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Functionalist Conceptions of Moral Progress and the Plurality of Ways of Life

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Abstract
Many prominent conceptions of moral progress implicitly assume that progress must lead to convergence in the moral domain. However, given the actual plurality of ways of life and attendant moral outlooks, there is no reason to assume improvement must lead to uniformity. Moreover, as the entanglement of the Enlightenment discourse of progress with colonialism makes evident, the assumption that progress must lead to convergence can license problematic practical conclusions. Drawing on insights from postcolonialist critique, I argue in favor of functionalist conceptions of moral progress. Functionalist conceptions of moral progress do not assume that progress must lead to convergence. By contrast, they make it possible to understand progress in a pluralistic way. Functionalist conceptions of moral progress thus offer one way to develop a conception of moral progress, which can offer practical guidance, while taking into account one important line of critique of the discourse of progress.

1. Introduction

The notion of moral progress has the potential to play several important roles in practical thought. Conceptions of moral progress can serve as critical tools for assessing ongoing social transformations and can be action-guiding, in the sense that they can tell us what kind

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of change to advocate and strive for. As one of the few philosophers engaging with the topic explicitly, Michele Moody-Adams (2017: 145) further emphasizes the practical importance of belief in the possibility of moral progress:

> Belief in moral progress, properly understood, has a regulative function in the domain of human action. It is a condition of the possibility of morally constructive action for beings like us, with limited powers of understanding, memory and prediction, and who act in a world that frequently frustrates hopes for moral change.

Yet, in spite of these potentials, the notion of moral progress is comparatively underexplored in contemporary practical philosophy. One reason why philosophers might eschew the notion of progress is that in the history of philosophy it is closely tied to a particular discourse of progress that is characteristic of Enlightenment philosophy of history. This discourse of progress has come under attack, among other things, for its entanglement with colonialism. These criticisms are well-founded and bear on how we should understand moral progress. In particular, they cast doubt on the common notion that progress must lead to convergence.

Drawing on insights from postcolonialist critique, I argue in favor of a certain kind of conception of moral progress that derives from so-called "functionalist" accounts of morality. I begin by spelling out what functionalist accounts of morality are and how they provide a criterion to assess particular developments as progressive and regressive respectively. Then, I develop my argument in favor of the resulting conception of moral progress, mainly, by providing a critical discussion of the assumption that progress must lead to convergence and of the practical conclusions it can lead to. I emphasize that functionalist conceptions of moral progress do not assume that progress must lead to convergence and are thus compatible with a pluralistic understanding of the diversity of actual ways of life and their attendant moral outlooks. Finally, I consider three possible objections to the picture of morality that underlies this understanding of moral progress.

2. Functionalist Conceptions of Moral Progress

2.1. Functionalist Accounts of Morality

The idea that something is best understood in terms of the function it serves plays different roles in different areas of philosophy, such as philosophy of mind and philosophy of biology, as well as in other disciplines, such as sociology. "Functionalist" accounts of morality of the sort that I am concerned with draw on a particular understanding of the notion of a function. According to these accounts, morality is a human creation that serves a certain function. Functionalist accounts of morality are thus a kind of "social constructivism". They claim that the moral norms that bind us are ultimately constructed by members of social groups as part of an ongoing attempt to figure out a way to live together. To this general outline of social constructivism, they add the idea that these norms serve a particular function, which explains their validity. Examples of functionalist accounts of morality include the views developed by David B. Wong, J. David Velleman, and Philip Kitcher (Wong 2006; Velleman 2015; Kitcher 2011).[2] While all of them follow the outline described above, they differ with respect to what they take to be the function of morality.[3]

According to Wong's "pluralistic relativism", morality serves two functions: the function of *"interpersonal coordination"*, that is, to organize and promote beneficial social cooperation, and the function of *"intrapersonal coordination"*, that is, to create a psychological order within the individual by providing a way to integrate potentially conflicting inclinations and dispositions (see Wong 2006: 37–41). According to Velleman's relativistic metaethics, the normativity of moral reasons ultimately derives from human beings' need to live

[2] Versions of social constructivism are often criticized for their presumed relativistic consequences. Moreover, Wong's and Velleman's functionalist accounts of morality are put forward as versions of moral relativism (Wong 2006; Velleman 2015). I will address the question of the relation between functionalist accounts of morality and moral relativism in detail in section 4.3.

