

MORAL PROGRESS – CRITERIA AND EXAMPLES

Christoph Lumer

Abstract. The first part of the article (sections 2-6) sketches a general, criterial theory of moral progress. Three types of moral progress are distinguished: 1. ethical progress, i.e. the epistemic and moral improvement of moral theory (ethics), 2. practical-moral progress or moral progress in the narrow sense, i.e. the moral improvement of moral systems and moral action, and 3. mundane moral progress, i.e. the mundane improvement of the world according to moral criteria of social well-being. These concepts are defined and the definitions are justified without circularity. Characteristics of this approach are, for one thing, the inclusion of ethical progress, which is what first brings about the central concept of moral desirability and which can then be used in the definition of moral progress in the narrow sense, and for another thing, that ethical progress, and thus also the justification of the definition of the concept of moral desirability is not moral but epistemic and is based on prudential desirability. Furthermore, epistemic problems of these definitions and criteria are discussed, such as their circle-free justification and self-referentiality (sect. 6). The second part (sect. 7-10) lists examples of the three types of progress, but also corresponding regressions. The appendix (sect. 11) discusses some alternative theories of moral progress.

Keywords: moral progress, moral regression, ethical progress, mundane progress, epistemic progress, prudential practical justification, moral desirability, moral instruments, idealising-hermeneutic theory, Münchhausen trilemma, moral realism.

1. Introduction and overview

Whether and, if so, where there is moral progress is an important question in ethical, moral, philosophical, moral political and general political terms, not least because on the answer to this question also depends the answer to the following question: is all the effort for and around morality and ethics worthwhile at all? The answer to the question of whether, where and to what extent progress occurs requires clarification of the criteria for moral progress. And once these criteria have been clarified,



the central conceptual prerequisites for answering the decision question will also have been clarified: Which decision in a given situation would be morally progressive, neutral or even regressive? This article will mainly deal with the question of criteria; but in the second part, empirical trends and examples of moral progress and regression will also be presented.

More specifically, the article covers the following: The first part of the article (sections 2-6) sketches a general, criterial theory of moral progress. Three types of moral progress are distinguished: 1. *ethical progress*, i.e. the epistemic and moral improvement of moral theory (ethics), 2. *practical-moral progress or moral progress in the narrow sense*, i.e. the moral improvement of moral systems and moral action, and 3. *mundane moral progress*, i.e. the mundane improvement of the world according to moral criteria of social well-being. These concepts are defined and the definitions are justified without circularity. Characteristics of this approach are, for one thing, the inclusion of ethical progress, which is what first brings about the central concept of moral desirability and which can then be used in the definition of moral progress in the narrow sense, and for another, that ethical progress, and thus also the justification of the definition of the concept of moral desirability, primarily is not moral but epistemic and is based on prudential desirability. Furthermore, epistemic problems of these definitions and criteria are discussed, such as their circle-free justification and self-referentiality (sect. 6). The second part (sect. 7-10) lists examples of the three types of progress, but also of corresponding regressions. The appendix (sect. 11) discusses some alternative theories of moral progress.

2. Definitions – three types of moral progress

According to «Oxford Languages», a *progress* (in the sense of ‘progress’ of interest here) is a «development towards an improved condition».¹ 1. So there is a development, a change, which stands in a series of changes (i.e. a causally continuous sequence of temporal states) with the same tendency. 2. It leads to a changed state in the sense that this new state has a certain permanence, does not immediately change again or remain an ephemeral event. 3. This development is evaluated positively; i.e. the later state is

¹Progress = «2. development towards an improved or more advanced condition» (<https://languages.oup.com/google-dictionary-en/>, 29.5.24. In my paraphrase above, I have left out «more advanced» because, being synonymous with ‘progressed’, it is merely a repetition of the defined term. – The meaning of the German word «Fortschritt» is identical: «a positively evaluated further development». (cf. Duden: Deutsches Universalwörterbuch 1989: 529; *my translation*. – C.L.).

better than the earlier one. – The evaluation meant here in this article is, of course (with one exception), a *moral* one.

What is *moral* progress? According to what has been said so far, the following applies:

P. Moral Progress in the broad sense: Moral progress in the broad sense is a development towards a morally better state. (Similar definitions: «Moral progress is [... here understood as] any kind of morally desirable change» (Sauer et al. 2021: 2; cf.: Eriksen 2020: 5-11; Kitcher 2017).)

Explanations: According to the explanations already given regarding the general concept of progress, moral progress must have a certain *longevity*. One-time morally good deeds, which, for example, provide a beneficiary with short-term help and thus generate a short-term increase in well-being or prevent a drop, are therefore not yet moral progress. However, the longevity meant here does not exclude the possibility that moral progress, i.e. an improvement actually designed for longevity, can be quickly undone by independent developments in the opposite direction. – The definition does not require a necessary *minimum size* of improvement. – The *criterion and measure of moral improvement* can be left open for the time being; in the event of a conflict (i.e. in the event of divergent assessments by different moral desirability criteria), however, what is meant here is welfare ethics or, more specifically, prioritarianism (Parfit 1997; Lumer <2000> 2009: 589-632; 2005; 2021a; 2021b). – This general concept of moral progress does not restrict moral improvement to certain *topics* – e.g. the way we treat each other – or to certain *causes*, such as a restriction to man-made or even only morally intentional improvements, but also includes completely natural improvements. For a justification of this openness, see below.

According to different objects of improvement, which we in turn have to distinguish for reasons of justification, we also have to distinguish at least three main types of development for the morally better, that is, of moral progress in the broader sense.

P1. Ethical improvement/improvement of ethics: The first form of moral progress is ethical improvement,² i.e. an improvement in ethics,

²The adjectives before ‘improvement’ or ‘progress’ have different meanings depending on the combination: they can indicate 1. the mode of improvement, 2. the object or area of improvement, or 3. occasionally both. In ‘ethical improvement’, the *object* of improvement is meant, i.e. an improvement in ethics; in ‘moral improvement’, the *mode*

thus a moral-theoretical improvement: an epistemic improvement of moral *theory*, thus an improvement of ethical knowledge – according to the subfields of ethics, that is, an

P1.1. improvement of metaethical knowledge,

P1.2. improvement of normative ethical knowledge, or

P1.3. improvement of applied ethical knowledge.

The *criteria for* improving ethics are (i) general epistemological and (ii) moral-epistemological (for more details, see Section 4). Because an improvement in ethics also leads to an improvement in behaviour in the long term, this is consequently also a moral improvement, i.e. a moral improvement in the broad sense. – The improvement of ethics is driven by epistemological and ethical reflection as well as empirical research, in particular psychological, sociological and biological, but also to some extent by social and moral experiences.

P2. Practical-moral improvement (moral improvement in a narrow sense): improvement of morals, moral systems: The second form of moral progress is *moral improvement in a narrow sense*, a *practical-moral improvement*, i.e. an improvement of morals, thus of moral systems (P2.1 and P2.2) and of moral action itself (P2.3), namely

P2.1. moral improvement of the sources of morality – such as the strengthening and qualitative improvement of empathy and respect (cf. Buchanan & Powell 2018: 55) –,

P2.2. moral improvement of the instruments for moral improvement of the world – such as moral knowledge, subjective moral principles, social rules, social norms, laws, institutions, virtues, etc. – and

P2.3. moral improvement (expansion and increased efficiency) of moral action itself, i.e.

P2.3.1. of intentionally moral action (cf. *ibid.* 46; 51; 107) or

P2.3.2. action guided by moral instruments.

The *criteria for* improving the moral systems are the normative ethical criteria of moral evaluation: are the moral systems and moral actions morally good, how good, better than before? – This improvement is driven by (i) the spread of ethical improvements (historically, this influence grows from zero to a very moderate degree so far), (ii) the general increase in the intelligence and rationality of moral subjects, (iii) improved self-control (against affective reactions and towards compliance with norms), (iv) greater sensitivity, generally more understanding of others and moral understanding

of improvement is meant, i.e. an improvement in moral terms, but occasionally also, in addition, the object of improvement, i.e. the improvement of morals.

