Decline. For example, Improvement is not better than Plateau when the fates of each generation are independent of each other, or when the only thing that changes over time is the hedonic aspect of people's lives. In such cases, and possibly some others, Plateau is not marked by the failure to adequately conserve the non-instrumentally valuable elements of our culture.[27]

5. The tragedy of decline

Another set of challenges to the Conservationist Account concerns the circumstances in which decline is bad, and the extent of its badness.

To get a grip on the first issue, consider that in certain historical cases, societal collapse appears to have been caused by factors beyond human control. Consider the civilisation of Easter Island (Rapa Nui), which, according to some historians, was started around 800 by a small group of Polynesian settlers, reached its peak around 1200, and then declined until at least the 18th century, when the island was first discovered by European explorers (Diamond 2011). Perhaps this society was always doomed to collapse because of the limited resources available on the island and its extreme isolation (the two nearest lands are Chile, 2,300 miles to the east, and the Pitcairn Islands, 1,300 miles to the west). This instance of Decline

[27] In a recent article, Knutzen (2023, p. 4) writes that conservatism about value "ascribes no value to positive cultural change per se" and thus "there may as well be indefinite cultural stasis". While strictly speaking correct, this characterisation is potentially misleading. It is virtually inevitable for humanity to be engaged in a wide range of collective practices and endeavours that, when appropriately conserved, tend to bring about positive cultural change. Only in exceptionally rare circumstances there is nothing amiss about cultural stasis.

seem tragic or impersonally bad, but the Conservationist Account might seem unable to explain this because there was no failure of conservation involved, just bad luck. We can call this *the Bad Luck Challenge*.

I believe that this challenge can be overcome once we appreciate the full nuance of historical cases of civilisational collapse. Although the inhabitants of Easter Island had no control over how much timber and other resources were available on their land and the pace at which these resources renewed, they did have some control over the demand side of the equation. In particular, available historical evidence suggests that what pushed their civilisation beyond the levels of sustainability was the construction of the famous stone statues (moai), which was driven by the competition for status between local tribes. Close to 1,000 statues weighing up to 75 tons each have been discovered on the island, and erecting each required great amounts of timber (for sledges and levers), among other natural resources, as well as effort and time that could have been directed towards other projects. More generally, in this and other well-known cases, it appears that civilisational collapse was at least as much the product of negligence, internal struggles, and lack of foresight, and thus failures of conservation, as it was of factors entirely beyond human control.[28] If that's right, the Conservationist Account does correctly imply that such historical cases of Decline are impersonally bad.[29]

But what about hypothetical cases in which positive and negative changes are attributable *entirely* to bad luck? Doesn't Improvement strike us as better than Decline even in these circumstances? I think it shouldn't. We have already seen a couple of counterexamples in Section 2, when we discussed the Independence Objection and the Simple Pleasures Objection. In both of these contexts, the shape

[28] For an extensive discussion of this issue, see Jared Diamond's tellingly titled book: *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* (2011).

[29] Though perhaps for reasons different from those that originally led us to think that such cases are tragic.

of history depends solely on factors beyond human control, and yet, on reflection, Improvement does not seem better than Decline.[30]

The final issue that I want to address concerns not the circumstances in which decline is bad, but rather how bad it is, if at all. Consider two courses of history, Improvement and Decline+, in which exactly the same people exist, though at different times. Crucially, unlike the previously considered scenarios, Improvement and Decline+ are not permutations of each other. Instead, everyone has more well-being in Decline+. This, on one kind of view, suggests that Decline+ is better than Improvement. However, the Conservationist Account would imply that Decline+ is worse than Improvement if failures of conservation are sufficiently more prevalent in Decline+. To some, this may seem counterintuitive. Call this *the Pareto Improvement Challenge*.

In response, note first that the appeal of this challenge depends on the welfarist assumption that the goodness of a state of affairs is determined solely by aggregate well-being. If we recognise, as I stipulated at the beginning of this essay, that there are also impersonal values—such as equality, accumulation of knowledge, or indeed, conservation—we should be prepared to trade off these values against one another, and the possibility of situations in which one of two states of affairs is overall better despite being Pareto inferior should not surprise us at all.

Notably, while the Pareto Improvement Challenge bears some resemblance to the levelling down objection against telic egalitarianism, there is an important difference.[31] Telic egalitarians hold that equality should be understood in terms of a

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[30] Suppose that you are convinced that Improvement is better than Decline even if the relevant changes are entirely a matter of brute luck. In that case, you still endorse a weaker conservationist thesis that Improvement is better than Decline *if* they differ in terms of the extent to which certain valuable elements of our culture have been conserved, and hold that many of the relevant cases are like that.

[31] For influential discussions of the levelling down objection, see Parfit (1991) and Temkin (1993).

distribution of well-being, and that more equal distributions are more impersonally valuable. As I think about it, what the levelling down objection points out is not just that if you want greater equality, you will sometimes have to forego greater well-being, or that you can make a state of affairs overall better by trading off one value for another. That sort of concern applies to pretty much any pluralistic view. What's special about levelling down is that you are increasing or achieving equality *purely by* reducing someone's well-being, and what's troubling about telic egalitarianism is that it holds that equality that can be secured in this sort of way is valuable.