[3] I adopt the term "functionalist" from Velleman, who points out that his view is in this respect similar to Wong's (see Velleman 2015: 97, n 23). Wong also uses the term to refer to his own view (Wong 2006). Kitcher does not use the term, but identifies as a constructivist and heavily relies on the idea that morality fulfills a function (Kitcher 2011).

together and therefore to be intelligible to one another. In order to be able to interpret one another and render themselves interpretable, they need to more or less converge on shared ways of life, that is, on shared ways of thinking, feeling, and acting. In the context of this view of morality, it is the function of ways of life, which determine the moral reasons a person has, to *facilitate mutual interpretability* (see Velleman 2015: 75–99).[4] Kitcher's "pragmatic naturalism" leads to a kind of view of morality that, as Dale Jamieson (2002: 320) puts it, "sees morality as a human construction grounded in evolutionary history". According to Kitcher, "ethical codes" have been invented some 50,000 years ago by our "pre-ethical", hominid ancestors in order to serve the function of *remedying altruism failure* (see Kitcher 2011: 67–103). This invention marks the beginning of what Kitcher calls "the ethical project", which we are still engaged in today.[5]

A conclusive assessment of functionalist accounts of morality, which would require an analysis of the benefits and costs of such a view compared to rival positions in metaethics, is beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, I will focus on the question how to conceptualize the possibility of moral progress and offer an indirect argument for functionalist accounts of morality based on a consideration of the advantages of the corresponding functionalist conception of moral progress.

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[4] In other work, Velleman argues for a related metaethical outlook, in which intelligibility plays an equally central role (J. David Velleman (2009): *How We Get Along*. Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press).

[5] Functionalist accounts of morality face the question of whether the function they propose picks out *all* and *only* those norms we intuitively take to be morally valid. I will come back to the question, whether they can be expected to pick out *all* the norms we intuitively take to be valid, in section 4.1. But the question, whether they pick out *only* the norms we intuitively take to be valid, might seem even more pressing, as it leads to the worry that functionalist accounts of morality might serve to portray norms as valid, which we intuitively take to be immoral. Whether this is the case depends on the details of particular versions of the view. For the purposes of my argument, which concerns functionalist accounts of morality as a kind of metaethical view and their consequences for the question of moral progress, I will assume that this challenge can be met, if not by any of the existing versions, then at least by some possible versions of the view.

2.2. A Criterion for Moral Progress

Any conception of moral progress has to include a standard of moral progress, that is, some normative assumptions that allow one to evaluate a given change as being for the better or worse. However, justifying a plausible standard of moral progress is a difficult matter. As Moody-Adams points out, skeptics might argue that we can only know whether a given change is progressive once we know what the "destination" of all progressive development is or that, even if we could establish a standard of progress, it might be too difficult to determine in which direction changing beliefs and practices are headed. They thus question whether the idea of moral progress has any content or meaningful application (see Moody-Adams 1999: 168 f.). Justifying a standard of moral progress can thus seem excessively difficult, even beyond the sense in which justifying any normative standard is challenging, as it seems to require a combination of an unfailing moral compass and a capacity to foresee the future. A less demanding way to try to establish a standard of moral progress is offered by functionalist accounts of morality. Functionalist accounts of morality imply a criterion for moral progress: any change that allows a system of moral norms to better fulfill its function will be assessed as progressive. Analogously, any change in a system of moral norms that diminishes its capacity to fulfill this function, or even any tendency that obstructs the possibility of functional improvement, will be assessed as regressive.

The proponents of a functionalist account of morality discussed above differ with respect to the weight they attribute to this implication. Kitcher assigns pride of place to the idea that the fulfilling of a function provides a criterion of progress and even defines the notions of truth and justification in terms of a prior understanding of progress in the context of his metaethics (see Kitcher 2011: 209–252). While Velleman too makes explicit that his functionalist account of morality implies a corresponding conception of moral progress, in part because this is a surprising consequence in the context of a relativistic metaethics (see Velleman 2015: 97), the question of progress plays no role in Wong's reflections on a functionalist account of morality (Wong 2006).[6] Irrespective of these differences, the functionalist

[6] In other work, however, Wong does make the following remark, which captures the basic idea behind a functionalist understanding of moral progress, without drawing

accounts of morality developed by Wong, Velleman, and Kitcher all imply a functionalist conception of moral progress. According to Wong's account of morality, any change that will allow a system of moral norms to better fulfill the requirements that derive from its functions of inter- and intrapersonal coordination will count as a change for the better. Following Velleman's view of morality, any change in the way of life of a community that contributes to its function of facilitating mutual interpretability will be an instance of moral progress. And in line with Kitcher's version of a functionalist conception of morality, any change that will allow an "ethical code" to better fulfill its function of remedying altruism failures is progressive.

A functionalist conception of morality thus provides a criterion for what would constitute moral progress and it does so without reference to a purported "destination" of all progressive development. While the idea of a specific system of moral norms as "maximally" realizing the relevant function of morality is not strictly speaking incompatible with a functionalist view of morality, neither is it required. In particular, functionalist views of morality are silent on the exact content of this hypothetical "best" system of moral norms. Adopting a functionalist understanding of morality thus allows one to judge a certain transformation as progressive or regressive, without having to anticipate where development will ultimately lead. Functionalist conceptions of moral progress are thus less likely to inspire skepticism about progress of the kind illustrated by Moody-Adams. The main advantage of a functionalist conception of moral progress, however, is that it is compatible with a pluralistic understanding of progress that takes into account the actual plurality of ways of life and their attendant moral outlooks. Or so I will argue in the next section.