(in which many factors are again involved: knowledge of other cultures, literary psychological considerations, psychological knowledge), (v) through cumulative greater knowledge about the functioning of moral systems, (vi) through greater material wealth (distribution potential, organisational distribution capabilities, more leisure; the increase in resources defuses conflicts) but (vii) also significantly through the collective efforts of strong groups (or groups supported by others) to improve their own situation, with successes that also benefit wider circles (the fight for fundamental rights, for social improvements, for fairer distribution, for better political systems, etc.).³

P3. Mundane improvement of the world: The third form of moral progress is mundane improvement, i.e. a mundane improvement of the world measured by morally justified criteria of the social good, thus of amoral (not specifically morally intended) actions and means (P3.1 and P3.2) as well as a resulting improvement of well-being (P3.3). Mundane improvement has the following components:

P3.1. improvement of the non-moral social behaviour of individuals and communities with regard to social welfare (in particular, a decrease in immoral or (according to current norms) morally forbidden actions, or a decrease in non-moral actions that are bad for social welfare, or an increase in actions that are good for social welfare but not morally controlled, e.g. non-morally motivated more humane treatment of members of the community or the reduction of military violence),

P3.2. improving the non-specifically moral means to improve well-being (especially the economy, science and technology) in terms of social well-being and, finally,

P3.3. the, tendentially long-lasting, improvement in the well-being of the population itself and its causes.

The transitions between groups P2.3 and P3.1 are very fluid: a less violent treatment of the population by the executive or judiciary, for example, can be specifically morally motivated, perhaps even morally required in

³Pinker (2011) provides an extremely comprehensive and detailed study of the improvement of moral systems and moral action itself, as well as the driving factors behind them. The factors that, according to Pinker, have led to the reduction of violence are: 1. sympathy, 2. self-control, 3. sense of morality, 4. reason, the ability to detach ourselves from the egocentric point of view, to analyse how we could do better (ibid. Ch. 9). And the historical developments that, according to him, favour the above factors are: 1. the Leviathan, i.e. the state monopoly on the use of force, 2. economic cooperation, 3. feminisation (of social values, away from aggression towards care), 4. world citizenship (contact and exchange with other cultures), 5. promotion of reason (through education and intelligence training stimulated by the environment) (ibid. Ch. 10).

the respective society (P2.3), or it can be a consequence of cost savings or an insight into the counter-productivity of violence (P3.2). – The *criteria for* mundane improvement of the world are morally justified criteria of the social good. In ethics of welfare (such as utilitarianism or prioritarianism), these criteria for the social good coincide with the normative ethical criteria for moral evaluation, because in these ethics the morally good is a social aggregation of mundane individual utilities. In P3.3, these criteria are applied to the intrinsic goods (individual well-being) themselves, whereas in the improvement of amoral actions and means (P3.1, P3.2) and moral systems (P2), they are applied to the amoral and moral causes of these intrinsic goods or to the means to achieve them. – These improvements are driven by P3.1: improved intelligence, especially social intelligence (a combination of intelligence and socio-psychological knowledge), self-control, interest in cooperation, P3.2: to a large extent by scientific and technological progress, while P3.3: the improvement of well-being itself in terms of causes is only a resultative category that is based on all the other improvements and changes in natural environmental conditions.⁴

Moral regressions (R) are, in very general terms, negative or inverse moral progressions, that is, developments towards a morally worse state. The more specific concepts of regression can be defined analogously.

The improvements mentioned above earlier causally foster those mentioned later. Above all, however, this *logical and systematic order* helps in explaining the evaluation criteria to be used in each case. Therefore, in the

⁴In particular, Kantian-oriented ethicists consider only the increased observance of moral commandments, increased intentional moral action or the strengthening and dissemination of the moral virtues on which they are based to be moral progress, but by no means mere mundane improvements (Albersmeier 2022: 57); to regard the latter as moral progress is, they claim, a category mistake. – In order to avoid this and similar conceptual discomfort, a distinction is made here between moral progress in the narrow sense and in the broad sense, whereby mundane moral progress is in fact moral progress in the broad sense. However, because the improvements assessed here are improvements in the sense of moral desirability, this is indeed moral progress. The very narrow understanding of the moral in Kantian ethics is based on its deontology, that it restricts morality to the realm of commandments (possibly also virtues) and of commanded action and leaves out values and utilities. However, deontologists have problems justifying these commandments because they cannot proceed axiologically – qua deontology – while human decisions are basically axiological, namely based on the consideration of the desirability of the implications of actions. The per se axiological ethics of welfare, on the other hand, systematically begin with a specification of the morally intrinsic good, which is precisely an aggregation of individual mundane utility; it is the increase (and distribution) of this utility of individuals that gives morality its meaning – which is lacking in deontology. Therefore, in the ethics of welfare, the change in this utility belongs to the realm of morals.

following sections an explanation in this order is necessary. Historically, of course, the development is rather the opposite: mundane moral progress (according to our criteria) occurred before practical moral progress, and this occurred before moral-theoretical progress.

3. Justification of the definitions

Before further elaboration, these definitions must be justified, if perhaps not in all details, then at least in their presumably most controversial components. The following justifications are based, among other things, on a general determination of the function of the concept of moral progress: In addition to evaluating past events, it also has the *function of orienting* our moral decisions: Which historically occurred conditions should be considered moral progress and thus preserved, defended or expanded? Which of our own developments would be moral progress? – Another central premise of the following justifications arises from the welfare-ethical approach represented and justified here: the only intrinsic moral value on which the evaluation as moral progress – and thus as moral improvement – is based is the *well-being of individuals*. Improving this well-being is therefore the very content of moral progress. *Moral intentions*, including those with the aim of moral improvement in the welfare-ethical sense, are therefore always only moral means, not themselves intrinsically good, and thus not an end in themselves.

The general definition of ‘moral progress’ given above does *not place any restrictions on the content of moral progress*; the content arises solely from the object of moral evaluation, namely that ultimately, as a result of the specific progressive developments, the (aggregate) well-being of the beneficiaries is increased. The sub-forms of moral progress P1 to P3.2 deal with moral progress with specific content; but the broad content is then guaranteed again in the residual class P3.3. An alternative to this breadth of content is, for example, to recognise only specific moral improvements as moral progress, such as changes in social behaviour or in the normative foundations for them (e.g. inclusion of members of other ethnic groups or of non-human animals in the group of moral beneficiaries). However, the following reasons speak against such restrictions: Even if the development of morality historically began in the area of ‘behaviour in social interaction’, a deeper justification of this moralisation must lead to an expansion of the moral. For, while moral action – in contrast to prudential action – is primarily concerned with the effects of our actions

on others, these effects arise not only from actions that directly affect others, but also from actions that influence their living conditions; and they can also affect the living conditions of beings with whom we never have personal contact – for example, the living conditions of future generations through our actions in relation to climate change. Accordingly, reducing our greenhouse gas emissions (according to P3.2) is a moral progress, even if it has nothing to do with direct personal contact with important beneficiaries of this development.