In the context of the shape of history, an analogous problem applies to the Pattern Account. This account allows for the possibility of creating a pattern of improvement *purely by* making the lives of people belonging to some of the earlier generations worse, and it seems highly counter-intuitive to think that a pattern of improvement secured in this sort of way is valuable. But the Conservationist Account is not vulnerable to the same objection. Like pretty much any pluralist view, it allows trade-offs. In particular, it might sometimes make things overall better to forego greater well-being for the sake of greater conservation. However, because the extent to which valuable cultural artefacts is not a function of well-being, you cannot increase conservation and make a course of history in one way better *purely by* reducing someone's well-being. This, to my mind, is a key difference between the Pareto Improvement Challenge and the levelling down objection.

Still, one might want to know more about how to assess scenarios like Improvement and Decline+, and how to trade off different kinds of value. This, of course, is a notoriously difficult problem that afflicts any pluralistic theory of value, so let me make just a couple of quick observations here.[32] First, it seems plausible that the badness of failing to conserve some non-instrumentally valuable thing X is

[32] For some discussions of this issue, see Chang (2002), Temkin (2012), and Hedden and Munoz (forthcoming).

proportional to the value of X. Thus, to figure out how bad it is to fail to conserve the Golden Gate Bridge, decades-long relations of equality, or one of humanity's prized collective projects, we need first to determine how valuable each of these things is. I cannot hope to do that here, but see, for example, Temkin (1993) for a discussion of the value of equality, and Bradford (2015) for an account of the value of achievement. Second, it seems plausible that if Decline+ were much better than Improvement in terms of well-being and only slightly worse in terms of conservation, then Decline+ would be overall better than Improvement. And conversely, if Decline+ were much worse than Improvement in terms of conservation and only slightly better in terms of well-being, then Decline+ would be overall worse than Improvement.

6. Concluding remarks

We started with the following question: is it better if the history of humanity features a pattern of improvement rather than deterioration? My aim has been to persuade you that the answer is not a simple 'yes' or 'no', but rather 'typically'. According to the Conservationist Account, Improvement is better than Decline just in case these courses of history differ in terms of whether certain valuable elements of our culture have been conserved across generations. In cases of Decline, the extent of the failure to conserve these things is typically greater than in Improvement, and such failures are intrinsically bad. Therefore, Improvement is typically better than Decline.

But there are some exceptions. In some rare cases, the extent of conservation in Improvement and Decline is the same, so these histories are equally good. We saw this when we discussed the Independence Objection and the Simple Pleasures Objection. In other rare cases, the extent of conservation in Improvement is lower than in Decline, so the former course of history is worse. For example, we could imagine that Improvement is a story of minor negligence with respect to conservation and major, entirely serendipitous hedonic improvement, whereas in

Decline a civilisation is exceptionally diligent about conservation but unfortunately experiences a major hedonic deterioration over time. While perhaps surprising at first, upon further reflection, these verdicts seem to be correct.

What about other possible shapes of history? One attractive feature of the Conservationist Account is that it straightforwardly extends beyond the basic comparison of Improvement and Decline. Because this view does not attach any evaluative significance to the pattern of value itself, it can inform our judgments about even the most intricate shapes of history. All we have to do is inspect the events that underlie these trajectories and determine whether they involve failures to conserve the valuable elements of our culture.

One may also wonder whether we could appeal to something like the Conservationist Account to give an explanation of the significance of a life's shape. I think that we could, but that would require a defence of three novel claims: (i) that in addition to cultural artefacts which are valuable simpliciter, we also have a distinctive moral reason to conserve certain prudential goods, such as loving relationships and important personal projects; (ii) that failing to conserve such prudential goods makes one's life worse; and (iii) that failures to conserve loving relationships and important personal projects are more common in declining lives compared to improving lives. Are these three claims true, though? I find each plausible, but the task of defending them is best left for another occasion.

Lastly, the Conservationist Account carries some important lessons concerning the future of humanity. To bring this out, consider:

> *Compound X*. Suppose that we discover an extraordinary resource, Compound X. It can be used to greatly improve the standards of life worldwide and advance our civilisation in many respects. But it will eventually start to run out, and we will not be able to replace it. And when that happens, the condition of humanity will deteriorate.

How should we exploit Compound X and distribute it among different generations? In particular, should we use a lot of it now, reach the heights of our civilisation quickly, and then witness it gradually stagnate as we run out of this resource? Or should we instead save most of it for future generations, gradually phase it in, and aim for steady improvement until the end of our time?

If the shape of history did not matter, then either option would be appropriate, other things being equal. The Conservationist Account, however, suggests that we should do the latter, and I believe it is correct in this regard.

This case strikes me as a helpful metaphor for humanity's current predicament. While no single resource might be quite as powerful and decisive with respect to humanity's fate as Compound X, the totality of the non-renewable resources that we are currently exploiting—fossil fuels, freshwater stores, fertile soils, biodiverse ecosystems, and even things like clean air, relatively low sea levels, and a largely moderate climate—might prove to be. In these circumstances, we should take care to leave enough resources for our descendants, including those in the distant future. Crucially, 'enough' here does not mean just 'enough to survive' or 'enough to have lives worth living'. Instead, it means 'enough to sustain and cultivate the valuable elements of our culture'. This is a significantly higher standard.

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