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out the consequences it has for the question of progress: "If moralities are those parts of culture that have inter- and intrapersonal coordinating functions, it would not be surprising that they can perform those functions more or less well." (David B. Wong (2011): Relativist Explanations of Interpersonal and Group Disagreement. In: Steven D. Hales (Ed.), *A Companion to Relativism*. Chichester, Malden, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 411–429, 418.)

3. Conceptions of Moral Progress and the Plurality of Ways of Life

3.1. Against the "Convergence Model" of Moral Progress

Although different kinds of moral theory attribute different weight to this fact, it is generally acknowledged that there is a plurality of ways of life across different times and places that leads to a multitude of different moral outlooks.[7] These outlooks are incompatible, in the sense that they require conflicting courses of action.[8] In the context of the topic of moral progress, attending to this plurality raises the following question: If the moral outlooks associated with different ways of life that exist at a given moment in time gradually change for the better, would this process lead them to converge necessarily at some point in the future? Assuming that moral progress must lead to convergence on one moral outlook would rule out the possibility that even indefinite improvement would leave us with a genuine plurality of moral outlooks. Given the actual plurality of incompatible ways of life and their attendant moral outlooks, there seems to be no reason to expect that progress must lead to convergence, even in the long run or at some kind of ideal limit. Yet, many conceptions of moral progress implicitly assume as much. Following Thomas McCarthy (2009: 67), I will refer to the model of progress that underlies these conceptions as the "convergence model of progress".

A philosopher who is known for drawing on considerations of convergence in order to determine questions of objectivity in the moral domain is Bernard Williams (see Williams 1985: 132–155). In *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy,* Williams argues that judgments involving what he calls "thick concepts", such as "treachery", "promise", "brutality" (Williams 1985: 129), present the best candidates for ethical knowledge because they are descriptive as well as evalua-

[7] By "way of life" I mean the various practices shared by a community, including economic, political, and cultural practices. By "moral outlook" I mean the resources members of a community rely on when making moral judgments, which may include moral principles, norms, and concepts, as well as paradigm cases of moral judgment, and which are closely connected to their way of life.

[8] However, it is important not to overstate the significance of the claim that there is conflict between the moral outlooks of different communities. Such a claim cannot show that these differences could not be resolved. Furthermore, moral conflicts occur within as well as across different communities.

tive. He opposes the idea that reflective inquiry conducted in terms of more abstract concepts, such as "right", which are not guided by the world in their application, could lead to ethical knowledge. Williams concludes that there is a disanalogy between convergence in science and convergence in ethical outlook: While convergence in science is best explained by scientific activity being guided by the external world, this is not the case when it comes to a possible convergence in ethical outlook (see Williams 1985: 136). While these considerations serve to undermine conceptions of progress along the lines of the convergence model, I will not rely on Williams' view here because I take it to have counterintuitive consequences. Perhaps the most counterintuitive consequence is that reflection, which leads from judgments involving thick concepts to judgments involving more abstract concepts, such as "right", can destroy ethical knowledge (see Williams 1985: 148). There are, however, other reasons to be skeptical of the assumption that moral progress will necessarily bring about a convergence of moral outlooks, which have to do with the practical conclusions it might lead to.

It is one of the potentials of conceptions of moral progress that they can be action-guiding, in the sense that they can tell us what kind of change to advocate and strive for. In the face of the actual plurality of ways of life and attendant moral outlooks, expecting that progress must lead to convergence can be misguiding. Conceptions of moral progress on the convergence model can imply that some communities have to radically change the moral views associated with their way of life and assimilate to a certain preconceived ideal. This can be problematic because whether change towards a particular social arrangement is possible and appears desirable can depend on the characteristics of a given way of life and its attendant moral outlook. Conceptions of moral progress on the convergence model can thus license misleading conclusions about what kind of change we should advocate and strive for in a given context, while at the same time occluding the potential for different kinds of progressive developments.

The problematic nature of conceptions of progress that call for assimilation to a particular ideal is especially evident in the case of conceptions of progress that can be described as "ethnocentric". Ethnocentric conceptions of moral progress assume that the moral norms associated with a particular way of life – usually, but not necessarily, one's own – can serve as a universal standard of progressive

development.[9] In so far as the moral outlook that is part of a particular way of life is itself the outcome of contingent historical and cultural processes, such conceptions of moral progress imply that a development that has already taken place in one part of the world can serve as a standard for future developments in other parts of the world.

There is no principled reason why a conception of moral progress on the convergence model has to be ethnocentric.[10] In fact, however, Western philosophers since the Enlightenment were often led by the idea that it is the Western way of life seen as epitomized by modern science, industrialization, and a particular set of political institutions that can serve as a universal standard of progressive development. They thus developed conceptions of progress that were not only conforming to a convergence model of progress, but at the same time ethnocentric, more specifically, "Eurocentric". Eurocentric notions of progress, which can be traced back to Enlightenment philosophy of history, have proved influential in shaping the discourse about progress in the West until today and have been severely criticized for their entanglement with colonialism. While these conceptions of progress have been put forward in an attempt to give meaning to historical development in general, they were often motivated by considerations of moral progress and implied conceptions of moral progress. Given their importance in shaping notions of progress in general and notions of moral progress in particular, their critique from a postcolo-

[9] The term "ethnocentric" is perhaps most familiar from the work of Richard Rorty. In the context of Rorty's philosophy, however, the term has a slightly different meaning. Rorty, who identifies with the label, describes ethnocentrism as the realization that "we must, in practice, privilege our own group, even though there can be no noncircular justification for doing so" (Richard Rorty (1991): Solidarity or Objectivity. In: *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*. Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 21–34, 29).