The general definition of moral progress given above, also with respect to causes of progress *does not provide any limitation e.g. to intentionally moral action*; and in particular in the sub-forms P2.2 (improved instruments for morally improving the world), P2.3.2 (improving actions controlled by moral instruments), P3 (mundane improvements to the world), actions without moral intentions are also included as possible drivers of progress. In contrast, Buchanan and Powell, for example, do not consider the reduction of violence in modern Europe due to the introduction of the state monopoly on the use of force or the extension of civil rights to all freemen in the Roman Empire by Caracalla to be moral progress, because the instigators of these moral improvements – the absolutist princes and Caracalla, respectively – were not concerned with moral improvement, but with the extension or stabilisation of their own power (Buchanan & Powell 2018: 49-51; discussion in the appendix). The justification of the broader concept of progress presented here is welfarist: If an instrument is introduced to morally improve the world that fulfils precisely this function, then the moral evaluation of this instrument is interested in its effect and *prima facie* not in the intention of its creator (P2.2). (Apart from that, the intention is often not known either.) Even if we decide whether to maintain, nurture, and develop this instrument because it is morally progressive, or conversely, to abandon or abolish it because it is neutral or regressive, the intention of its creator should be irrelevant. Furthermore, if norms enforced by sanctions are introduced to «persuade» those who are insufficiently or not at all morally motivated to follow certain morally good courses of action, then the fact that they act in this way, even without moral motivation, is precisely the success striven for with this instrument (sanctioned moral norm) (P2.3.2) – though morally insightful action would be even better. If we now decide again whether we classify this success as (medium) moral progress and therefore maintain and support its basis or abandon it, then the action itself counts in the comparative evaluation; the moral intention is absent in the persons guided by the norm or no longer guided, in either alternative. (Moreover,

the lack of moral intention must not play a role in this comparison, because the point was precisely to compensate for this lack of intention.) – An analogous justification, also pointing to the orienting function of the concept of moral progress and the significance of non-intentional improvements, applies to the inclusion of mundane improvements (P3) in the concept of moral progress. – The inclusion of morally good but not intentionally moral actions in the scope of ‘moral progress’ is not intended to deny the special role of intentional moral improvements: These are not merely accidental progress drivers, but purposefully drive progress in a moral direction. However, there are also non-moral mechanisms that specifically reinforce morally good developments – from a welfare-ethical point of view – and thus promote moral progress in a reasonably targeted manner, without being intentionally moral themselves. For one thing, an institution introduced for non-moral reasons (e.g. monopoly on the use of force, Roman civil law) can be supported, strengthened and preserved by other actors afterwards because they have understood its morally positive effects. For another, this can also happen for more personal reasons, because these actors see an advantage for themselves or for those close to them in the institution. Their support leads in a morally good direction if this group of actors is reasonably large and diverse and if they are sufficiently informed and rational. In this case, their cumulated and purposefully pursued interests already account for a large part of the aggregate well-being that defines moral improvement. This means that the new institutions selected and supported by such groups correlate positively with moral improvement – but how strongly remains an open question. The effects of such mechanisms driving moral improvement without moral motivation should not be excluded per se from the extension of ‘moral progress’ here, precisely because of their possible morally positive role.

The general definition of ‘moral progress’ and then the special case P3.3 of, ‘mundane moral progress’ (improvement of well-being and its causes) does not even exclude *non-humanly made moral improvements* from the domain of definition of ‘moral progress’, so it also does not exclude improvements through natural developments – e.g. the end of the Little Ice Age (1590-1780), which also put an end to the associated crop failures, or a rainy season that led to the regeneration of the parched soils and the filling of the empty water reservoirs. If the concept of progress also serves to guide our decisions, especially with a long-term perspective, then this inclusion of seemingly self-induced moral improvements in moral progress seems, *prima facie*, misplaced, precisely because these improvements are not based on human intervention. The fact that these developments are not man-made

does not mean, however, that they cannot be brought about by humans today or in the future, or, conversely, that analogous natural regressions (the beginning of a little ice age, a dry period) cannot be prevented by humans today or in the future. Understanding such developments as moral progress or regress could then be an incentive to learn to control such developments and to promote or initiate similar progress in the future or to prevent or hinder regress. – This most general argument for including even natural developments for moral improvement in moral progress (and conversely natural developments for moral deterioration in moral regress) is a fortiori an argument for also regarding all developments, less (than the completely natural ones) distant from human action, as moral improvement (or moral deterioration as moral regression). This applies, for example, to the anthropogenic greenhouse effect (mundane moral regression), which by now we know how to stop.

The general criterion for moral progress presented here and then its specification P1, *ethical progress*, also include epistemic progress in ethics as moral progress. Alternatively, one could insist that only moral progress in the narrow sense, that is, practical-moral progress, is truly moral progress, because only this includes what morality is actually about. However, the following reasons speak in favour of including ethical progress in moral progress. 1. Ethical progress is functional to practical moral progress. For one thing, it often triggers practical moral progress by pointing out moral deficits or possibilities for improvement, whereby the dissemination of these insights then triggers respective efforts for change. For another, the normative ethical criteria provide the criteria for moral improvement, which give the moral improvement efforts the right direction in the first place. In this way, ethical improvements also lead to improved moral practice: The latter is no longer oriented by misleading or unclear criteria for moral improvement. 2. The definition of the concept of moral progress includes that of moral desirability, which, however, is itself the subject of philosophical research and discussion. In this respect, the inclusion of ethical progress in moral progress allows a dynamisation of the criterion for moral progress, in that the definition of moral progress adopts the moral evaluation criterion from the most advanced ethics. – However, this entails specific epistemic problems, which will be discussed below (sect. 6).

4. Ethical progress – general

Ethical progress is an improvement in ethical knowledge. *Knowledge* is understood here extensionally broader than in the strong, Platonic philosophical sense (true, certainly justified belief), namely as: (epistemically) justified acceptable (not necessarily true) belief. Here, «*acceptable*» means: true, probably true or truth-like. This extensional expansion of the concept of knowledge compared to the classical one is necessary in order to allow for uncertain justifications, which are very frequent and indispensable in ethics as in philosophy in general, but cannot guarantee the truth of what is justified.

Knowledge progress is then, *in very general terms*:

PK1: the acquisition of new relevant knowledge (that is, the acquisition of new relevant acceptable and justified beliefs) and in particular the knowledge that what has been previously held to be true is false or very poorly justified;

PK2: the stronger justification of existing knowledge or of a relevant opinion;

PK3: the refutation and abandonment of false or poorly justified beliefs;

PK4: the further social dissemination of knowledge.

The third (*PK3*) of these four possibilities of knowledge progress is actually only a sub-case of *PK1*; but because of its special significance, I would like to refer to it again explicitly. That the social dissemination of knowledge (*PK4*) is also a form of knowledge progress can be seen most easily from the opposite, namely when knowledge that has already been acquired is lost again or is not disseminated socially, in the most blatant case when it ceases with its discoverer.

Knowledge regression – I will also come to this – is accordingly:

RK1: the adoption of a false opinion or one that is poorly or not at all justified;

RK2: the misjudgment of a more strongly justified opinion in favour of one that is less strongly or not at all justified;

RK3: the re-adoption of an opinion that has already been refuted;

RK4: the narrowing of the social dissemination of knowledge, in particular due to the death of the knowledge bearers, above all when the knowledge is not passed on, or due to the forgetting of the opinion itself or its justification.

Especially in philosophy, the latter form of knowledge regression (*RK4*) is a major problem due to the less clear conditions of knowledge and justification and blurred criteria, due to the abundance of competing

theories, but also due to RK1: the noise, that is, an overabundance of false, poorly justified and ill-conceived theories.

Ethics is now divided into three layers that build on each other: metaethics, normative ethics and applied ethics, with the more fundamental theories each helping to justify the theories that build on them. If we combine this classification and our understanding of the sub-disciplines of ethics with the explanations of knowledge progress, the following general *types of ethical progress* result:

PEK1: Knowledge progress in metaethics is, among other things: *PEK1.1.* new moral psychological and sociological insights into the foundations of morality; *PEK1.2.* (improved) insights into the meaning and function of morality and moral instruments, as well as *PEK1.3.* into the ontology and *PEK1.4.* the language of morality; *PEK1.5.* the improvement of the understanding of justifications; *PEK1.6.* the improvement of the understanding or conception of the type or structure of normative ethics (e.g. axiologism, stratification into an axiological and then a praxeological part, etc.); *PEK1.7.* the improvement of criteria for the justification of moral values; *PEK1.8.* the improvement of old criteria or the introduction of new ones and of new methods of justification of instruments for the realisation of moral values.

PEK2: Knowledge progress in normative ethics is, among other things, *PEK2.1.* the justification and elaboration of better criteria for moral evaluations or the improvement of the justification or elaboration of such criteria; *PEK2.2.* the justification and elaboration of the design of better instruments for realising moral values or the improvement of the justification or elaboration of such designs; *PEK2.3.* the justification and elaboration of strategies for the social and political enforcement of these instruments or the improvement of these justifications and elaborations.

PEK3: Progress in knowledge in applied ethics includes: *PEC3.1.* the justification and elaboration of better evaluation standards in individual areas of application of ethics or the improvement of the justification and elaboration of these standards; *PEC3.2.* the justification and elaboration of better standards of action (for typical decision-making situations) in the areas of the application of ethics or the improvement of the justification and elaboration of these standards; *PEC3.3.* the justification and elaboration of better instruments for realising moral values in the areas of the application of ethics or improving the justification and elaboration of these instruments; *PEK3.4.* the justification and elaboration of better evaluations of major alternatives for action in the areas of the application of ethics or the improvement of the justification and elaboration of these

evaluations. – In addition, in all these cases, there is also the dissemination of the improved knowledge.

A *typology of regressions in knowledge* is straightforward:

REK1: Knowledge regressions in metaethics include: *REK1.1*: the adoption of a poorly or not at all justified belief about ethical justification procedures; in particular, this includes the adoption and then use of a poor, namely ineffective or based on false premises justification procedure; *REK1.2*: the adoption of a poorly or not at all justified (and therefore usually false) opinion about the sense and function of morality; *REK1.3*: the adoption of a poorly or not at all justified (and therefore usually false) belief about the meaning of moral expressions; *REK1.4*: the adoption of a poorly or not at all justified (and therefore usually false) belief about the ontology of morality; *REK1.5*: the misjudgment of a more strongly justified metaethical belief in favour of a less or not at all justified metaethical belief; *REK1.6*: the renewed adoption of an already refuted metaethical belief; *REK1.7*: or the narrowing of the social distribution of metaethical knowledge.

REK2: Knowledge regressions in normative ethics include: *REK2.1*: the acceptance of poorly or not at all justified (and therefore usually false) normative-ethical criteria or systems of morality or parts of them; *REK2.2*: the acceptance of a poorly or not at all justified (and therefore usually false) justification of a normative-ethical criterion or system of morality or parts of them; *REK2.3*: the misjudgment of a more strongly justified normative-ethical belief in favour of a normative-ethical belief that is less well justified or not at all justified; *REK2.4*: the re-adoption of a normative-ethical belief that has already been refuted; *REK2.5*: the narrowing of the social dissemination of normative-ethical knowledge.

REK3: Regressions in applied ethics instead include: *REK3.1*: the adoption of an applied ethical belief that is poorly or not at all justified (and therefore usually false); *REK3.2*: the acceptance of a poorly or not at all justified (and therefore usually false) justification of an applied ethical belief; *REK3.3*: the misjudgment of a more strongly justified applied ethical belief in favour of a less or not at all justified applied ethical belief; *REK3.4*: the re-adoption of an already refuted applied ethical belief; *REK3.5*: the narrowing of the social dissemination of applied ethical knowledge.

The *connection between ethical and moral progress in the narrow sense* is disputed. Many ethicists do not include ethical progress in moral progress at all (they do not distinguish between moral progress in the narrow and broad sense). Others consider only ethical progress (or even only

normative or applied ethical progress (e.g. Moody-Adams 1999) to be moral progress. Still other theorists see both types of moral progress in the broader sense, but consider the influence of ethical progress on moral progress in the narrower sense, i.e. practical-moral progress, to be at most minimal; practical requirements or changed life situations drive moral progress (Pinker 2011). Ethicists, by contrast, hope, conversely, for a correspondingly strong influence of ethics. De facto, there is such an influence of ethical progress on moral progress, even if it does not always originate from ethics as a philosophical discipline. Recent examples include

1. applied-ethical insights into the harmfulness for those affected and subsequently the moral badness of behaviours such as sexual harassment in the workplace, foot binding, duelling, female genital mutilation, marital rape, animal cruelty (Buchanan & Powell 2016: 988; 2018: 57; Sauer 2019: 158) – where even the concept of ‘sexual harassment’ first had to be introduced (Fricker 2007: 149-152; Buchanan & Powell 2018: 54) – or corporal punishment, which then led to corresponding moral prohibitions as a result of the dissemination of these findings.
2. And conversely, there was the realisation that actions that had previously been morally prohibited, such as masturbation, homosexuality, premarital sexual relations, interracial marriage, money lending at interest (Baker 2019; Buchanan & Powell 2018: 56; Sauer 2019; Sauer et al. 2021: 3), are morally harmless, which then also led to the dissolution of these moral prohibitions.

Other types of influences are:

3. What has been ignored or wrongly considered neutral or even bad is recognised as morally good, which then leads to moral commandments or at least recommendations (e.g. caring for the poor).
4. What is wrongly considered morally good and therefore morally commanded or recommended is recognised as morally bad or neutral and then morally forbidden or at least no longer recommended (e.g. human or animal sacrifice to appease the gods, the sale of indulgences, nationalistic self-sacrifice, self-mortification, punishment for innocent harm).
5. Then there is ethical progress, which leads to moral improvements in several ways (such as insights into the deterrent effect of punishments, which helped to create a new understanding of the role of intentions and subjective states (*mens rea*) for retrospective responsibility and punishability, which in turn led to the decriminalisation of blameless transgressions, thus to the abolition of useless punishments, and conversely to the criminalisation of failed attempts at crime, hence to improved deterrence (Buchanan & Powell 2018: 54). – The applied ethical advances are also due – to a degree that is less easy to clarify – to normative ethical and even metaethical progress, in particular to the erosion of theological ethics

and the strengthening of ethics oriented towards the well-being of the beneficiaries.

5. Ethical progress – specification and justification of the general criteria

The criteria for ethical progress (and regression) that have just been presented are still imprecise, in particular because most of them contain, overtly or covertly, the term ‘better’ or ‘optimal’, which is anything but unambiguous and also has different meanings in the various criteria. Clarifying this meaning is not only a question of precision, but, as will become clear in a moment, also a matter of explicating the sense of these criteria and of the non-circularity of their justification.

The *metaethical* criteria for progress (PEK1.2–PEK1.8) all openly include the term ‘better’, and in addition they all refer covertly to criteria for practical evaluations. The only exceptions in this respect are, therefore, the moral-psychological and moral-sociological insights, which I will ignore in the following. On the surface, the intended improvements are all *epistemic*: there is a new insight that is justified as good or better than before (PK1; PK2). Whether the justification is good is measured against epistemological criteria of knowledge: Is the justification procedure effective, i.e. does it (sufficiently often) lead to true or at least acceptable (true, probably true or truth-like) insights, and have the criteria of this justification procedure been met? Such justification procedures are, for example, deduction, inductive-statistical or probabilistic reasoning, practical justification. They are developed in epistemology and argumentation theory, not in ethics, and can therefore be presupposed by ethics. So far, the explication of epistemic progress is presumably relatively uncontroversial; however, there may be more disagreement about the following parameters.