[10] Escaping ethnocentrism can, however, turn out to be more difficult than it might at first look. Even if a standard of progress is not explicitly ethnocentric in the sense described above, any standard of progress will be developed in one specific cultural and historical context rather than another and therefore unwittingly bear the marks of this context. Moreover, it is possible to argue along the lines of a "pessimistic induction" that the exclusions universalist philosophies have produced in the past give us reason to be skeptical about any philosophical theory that purports to be universalist (see Allen 2016: 138). This claim could serve as the basis for an even stronger argument against the convergence model of moral progress. However, I do not defend this line of thought here and it might affect the kind of functionalist position I am arguing for as well.

nialist perspective is relevant for metaethics. I will rely on this critique in order to further illustrate the dangers associated with the convergence model of progress.

3.2. Postcolonialist Critique of the Enlightenment Conception of Progress

An example of a Eurocentric conception of progress, which can be considered as representative of Enlightenment historical thought more generally, can be found in Kant's philosophy of history. As McCarthy puts it, Kant's reading of history is "progressivist and cosmopolitan while remaining decidedly Eurocentric – that is to say, a reading in the Enlightenment mold" (McCarthy 2009: 54). How exactly to understand Kant's writings on history as well as their significance for and position within his overall philosophy remain matters of interpretative dispute. Addressing these questions is beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, I will rely on McCarthy's interpretation of Kant's philosophy of history, which will suffice for my purposes of illustrating the dangers associated with the convergence model of progress (see McCarthy 2009: 42–68).[11]

As McCarthy describes it, Kant's philosophy of history combines a teleological conception of nature, on which the development of the natural capacities of humans, in particular their capacity for reason, is the "ultimate end" *(letzter Zweck)* of nature, with the idea of a "final end" *(Endzweck)* of human history that is beyond nature and consists in establishing a global moral community. In light of Kant's distinction between nature and freedom, the exact relation of these aspects of Kant's philosophy of history is difficult to determine. However, according to McCarthy, it is clear enough that the dimension of natural development, which includes cultural development, plays the role of a precondition for humans being able to reach the final end,

[11] Critical reference to Kant has become somewhat canonical in the context of the Enlightenment's complicity with racist and imperialist politics. I stick with the example of Kant although I accept Katrin Flikschuh and Lea Ypi's argument that the current debate on "Kant and Colonialism" overstates Kant's influence on the course of colonial history and might serve to occlude the systematic nature of the racist and imperialist attitudes Kant shared (Katrin Flikschuh/Lea Ypi (2014): Introduction: Kant on Colonialism – Apologist or Critic? In: *Kant and Colonialism: Historical and Critical Perspectives*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1–18).

which "must itself be the work of freedom" (McCarthy 2009: 55). Thus, Kant's philosophy of history "with a practical interest" can provide no guarantee, but only a basis for "rational hope" that the moral end of development will ultimately be reached (see McCarthy 2009: 53–58). The development of a particular kind of political order, a federation of constitutional republics, plays an especially important role as a precondition for moral progress in Kant's writings on history (Kant 1784/2006). As McCarthy (2009: 66 f.) explains, in a passage that is worth quoting at full length, this entanglement of natural development broadly understood and the moral end of human history leads Kant to advocate what McCarthy calls a convergence model of progress:

> What is clear is that the path Kant projects toward this end-state [the federation of constitutional republics and the global moral community] is marked, even prepared, by an unevenness in development among various races and peoples; and that from the start of the modern period, at the latest, progress in cultivation, civilization, and moralization is and will continue to be a process of diffusion from the West to the rest of the world. Not only will Europe eventually bring republican government to all other peoples; progress in the arts and sciences, as in technology and society, will also spread from there over the entire earth. And even in the sphere of religion, the rationalized, demythologized version of Protestant Christianity serves as an exemplar of moral religion for the rest of the world. In short, progress in non-European societies seems to mean gradual assimilation in central respects to European culture and civilization.[12]

In his "Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Perspective" Kant (1784/2006: 15) is particularly outspoken about the place of origin of the progressive development of history, which bears on how a universal history could be written:

> For if one begins with *Greek* history – through which every other older or contemporaneous history has been passed on to us, or at least must be

[12] Because it is one of McCarthy's interests to understand how universalist philosophical moral doctrines were compatible with exclusionary political practices, he points to a problem this theory of progress raises in the context of Kant's moral philosophy: "With regard to Kant's systematic intentions in practical philosophy, this projection raises an obvious problem: Is the convergence model of progress, with its attendant – even if not explicitly advocated – civilizing mission of the West, compatible with a future in which the passive recipients of development are on a cultural, political, and moral par with its active originators?" (McCarthy 2009: 67)

> certified; if one traces up until our time its influence on the formation and deformation of the *Roman* state which swallowed up the Greek state, and the Roman's influence on the *barbarians* who in turn destroyed them, and if one *episodically* adds to this the history of the states of other peoples, the knowledge of which has gradually been passed down to us from the enlightened nations specifically: then one will discover a regular course of improvement in the constitution of the state in our part of the world (which is likely to provide all others with laws at some future point).