1. The insights must not only be acceptable and well justified, but also relevant and reasonably important (PK1; PK2). They are relevant if, critically, they refute accepted beliefs correctly and fairly often, or prove them to be poorly justified, or, constructively, if they contribute to a good theory of the respective sub-discipline of metaethics, which in turn is good if it adequately answers the questions of that sub-discipline. (Criteria for good philosophical theories: Lumer 2011; 2020: 5-16; 18-26).
2. All the mentioned metaethical insights, or more precisely, the associated theories contain at the central place (for the central hypotheses) practical justifications, that is, justifications of value judgements that determine the

degree of desirability of an evaluated object by listing the advantages and disadvantages of that object (Lumer 1990: 319-433; 2014). This is because all these theories are idealising-hermeneutic or technical-constructive.

Idealising-hermeneutic theories attempt to determine the meaning behind found or man-made objects, to reconstruct their function and mode of operation, but in doing so, they idealise the found objects and combine the best components into criteria for optimal objects. Such objects can be, for example: logical inferences, arguments, insights, scientific theories, but also moral systems, individual moral norms, the structure of ethical theories, etc. The proof that the criteria capture *optimal* or at least very good objects naturally consists in the practical justification of the corresponding value judgment. (Lumer 2020: 8; 10-12; 19-20). *Technical-constructive theories* also attempt to develop criteria for good instruments. As guidelines for the function of these instruments, they usually orient themselves on the idealised-hermeneutically reconstructed functions of corresponding models, but then invent suggestions for optimal instruments with this function, free of the ties to elements of such instruments that have already been realised. Again, this is possible for all the objects just mentioned. In technical-constructive theories, too, the proof of the optimality of the constructed instrument by a corresponding argument is the keystone of the theory (Lumer 2020: 8-9; 12; 20-21).

Theories of the meaning and function of morality as a whole⁵ as well as of the moral instruments (PEK1.2), of the language of morals (PEK1.4), of ethical justifications (PEK1.5), of the type and structure of normative ethics (PEK1.6) can, as is relatively easy to realise, be idealising-hermeneutic and are so in ideal cases; occasionally they advance to a technical-constructive theory. It is not necessarily immediately apparent that the other metaethical theories can and ideally are idealising-hermeneutic and technical-constructive as well: If most ontologies of morality (PEK1.3), such as ethical realism, have been empirically, epistemologically or metaphysically refuted (see below) and only social constructivism remains, then this constructivism provides, for one thing, an historical explanation: How did morality come about? What is it based on? For another, these explanations, when formulated more precisely, are idealising-hermeneutic; they are reconstructions of the rational emergence of morality: What socially important functions should this morality ideally fulfil – even if the respective promoters

⁵Theories on the function of morality are provided, for example, by. Kaluza 2008; Kitcher 2006; 2011: Ch. 2 (= 67-103); Lumer 1999: 197-205; <2000> 2009: 577-589; Mackie 1977: Ch. 5; Plato, Protagoras 320c-328b.

did not have this so precisely in mind? Was the introduced morality sufficiently good? Which morality would fulfil the function better? – Moral desirability concepts can also fulfil a social function and can be instruments. Accordingly, a theory that examines this function and develops criteria for good moral desirability terms (PEK1.7) from it, which then have a guiding function in the development of the definition of the moral desirability concept itself, is already idealising-hermeneutic (or even technical-constructive): Which social function is so important that a moral desirability concept should fulfil it? And what conditions must a moral desirability concept fulfil to be a good desirability concept? – The metaethical theory for the development and justification of criteria for instruments for the realisation of moral values (PEK1.8) – for instruments such as moral norms, institutions or virtues – must clarify the instrumental character and function of such instruments and then formulate general conditions for morally good instruments, which in turn are used in normative ethics for guidance in construction itself. Here, too, an evaluation is needed to determine whether instruments that fulfil these conditions are suitable for increasing the moral value of the world. Accordingly, the development of such criteria is a technical-constructive task.

The keystone of idealising-hermeneutic and technical-constructive theories is always an evaluation, and this is also true of metaethical theories. What kind of evaluation is this? For several reasons, it cannot be a moral evaluation. 1. Purely systematically – in contrast to the historical situation in which ethicists always philosophise within a morality that is decisive for them or around them – the moral desirability criteria are only developed in one of the next steps. Systematically, they do not yet exist at this point. Of course, when we engage in such metaethical considerations today, there are also practically used moral evaluation criteria. But there are many different ones, and they are not justified. One could simply base one's judgement on the criterion one has personally accepted in advance; but then there would be no point in starting the whole theoretical attempt at justification, because it would begin with an unjustified premise and would therefore be epistemically invalid. 2. A theory constructed in this way would also not be acceptable to everyone, but only to those who share the arbitrarily chosen desirability criterion. 3. And even one's own acceptance of the unfounded desirability criterion used as a justificatory basis is not permanently guaranteed because of this lack of justification. – If the evaluations are not moral, then the only other obvious evaluations that come into question are prudential evaluations: are the developed

structure of ethics, the criteria for the concept of desirability or for instruments for realising moral values good for the individual in each case – e.g. because a (to be developed) moral concept of desirability, which, since it is shared by all, can be used to resolve conflicts of interest, which however is in everyone's interest? This order of justification, in which prudential desirability systematically precedes moral desirability, also corresponds to the ontogenesis and phylogenesis of morality and the primacy of interests in the individual: Children have selfish motives and desires from the outset, and fairly soon also empathic ones; but morality only develops later, among other things on the basis of empathic motives, through the demands and affirmations of educators, but also from self-interested cooperation interests. In the phylogenesis of morality, this is not very different (except for the influence of educators). This dependence of moral motives on self-interested and much weaker empathic motives also remains in the primacy of prudential interests over moral interests: For most people, moral motivation is relatively weak anyway, significantly weaker than prudential motivation. But even for people who are very principled, who are even willing to sacrifice themselves for the moral principles they accept, this strong acceptance of morality presupposes that the morality thus accepted gives enough leeway to the self-interest of individuals in general; the acceptance of such a morality is not unconditional. – In short, the criteria for metaethical progress are not only epistemic (expansion of knowledge), but also prudential: having a moral concept of desirability that serves as a general social guideline and for the resolution of conflicts of interest is good for individuals; and then having criteria for developing such a concept is also good for the individuals.

Once the *concept of metaethical progress* has been clarified, this concept itself is relatively easy to *justify*: These criteria for progress help to distinguish between epistemic and prudential improvements on the one hand and corresponding deteriorations on the other when designing the structure of ethics, developing criteria for moral desirability and developing criteria for morally good instruments, and thus to promote epistemic and prudential improvement of progressive development itself.

Having specified and justified the criteria for metaethical progress, let us now turn to the *criteria for normative-ethical progress*, beginning with the development of the *concept of moral desirability*! Metaethics already provides massive guidelines for what the concept of moral desirability should be: it should be a good instrument with a specific function, which is also determined metaethically, namely, roughly speaking, to serve as a

generally accepted evaluation standard for resolving conflicts of interest, as a basis for large collective projects, and the like. A *normative-ethical progress* in this area then consists in developing a concept that ideally (i) fulfils all these functions, fulfils formal conditions for quantitative concepts and is prudentially better than other concepts that fulfil these conditions, or (ii) that, compared to what has been developed so far, is an approximation to this ideal. The *justification of this criterion* for normative-ethical progress in the development of the concept of moral desirability consists mainly of the justification, already developed in metaethics, of the value of such a concept of desirability itself – keyword: prudential value of a concept with this social function. The only thing missing is the trivial addition that if the ideal striven for is prudentially good, then a step in this direction is also a prudential advance in (normative) ethics.