It is because progress is conceived in terms of a dissemination of the Western way of life that the history of the West will ultimately become universal history. Thus, the conception of progress implicit in Kant's philosophy of history has methodological import for historiography. It is, however, the practical conclusions that it is at least possible to draw from this kind of understanding of progress that give rise to incisive criticism, in particular from a postcolonialist perspective. As Amy Allen (2016: 3) puts it:

> [P]erhaps the major lesson of postcolonial scholarship over the last thirty-five years has been that the developmentalist, progressive reading of history – in which Europe or "the West" is viewed as more enlightened or more developed than Asia, Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, and so on – and the so-called civilizing mission of the West, which served to justify colonialism and imperialism and continues to underwrite the informal imperialism or neocolonialism of the current world economic, legal, and political order, are deeply intertwined.

As Allen points out, the notion of progress that is characteristic of the Enlightenment has been developed at least in part as a response to encounters with other ways of life through colonial conquest (see Allen 2016: 20) and associated ideas about development have played an important role in structuring Europe's relation to the rest of the world. The claim that Eurocentric narratives of progress, such as the one implicit in Kant's philosophy of history, "served to justify colonialism", however, needs to be qualified in several respects. For one, the claim is not that the philosophical assumptions underlying a conception of progress such as Kant's were put forward with the intention to justify colonialism, but that they might serve as a resource for doing so.[13] Further, the criticism should be understood as targeted at a par-

[13] While it seems to be universally acknowledged that at least until the early 1790s Kant did hold racist beliefs and at least implicitly supported colonialism, there is a

ticular conception of progress, rather than at a broader moral theory, of which such a conception is a part. It is of course possible that a philosophical position which implies a Eurocentric conception of progress has other resources to oppose certain ways to achieve the convergence it conceptualizes as the end-point of progressive development. Arguably, Kant's moral and political philosophy, for example, has ample resources to criticize actual colonial practices.[14] In addition, the claim is not that these attempts at justification were actually successful. Even if we accept the assumptions underlying a Eurocentric conception of progress such as Kant's and disregard concerns that might derive from other aspects of his practical philosophy, this would not suffice to justify all aspects of colonial rule. For example, it is not obvious how an argument that would justify the extraction of resources from colonies can be based on a Eurocentric conception of progress. The claim is thus, more precisely, that a Eurocentric narrative of progress helps to portray some aspects of colonial rule as a necessary evil (when seen as the natural course of history) or even as in accordance with the moral law (when seen from the perspective of our duty to contribute to this course). While there are additional assumptions of Eurocentrism and the mechanisms of historical development at play, it is clear that the idea that progress must lead to convergence plays a crucial role in conceptions of progress that lend themselves to legitimizations of this kind.

3.3. Functionalist Conceptions of Moral Progress as Pluralistic

Conceptions of progress along the lines of what McCarthy calls a convergence model of progress are thus problematic for different reasons. Not only is there no *prima facie* reason to assume improvement must lead to uniformity; as the critique of the Enlightenment discourse of progress shows, conceptions of progress that rely on this assumption

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debate about whether and in how far he changed his mind later on (Katrin Flikschuh/Lea Ypi (2014): Introduction: Kant on Colonialism – Apologist or Critic? In: *Kant and Colonialism: Historical and Critical Perspectives*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1–18).

[14] For a discussion of Kant's presumed views on colonialism from the perspective of scholars sympathetic to Kant see the contributions in *Kant and Colonialism* (Katrin Flikschuh/Lea Ypi (Eds.) (2014): *Kant and Colonialism: Historical and Critical Perspectives*. Oxford: Oxford University Press).

can license misleading conclusions about the source of progressive development and the scope of legitimate intervention. While these problems are most striking in the context of the Eurocentrism of Enlightenment philosophy of history, in principle, all conceptions of progress along the lines of the convergence model are subject to worries of this kind. Nevertheless, many conceptions of moral progress do conform to this model. They imply that progressive development would lead to convergence, at least in the long run or at a kind of ideal limit.

One reason for this is that the notion of progress is closely related to the idea of sketching, at least in broad strokes, a kind of "utopia". Many conceptions of progress, therefore, include descriptions of what the ideal society we are trying to build through progressive efforts would look like, at least in some detail. Amanda Roth calls conceptions of progress that posit an ideal end-state and conceptualize progress in terms of an approximation of this ideal end-state "utopian" conceptions of progress (see Roth 2012: 385). On such views, progress and regress can be understood in terms of distance between a state of affairs, its preceding state and this ideal state. Kant's idea of a global moral community serves as one example of such a conception of moral progress that entails a specific end-state. However, it is really the other component of his philosophy of history, which specifies the preconditions for this development in terms of, among other things, a specific political order constituted by a federation of constitutional republics, that gives particular content to the ideal end-state his conception of progress implies.

Another reason the convergence model of progress is quite widespread is its association with realism. The most clear-cut examples of conceptions of moral progress along the lines of the convergence model are not the conceptions of progress implicit in versions of Kantian constructivism, but those that follow from versions of moral realism. One common way to understand "realism" is in terms of a commitment to mind-independent facts that determine the truth-value of judgments in a certain domain. Following this definition, moral realism, for example, would be characterized by a commitment to mind-independent moral facts that determine the truth-value of moral judgments (see Miller 2003: 4). Understood in this way, realism is closely connected to a very influential conception of progress. According to this realist conception of progress, progress is understood as an accumulation of true beliefs, which at the same time amounts to an

ever better representation of an objective reality.[15] As Jamieson (2017: 170) puts it:

> On such a realist view the point of moral beliefs is to correspond to the moral order, and the role of moral action is to respect or promote the moral order. From this perspective, moral progress is assessed on the basis of how well our moral thought and action reflect the moral order in temporally successive stages.[16]

Although conceptions of moral progress that imply that progressive development must lead to convergence are problematic, the fact that they are closely associated with "utopian" conceptions of progress as well as with the realist idea that progress gets us closer to the mind-independent truth about a subject matter gives them a certain *prima*

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[15] While the idea of an accumulation of true beliefs is compatible with versions of anti-realism, as long as they take the relevant judgments to be truth-apt, the idea of an increasingly accurate representation of a mind-independent reality is specific to realism in the sense described above. The connection between moral realism and the convergence model of progress seems to rely on the implicit assumption that moral realists are committed to the claim that fully informed, rational agents would converge on the moral truth. Against this, Sarah McGrath argues that the moral realist has no reason to accept this claim (Sarah McGrath (2010): Moral Realism without Convergence. In: *Philosophical Topics* 38:2, 59–90. https://doi.org/10.5840/philtopics201038214). However, even if the realist does not commit to the claim that convergence on the truth will be achieved at any specific point in time or even that we have a rational way to get there, given their other commitments, there still remains a sense in which convergence on the truth is both possible and desirable – it would constitute a change for the better.

[16] This relationship between realism and a certain fairly intuitive and attractive conception of progress is particularly salient in the context of philosophy of science. Scientific realists criticize rival positions for being unable to characterize scientific progress in terms of "progress in our knowledge about unobservable entities" (Howard Sankey (2017): Realism, Progress and the Historical Turn. In: *Foundations of Science* 22:1, 201–214. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10699-015-9481-4, 210). As Catherine Wilson points out, a corresponding relationship exists between realism and progress in the moral domain, even though it is much less debated: "There is a widespread assumption that its very possibility [the possibility of moral progress] furnishes the basis of a transcendental argument in favour of moral realism. Yet, there has been little or no direct discussion of whether the existence of moral progress actually gives realists a dialectical advantage. This is surprising because the relationship between the fact of scientific progress and the tenability of scientific realism has been vigorously debated, and because the analogies and disanalogies between knowledge of nature and knowledge of norms, between science and ethics, have received a good deal of attention." (Catherine Wilson (2010): Moral Progress Without Moral Realism. *Philosophical Papers* 39:1, 97–116. https://doi.org/10.1080/0556864100 3669508, 97 f.)

facie plausibility – at least for those who are in general optimistic about the possibility of moral progress.

Against this background, I take it to be a major advantage of functionalist conceptions of moral progress that they do not entail any commitment to convergence. By contrast, functionalist conceptions of moral progress allow to understand progress in a pluralistic manner. Functionalist accounts of morality are compatible with pluralism because different systems of moral norms can fulfill the same function equally well. While the function component of views of this kind offers a criterion to assess transformations as being for the better or worse, it does not entail that progressive transformations will make different ways of life and their attendant moral outlooks more similar. The result is a genuinely pluralistic understanding of progress, which allows for progressive developments pointing in different "directions". Both Kitcher and Velleman reflect on this consequence of their view of moral progress. As Kitcher (2011: 248) puts it: "We can imagine two different ethical traditions proceeding indefinitely, making a series of progressive transitions, without its [sic] ever being possible to integrate their differing accomplishments." In a similar vein, Velleman (2015: 3) takes his view of morality to be associated with an attitude he calls "humility" and which he describes as "the recognition that distant communities may never, not even ideally, converge".