What is the *criterion for normative-ethical progress in the design of general criteria for types of moral instruments* for the moral improvement of the world and also in the design of such instruments themselves? On the metaethical level, only a general idea for such instruments has been developed in this regard: We need instruments for the broad moral improvement of the world for reasons such as increasing the motivation for morally good action, coordinating to achieve greater effects, etc., beyond individual morally good actions (see above). The *criterion for progress in the development of general criteria for types of moral instruments and individual instruments* is then: 1. The conception of a new or modified instrument for the moral improvement of the world (e.g. for moral commandments, moral norms, moral institutions, etc.) is a normative-ethical progress if the conceived instrument is an effective instrument for increasing moral desirability and it would increase moral desirability to an almost maximum extent (under realistic conditions) in the area of application in question. 2. And the conceptualisation of general criteria for types of moral instruments is a normative-ethical progress if, with these general criteria, such new instruments for moral improvement, which are optimal under the respective conditions, can be well and practically conceptualised. In both sub-conditions, the concept of moral desirability, which has just been discussed, is used for the first time and was not previously available. And with this concept, the progress criterion just introduced can then also be justified: the conceptualisations mentioned in the progress criterion are normative-ethical progress because these insights are essential steps towards realising the instruments themselves and thus towards the moral improvement of the world.

The *further criteria for ethical* and then also *moral progress* can now

always use the moral *concept of desirability as the central measurement standard* for improvements, without the risk of using undefined concepts or unfounded premises. This means that the definitions of the further criteria are relatively trivial: In other areas of ethics, moral progress occurs when a relevant insight for this area is not only an insight, i.e. rationally well justified, but also contributes to the moral improvement of the world.

6. Epistemic problems of ethical progress: consequential errors, Munchausen's trilemma, self-referentiality and self-praise

The concept of progress includes that of positive evaluation; and I have already said above that the evaluation of moral progress is to be understood morally here, i.e. on the basis of moral criteria of desirability. However, the criteria of moral evaluation themselves are the subject of ethics, in particular metaethics. And this then leads to a series of epistemic problems specifically in the theory of ethical progress.

No fallacy from evolution: The fallacy from evolution is generally: 'Because something comes later in development, it is better' (*postea ergo melior*). Applied to ethics and morals, it reads: 'Because our ethics / morals have replaced their historical predecessors, they are ethically / morally better than these.' This inference is a fallacy because no normative conclusion follows from the empirical fact of historical succession alone. After all, there are also regressions, especially in morals and ethics. In order to evaluate a development as progress, criteria of evaluation must be presupposed and used. (On the criticism of the fallacy from evolution: Russell <1907> 1999.) In fact, the justification of progress assertions so far did not and also in the following (sections 8-10) will not follow the scheme of the inference from evolution, but is based on evaluation criteria. So far, so good. On the other hand, the evaluation criteria applied here have themselves only emerged historically and are in fact based on progress in knowledge. Does this not result in a fallacy from evolution of a higher level or similar? – The theory outlined here does justice to both of these considerations and does not commit the fallacy from evolution. 1. The classifications as ethical or moral progress that will follow do not simply assume that current ethics or morals are at the end of a preliminary development. Rather, these classifications (step S4, cf. below) are based on the application of presupposed evaluation criteria. 2. These criteria were neither arbitrarily presupposed nor justified by their historical position.

Rather, although these criteria could only be developed after a long epistemic history, they were justified not historically but systematically (steps S1, S2). This is the difference between the context of discovery versus the context of justification (Hoyningen-Huene 1987). 3. This systematic justification followed a logical sequence with the following steps:

S1: epistemic, prudential-practical justification of criteria for the definition of moral value judgements,

S2: development and justification of corresponding definitions on the basis of the previously established criteria,

S3: application of the thus defined concept of moral desirability to the justification of moral instruments, and finally

S4: application of the concept of moral desirability to the evaluation of historical moral and mundane development as morally so and so good and thus as moral progress or regression.

No circular justification: Metaethics and normative ethics, in particular the theory of the justification of moral evaluation criteria and moral value theory itself, provide the criteria for what moral progress is. On the other hand, however, these theories themselves are also to be classified as progressive or not. Contrary to appearances, this does not lead to a circularity problem. 1. For one thing, the (subsequent) classification, e.g. as an ethically / epistemically progressive thesis or justification theory, is usually not used again to justify this thesis or theory. The justification for replacing a theory or thesis t_1 with a theory or thesis t_2 that is incompatible with it is not: ' t_2 is *epistemically better* than t_1 ', but rather, for example: ' t_1 is based on a false justification (PK3) (one of the premises was false, the inference was not conclusive (PK3)...), while the argument for t_2 is argumentatively valid (PK1)' or: 'The justification for t_1 is argumentatively valid, but weaker than that for t_2 : t_1 was only based on assumptions, whereas t_2 was based on empirical observations (PK2)'.⁶ Only on the basis of epistemic justifications like those just given can the transition from t_1 to t_2 be evaluated as ethical progress, using the definition of 'epistemic progress' (see in section 2 the criteria PK1-PK4). 2. For another thing, ethical developments can also be assessed as *moral* progress – a well-justified and precise moral desirability concept can help to make better moral decisions (the really morally best option is chosen) and thus also to increase the moral desirability of the world –; but this assessment is not part of the justification of this desirability concept either. As the sequence S1-S4 makes clear, the concept of moral desirability, developed

⁶Theory and criteria of the strength of justification of theses: Lumer 2018.

only in step S2, is not used in the justification of steps S1 and S2. *After that*, in steps S3 and S4, the development of this ethics, of the moral concept of desirability, can also be evaluated as *moral* progress (clearer and more precise moral decisions) – and not only, as before, as ethical progress. (Namely, it helps to clarify and specify moral evaluations and thus also to make better decisions and thus to improve the world morally.) It is crucial again that this is a 1. systematically later 2. *evaluation of* this concept, which was not used in its epistemic justification (steps S1 and S2).

Possible consequential errors: Even if the systematic order of justification presented is non-circular, it is still open to the problem of *consequential errors*: If the theory of justification is wrong (S1, S2), then wrong criteria for evaluation are developed (S2), wrong evaluations are made (S3), and finally, it is possible that even the development of this wrong theory of justification is classified as ethical progress (S4). Consequential errors can be found in all possible theories – once you are on the wrong path, you often continue down it undeterred. However, consequential errors specifically resulting from a false metaethics, in particular evaluation theory, do not lead to a black hole of progress, in which all criteria for the morally good and thus the morally good itself disappear, namely because the false classification as progress does not lead to an exclusion of further research on the moral evaluation criteria. To get out of this impasse, we need a much more independent basis for the justification of the criteria of evaluation, which does not disappear with the original epistemic error and the consequential errors.

Münchhausen's trilemma: But this immediately brings us to the next problem: Are there such independent foundations for the justification of evaluation criteria? Or more generally: Can the criteria for the justification of evaluation criteria be justified at all? Don't we end up here, as Hans Albert called it, with a Münchhausen trilemma (Albert 1980: 10-15),⁷ more precisely, with a vertical Münchhausen trilemma in the justification of ever deeper levels of justification? The *Münchhausen trilemma* in this continuation of justifications consists of three bad alternatives that then arise: The attempt at justification leads to (i) an *infinite regress* of ever new justifications, (ii) a *circularity* of justifications, or (iii) an arbitrary termination of justifications, i.e. to *dogmatism*. (Albert considers the trilemma to be insoluble; he therefore recommends dispensing with justifi-

⁷The trilemma is actually introduced by Aristotle (*Analytica posteriora* 72b 5-18) and subsequently discussed. Sextus Empiricus discusses the trilemma and traces it back to the sceptic Agrippa, which is why it is also called the '*Agrippa Trilemma*.'