Because there is no reason to assume that, even under ideal circumstances, members of different communities would converge on one moral outlook and because doing so can have problematic consequences as illustrated by the implications of narratives of progress in the history of colonialism, the fact that functionalist conceptions of moral progress allow for a pluralistic understanding of progress gives us some reason to adopt a functionalist conception of moral progress. However, these considerations do not settle the question. For one, it is likely that this advantage is not unique to functionalist conceptions of moral progress. Further, while postcolonialist critique has conclusive force in the case of Enlightenment philosophy of history, its consequences for contemporary metaethics are less direct. There are at least three different ways proponents of a conception of moral progress along the lines of the convergence model might try to avoid the criticism I put forward. They might argue that worries about ethnocentrism do not apply to the standard of moral progress they defend, that they have other resources to oppose misguided attempts at progressive development, or that their account can accommodate a

plurality of ways of life, if not of moral outlook, by appealing to considerations of underdetermination.[17] Moreover, they might point to potential costs of giving up convergence, at least as a regulative ideal guiding moral inquiry and debate. The worries associated with the convergence model of progress I have emphasized thus constitute a challenge for proponents of conceptions of moral progress that commit to convergence rather than a conclusive refutation. However, I hope to have shown that the challenge is serious and that considerable work would have to be done in order to meet it. Finally, there might be reasons to reject a functionalist conception of moral progress because of independent objections to the underlying view of morality. In the next section, I consider three different objections of this kind and respond to them.

4. Replies to Objections

4.1. Is There a Single Function of Morality?

One possible objection to the view of morality underlying a functionalist conception of moral progress is based on challenging the plausibility of the idea that morality serves a *single* function. Is it really plausible that all of the diverse things we intuitively take to be morally required can be explained by appealing to the idea that the corresponding norms serve one and the same function?

This worry can be mitigated by pointing out that functionalist accounts do not have to stipulate only one function morality is supposed to serve. Wong, for example, takes morality to fulfill two distinct functions, interpersonal and intrapersonal coordination, and points out that the requirements deriving from these different functions can conflict. In a similar vein, Kitcher stipulates one original

[17] While on the constructivist view of morality I am mainly concerned with, moral norms are understood as part of a way of life and a convergence on one moral outlook thus comes close to a convergence on one way of life, this need not be the case on all views of morality. Hilary Putnam points out that philosophers often confuse the notion of a "universalistic ethic" with the notion of a "universal way of life" and considers that this confusion is perhaps intrinsic to the Enlightenment or even to Western philosophy itself (see Hilary Putnam (1994): Pragmatism and Relativism: Universal Values and Traditional Ways of Life. In: *Words and Life*. Edited by James Conant. Cambridge Massachusetts, London: Harvard University Press, 182–197, 184).

function of "ethical codes", remedying altruism failures, but points out that during the long history of the evolution of moral codes, more functions have developed. These "secondary functions" are "generated from the ways in which the original function is discharged" (Kitcher 2011: 237). As is made evident by Kitcher (2011: 260), in the context of a functionalist conception of progress, allowing for this kind of complexity is advantageous because it provides resources for evaluating different moral systems and their transformations in a more nuanced way:

> In general, when there are gains and losses with respect to different functions, three possibilities arise: (1) because the balance is significantly greater on one side (the gains are much larger than the losses), the modification is overall progressive (or regressive); (2) although there is no overall verdict, the modification can be partitioned, and some newly introduced elements make progress, while the rest are regressive; (3) the situation is so thoroughly mixed that neither an overall judgment nor a recognition of progressive and regressive aspects is possible.

A more complex picture of morality, which recognizes different and possibly conflicting functions, provides the flexibility needed to account for the diversity of moral requirements we intuitively recognize within a functionalist account of morality.[18]

4.2. Is There a Sound Way to Argue for a Functionalist Account of Morality?

Although the first objection has a straightforward answer, it raises a more general worry. How can the claim that morality serves a function, or several for that matter, be sustained? Proponents of a functionalist account of morality develop different arguments for their views. Wong, for example, presents his "pluralistic relativism" as providing the best naturalistic explanation of the experience of what he calls "moral ambivalence", that is "the phenomenon of coming to understand and appreciate the other side's viewpoint" (Wong 2006: 5)

[18] The compatibility of functionalist accounts of morality with a pluralist understanding of moral progress does, however, not depend on adopting a multiplicity of functions. Even one and the same function can be fulfilled equally well by different systems of moral norms and improvement of these norms need not lead to convergence.

in a moral conflict, while Velleman sets out to find the most plausible outline for a relativistic metaethics and presents his argument for a functionalist understanding of morality as part of what he calls "speculative sociology" (Velleman 2015: 83).

One possible objection to all of these arguments is that they constitute a kind of "naturalistic fallacy" because they amount to an inference from the premise that people have constructed a system of norms in order to serve a certain function to the conclusion that fulfilling this function is the aim of morality. Both Wong and Kitcher consider this as a possible objection to their view and provide different replies (see Wong 2006: 45–47; Kitcher 2011: 253–262). They both refer to the argument against naturalistic fallacies in the version attributed to Hume rather than the version attributed to Moore (see Hume 1739–1740/2007: 302; Moore 1903/1993: 61 f.). According to this version, it is illegitimate to derive an "ought" from an "is". As Wong (2006: 45 f.) puts it, the corresponding charge against a functionalist conception of morality takes the following form:

> How can the observation that, as a sociological matter of fact, moralities have the function of regulating and promoting social cooperation support the normative criterion that adequate moralities must contain duties that further this function? Am I not, the objection goes, trying to derive an "ought" from an "is"?

In replying to this challenge, both Wong and Kitcher deny that their investigation has a purely factual starting point. In stating their defense, both independently appeal to Rawls' idea of achieving a "reflective equilibrium" by going back and forth between judgments about particular cases and more general principles and revising them to achieve coherence (see Rawls 1971/1999: 18). Wong describes his investigation of different systems of moral norms as based on this method. He claims that the idea of morality fulfilling a function helps to establish reflective equilibrium "within different systems of moral beliefs to be found across different cultures" (Wong 2006: 46). Kitcher appeals to the idea of reflective equilibrium in order to point out that not all relevant inferences are deductive (see Kitcher 2011: 257). He takes the challenge of the naturalistic fallacy to amount to the claim that the inferences made as part of the "ethical project" as he describes it are invalid and defuses it by showing that they are valid, drawing on his own reliabilist account of justification (see Kitcher 2011: 258–262).

While Kitcher's reply depends on details of his overall view that are controversial, Wong's appeal to reflective equilibrium seems available to any proponent of a functionalist account of morality. The method of reflective equilibrium is common in practical philosophy and since it engages with normative assumptions from the start, there is no reason to suspect that it commits a naturalistic fallacy in the sense attributed to Hume. Thus, while arguments for functionalist accounts of morality remain controversial and proponents do not agree with respect to the appropriate argumentative strategy, there is no principled reason to assume that they must fail – at least not based on the claim that they commit a naturalistic fallacy in the sense discussed above.

4.3. Do Functionalist Accounts of Morality Have Relativistic Implications?

I have emphasized the pluralistic consequences of functionalist accounts of morality and argued that they constitute an advantage of the kind of conception of moral progress implicit in such an account. However, functionalist accounts of morality are versions of social constructivism, which are often criticized for their presumed relativistic consequences. Moreover, two of the three examples I discussed, Wong and Velleman, explicitly develop their version of a functionalist account of morality as a form of moral relativism. Moral relativism is often criticized for allowing any norm to count as a valid moral norm, even norms we intuitively take to be immoral, and for being unable to ground any evaluative judgments about potential moral norms. It is thus possible to object to functionalist accounts of morality on the grounds that they lead to a relativistic understanding of morality and are therefore confronted with criticisms of moral relativism.

However, not all versions of a functionalist account of morality present themselves as relativistic. Kitcher, for example, does not identify as a relativist, although he emphasizes the possibility of a certain kind of pluralism as a consequence of his metaethics, as discussed above. Even if the resulting view can properly be called a version of relativism, as Velleman and Wong assume, this kind of relativism does not have many of the dreaded consequences often ascribed to relativism. Functionalist accounts of morality are compatible with the

claim typical of relativism that there is a plurality of systems of moral norms that are at least possibly equally valid, in the sense that they fulfill the same function equally well, while at the same time genuinely different, in the sense that they are incompatible. However, they do not imply that anything can be a valid moral norm or that we can no longer distinguish between better and worse moral norms. The idea that moral norms serve a certain function constrains the scope of what could conceivably be a valid moral norm. There are certain conventions that, even if they were reached by people in agreement, would do little or nothing to further the relevant function or even hinder it. At the same time, the function component of the view serves as a criterion to ground evaluative claims about transformations, but also different sets of moral norms. Functionalist accounts of morality are thus able to ground at least some evaluative judgments about moral norms.

Whether functionalist accounts of morality should ultimately be regarded as versions of "pluralism" or "relativism" remains an open question and depends on how exactly these terms are understood.[19] However, even if it turns out that they are best described as versions of relativism, there is no reason to assume that this specific version of moral relativism has any objectionable consequences.[20]

5. Conclusion

I have argued that functionalist conceptions of moral progress make it possible to conceive of progressive development in a pluralistic way that takes into account the actual plurality of ways of life and their attendant moral outlooks and that this constitutes a *pro tanto* reason to adopt a functionalist conception of moral progress. The full force of this argument becomes evident against the background of postcolonialist critique of the discourse of progress that derives from Enlightenment philosophy of history. In light of the complicity of this discourse of progress with imperialistic and racist politics, critics of the

[19] This is further illustrated by the fact that both Wong and Velleman, who describe their functionalist views of morality as versions of relativism, face the question whether they are properly called so (see Wong 2006: 94–100; Velleman 2015: 93–99).

[20] The resulting version of moral relativism would be similar to what T. M. Scanlon calls "benign relativism" (see T. M. Scanlon (1998): *What We Owe to Each Other*. Cambridge Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Chapter 8).

concept, such as Allen, press for a radical conclusion: to get rid of talk about progress altogether. However, as becomes clear in the course of Allen's discussion, this is not as easy as it might at first look. This is because, as long as we want to hold on to standards that allow us to make normative judgments in the moral domain, it will be possible to judge a particular transformation as being for the better or worse in light of these standards (see Allen 2016: 32). Although the underlying conception of morality remains controversial, I hope to have shown that functionalist conceptions of moral progress offer one way to account for the possibility of moral progress while taking into account one line of well-founded critique of the discourse of progress.

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