cations and switching to Popperian falsificationism.) As a detailed analysis shows (Lumer 1990: 197-209), there is, however, a solution that includes a justification: The trilemma can be dissolved by, among other things, recourse to *qualified first* criteria, i.e. criteria of justification that represent a genuine beginning, namely, are not justified, but – because of their evolutionary advantage and practical unavoidability – are nevertheless not arbitrary; the correct applications of these qualified first criteria are then already justified. In the realm of empirical knowledge, first of all the capacity to recognise similarities entails such a qualified first criterion; in the realm of practical knowledge, these qualified first criteria are the criteria for simple prudential practical evaluations and decisions: We decide between alternative actions according to the intrinsic evaluations of the assumed consequences of the possible actions. In the simplest case, only one consequence of two alternatives is evaluated. In more complex cases, more and more complex alternatives and more and more very ramified, possibly only probabilistic or completely uncertain consequences are evaluated. This origin of practical justifications is not justified, but simply empirically given; and it is not arbitrary in the sense that it forms an evolutionarily advantageous, psychologically unchangeable basic structure of our decisions. On this basis, criteria for more complex justification criteria can then also be justified in several ascending stages.⁸ Above (Section 5) it was shown how the criteria for moral evaluation criteria could be justified by means of general human extra-moral practical interests, by means of a practically justifying idealising-hermeneutic determination of the function of morality, especially of the moral desirability criteria. Once these moral desirability criteria have been developed (S2), the rest of morality can be justified through them (S3). – In addition to these practical justifications and their criteria, a number of forms of justification are also adopted and applied in ethics from general epistemology, and are thus not developed and justified in metaethics. This is the case, for example, in the recognition of the social function of morality or the way moral instruments work, or in moral psychology. In these forms of justification, an analogous justification problem arises in epistemology or the philosophy of science – but is also solved there in an analogous way.

De facto pluralism in metaethics, embarrassing self-referentiality and self-praise: There are various competing schools in metaethics, as in normative and applied ethics; de facto, pluralism prevails. In critical cases,

⁸Outline of a circle-free justification of criteria, among other things, for very complex value judgements: Lumer 1990: 437-447.

the progress of the theory of one school is then a step backwards from the point of view of the other school. And every theory, provided it is coherent, will confirm itself on the basis of the criteria it has developed that it represents the most highly developed progress. So it comes down to self-referentiality and self-praise – not very nice qualities! I'm afraid this can't be avoided. (For an attempt to avoid this by means of a normative-ethical and metaethical neutral concept of moral progress, see in the appendix the critique of corresponding criteria of progress (in particular nos. 1.3 and 2.1).) But for one thing, this applies equally to all theories. The theory of moral progress is just a continuation of the rest of the ethical theory; in principle, there are as many theories of moral progress as there are metaethics and normative ethics. For another thing, and above all, the theories considered progressive are not simply chosen according to taste, but are, in cases of strong justifications, justified on the basis of multi-level criteria of justification. And these justifications can be wrong and criticised; but they can also prove to be valid and stable in discussion. This is the normal competition between theories with justifications and openness to criticism and not a fundamental problem. Whether a particular metaethics, for example, provides the best criterion for moral desirability depends on whether this criterion is valid and adequately justified and, if necessary – if several criteria are valid and adequately justified – whether it is more strongly justified than its competitors. What looks like embarrassing self-referentiality and self-praise is ultimately just a proof of coherence for one's own theory. And if this proof of coherence is successful and the theory is more strongly justified than any competing coherent theories, then it is optimally justified.

However, it is crucial for the solution of the five epistemic problems just discussed that the theory of moral progress also contains such a complete and circular-free justification of the criteria of justification and evaluation, that is, that not only moral progress in the narrow sense, practical moral progress (P2), is dealt with, but also *ethical* progress. For in the development of the criteria for ethical progress, the concept of moral desirability cannot yet be presupposed; rather, it is only developed there, whereas, once it has been developed, it can be used to define the other types of progress. The inclusion of ethical progress is therefore an essential characteristic of the theory of moral progress presented here, because this theory draws its criterion of moral progress from it.

The fact that the topic of ethical progress is not treated or not treated sufficiently is then a fundamental problem of competing theories. In other words: competing theories of moral progress usually have major problems in that they do not justify the criteria

for moral progress or do not justify them sufficiently. I can only show this here with a few examples.

Jesse Prinz methodically advocates a naturalistic moral theory, but content-wise, with regard to the foundations and mechanisms of morality, he advocates a culturally relative sentimentalism (Prinz 2007: Part I (= pp. 13-169)). Both together then lead to a moderate relativism: there is an abundance of morals, each of which confirms itself (ibid. 308). Even the Western morality of autonomy is no better than the others; it ignores the values of the divine/natural and of the community (ibid. 304-305). Despite all plurality and relativity, according to Prinz, some moral values are better than others from an external perspective because they serve our desires and needs; and certain local moral advances are possible – but without aggregating into a history of moral progress. – Prinz's naturalistic method, properly used, precludes a moral evaluation and thus also a theory of moral progress. This exclusion is further supported by his empirical sentimentalist theory of morality, which, however, completely underestimates – empirically incorrectly – the cognitive components in morality. The fact that Prinz then goes on to advocate moral relativism and declares some moral values to be better is a transgression of methodological naturalism that, moreover, remains ad hoc and unfounded. – This theory illustrates that a methodological naturalism cannot arrive at a theory of moral progress, precisely because methodological naturalism cannot provide evaluative criteria as a consequence of Hume's Law; if it nevertheless wants to make evaluations, it must get these evaluative criteria from somewhere else. But Prinz then turns this methodically induced failure into a normative argument, albeit without any foundation, for denying (to a large extent) the existence of criteria for moral progress and of moral progress itself. My critical conclusion is: For a theory of moral progress, one simply needs a different theory than methodological naturalism, namely one that also provides criteria for moral evaluation.

Philip Kitcher develops a broad, supposedly also naturalistic theory of moral progress, according to which the development of morality begins about 50,000 years ago (Kitcher 2011). Morality, that is, in his view, control by social rules and the internalisation of these rules, develops, according to Kitcher, in response to the weaknesses of innate altruism, namely the inability to curb sufficiently group-damaging selfish behaviour. In a cultural evolution, the social rules that have arisen in this way would be progressively developed in such a way that the strengthening of the community achieved by them would lead to success in the competition with other groups through the internal rule-led organisation. Kitcher's criteria for the progress of morality are: (i) that this morality compensates for the failure of altruism, (ii) that it resolves social tensions, and (iii) that it leads to success in group selection. On this basis, Kitcher even defines 'moral truth' pragmatically: ethical rules (or their «descriptive counterparts» – whatever that means) are true if they permanently survive corresponding progress (ibid. 246). – So Kitcher even develops a criterion for moral truth. But for him, a development of morality is not progress just because the new morality is morally better than the old one; rather, the concept of progress is primary for him. The three criteria for progress are introduced by Kitcher ad hoc and are not justified (see also the criticism by: Meyer 2011). They even compete with each other (an example of this competition is a peace-loving, prosperous, egalitarian society (criteria i and ii), which is destroyed by military superiority (criterion iii)). They are much too vague to be able to use them to compare possible improvements in social morality. And they do not fulfil moral expectations, such as the expectation of protection of the weak. The conclusion is that instead of solving the question of the

criteria of progress ad hoc, it is better to solve it by linking it to the theory of the morally good, which does not have to be understood in an objectivist, value-realistic way.

7. Practical-moral progress – a simple criterion

As already mentioned at the end of section 5, once a well-founded (that is, among other things, non-circular) and practicable concept of moral desirability has been developed, it is, trivially, the criterion for moral progress: *Moral progress in the narrow sense*, i.e. practical moral and mundane moral progress, *is thus a moral improvement of the world* or, more precisely, of the respective objects in this world. According to the meaning explained at the beginning, progress is generally a positively evaluated change (in the context of a development); and moral progress is about a morally positively evaluated change. This basic idea of the concept of progress could not be simply applied to metaethics and the axiological part of normative ethics because this concept of moral desirability was not yet available. However, once it has been developed and well justified on the basis of metaethical and normative ethical constructive theory work, it can be used without any problems to evaluate all further developments as moral improvement or deterioration, i.e. as moral progress or regression. This applies to all types of moral progress distinguished here: the improvements of moral systems (P2.1, P2.2) and of moral action (P2.3), as well as the mundane improvements of the world (P3.1–P3.3). For these differ only in their evaluated object – sources of morality (P2.1), instruments for improving the world (P2.2), moral action (P2.3) and social welfare (P3.1–P3.3) – but not in the criterion used in the evaluation, namely moral desirability.

This concludes the development and justification of the various concepts of moral progress in the broader sense. In the appendix, some alternative concepts of moral progress in the broader sense, namely ethical and moral progress in the narrower sense (i.e. moral-theoretical and practical moral progress), are discussed. In the next three sections, however, the concepts of moral progress just developed are applied by presenting examples from the various groups of moral progress in the broader sense.

8. Ethical progresses and regressions – some examples

After the general, conceptual part of the theory of moral progress, now some applications follow. I cannot develop a comprehensive history of moral progress here, but only give some examples of moral progress, above all in recent times, and justify their progressiveness. These examples are not intended to simply reflect what I personally consider to be moral improvements⁹ but capture broader trends that are seen as progress by many ethicists and that can be justified as progress according to the above criteria.

Are there ethical progresses now? Yes, there are. The following examples are intended to prove this thesis.

In my opinion, the following are some of the significant *metaethical progresses* of the last 50 years.

1. *Motive internalism*: Despite the existence of some outspoken externalists, the internalism debate has led to a relatively broad, albeit often diffuse, acceptance of a motive-internalistic criterion for moral justifications, which can be formulated as follows: It is an adequacy condition for sound moral justifications that a moral criterion is only validly justified if an open and rational addressee, after taking up the moral justification, is motivated to accept this morality for themselves and is at least somewhat motivated to follow it. What I have just formulated is, of course, a special interpretation of motive internalism, namely as an adequacy condition for valid moral justifications etc. Unfortunately, there is a plethora of divergent interpretations; but many proponents of motive internalism also want roughly what I have just formulated. And the dissemination of this form of internalism is a step forward, 1. because it provides a starting point for moral justifications, especially instrumentalist moral justifications, which has been missing so far, and 2. because it makes moral justifications pragmatically relevant, i.e. only recognises as a moral justification what really contributes to changing the world through the acceptance and observance of a moral criterion; finally, 3. the recognition of motive internalism as a postulate for moral conceptions also introduces a further level into the justification of moral conceptions, which in turn recurs to non-moral interests.

⁹The criteria I have developed can be found in the following writings, among others: Criteria for good ethical theories: Lumer 2020: 7-14; 19-21; 25-26; 30-33; Lumer 2011: 45-75. – Criteria for justifying morals: Lumer <2000> 2009: 30-127; 577-589; Lumer 2015. – Criteria for moral evaluations: Lumer <2000> 2009: 589-632; Lumer 2005: 2-39; Lumer 2021.

2. *Recognition of the problem of overdemandingness*: A further progress was the *debate about moral overdemandingness* and the extensive recognition of the legitimacy of this criticism of act utilitarianism and of act welfarism in general. This is a step forward not only because it is substantively adequate, but also because it brings freely preaching ethicists back to the ground of social and rational reality: one cannot simply make moral demands of any strength without losing contact with the actual addressees of morality.

3. *The disappearance of metaethical semanticism*: A metaethical progress that occurred somewhat earlier is the *disappearance of metaethical semanticism*, as advocated in particular by Richard Hare, i.e. the theory that moral criteria can be derived from the meaning of moral language. The vast majority of ethicists have now realised that no morality can be justified on the basis of the meaning of moral expressions. – This is an ethical progress, if only because metaethical semanticism fails the condition of motive internalism: Even if the moral language had, for example, the meaning of universal prescriptivism assumed by Hare, one can change the meaning of linguistic expressions. Metaethical semanticism provides no reason why one should not do so.

4. *Repressing theological justifications of morality*: A metaethical progress that is perhaps less noticeable in the philosophical debate, but more so in public political debate, is the *repressing of theological justifications of morality* and thus of bad metaphysics. Even theologians in the relevant commissions and in general public political debates no longer refer to theological arguments, but to human dignity, for example. – This is metaethical progress because it rejects moral justifications that essentially contain premises that cannot be justified rationally.

But in my opinion, there have also been significant *metaethical regressions*, particularly since the 1990s.

1. *The diffusion of methodological intuitionism*: A first metaethical regression is the *diffusion of methodological intuitionism* as a form of ‘moral justification’. In this assessment, I refer to all forms of intuitionism: the old intuitionism, which also claimed this title for itself and developed approaches to a theory of the perception of the moral through intuitions (Ross <1930> 2002); a Rawlsian intuitionism of reflective equilibrium (Rawls <1971> 1999: §§ 4; 9); an intuitionism of popular opinions, which are now also empirically examined in experimental ethics, as well as an untheorised intuitionism that uses one’s own moral intuitions

as premises.¹⁰ – This is a metaethical regression, because recourse to intuitions, above all those that the addressee of the argument does not accept, is simply a renunciation of justification. One simply does not justify further and may then still act as if one's own intuitions had a special dignity. But this dignity is not accounted for; and as a rule, such intuitions are based either on the adoption of sources recognised as authorities or on relatively complex cognitive processes that one would like to have explained. A consequence of this failure to provide justification is that one cannot convince anyone by resorting to intuitions. Either the other person shares these intuitions, in which case he is already convinced and cannot be convinced; or he has no or contrary beliefs on the matter; in which case the intuitions of others do not give him any reason to form a new belief.

2. *The dissemination of ethical realism*: Another metaethical regression is a certain dissemination of ethical realism in the strong sense, i.e. the thesis that there is a moral reality independent of the moral attitudes of moral subjects that only needs to be discovered. – This is a metaethical regression, because the strong arguments against this thesis (in particular: Mackie 1977: 36-42) are simply no longer received by the adherents of moral realism.

3. *The diffusion of neonaturalism*: A further metaethical regression is a certain *neonaturalism* that has developed among some researchers and advocates of an empirical moral psychology and moral physiology: The (alleged) empirical results from moral psychology and moral physiology of moral judgement and action are turned normative.¹¹ – This is a metaethical step backwards because it violates Hume's Law. This verdict does not mean, of course, that such empirical information could not be ethically relevant. But ethics, metaethics is not moral psychology or physiology; and moral prescriptions do not arise directly from such empirical findings.

¹⁰Why do I count Rawls' method of reflective equilibrium as methodological intuitionism? The core of reflective equilibrium is that coherence is established between fundamental intuitions, intuitions about maxims and possibly intuitions about individual cases; according to Rawls, abandoning former intuitions to establish this coherence is the result of reflection; but this reflection consists of keeping in mind the various possible coherent systems; the selection between them is again an intuitive act. Incidentally, Rawls's own fundamental moral intuition is that of impartiality, which is then operationalised by the veil of ignorance.

¹¹I have already analysed somewhat disguised examples of this, namely the theories of Prinz and Kitcher, above.

There has also been a series of *progresses* in *normative ethics* over the last 50 years.

1. *Development of axiological criteria for distributive justice*: The most important advances in normative ethics are arguably the development and justification of completely new, fruitful fundamental axiological criteria for distributive justice: Rawls's principles of justice, maximin, leximin, moderate egalitarianism, prioritarianism, sufficientarianism, but also the game-theoretical elaboration of contract theory by Gauthier, for example. – Of course not all these criteria can be right. But the debate shows that in this area, in contrast to the largely deadlocked discussion between utilitarians and Kantians, for example, there is considerable scope for the development of, for example, criteria for moral desirability, which can rectify the often-criticised deficits of utilitarianism, such as the neglect of distributive justice. It is therefore an expansion of the spectrum of alternatives and of the cognitive horizon and thus a normative-ethical advance.

2. *Deontic part of welfare ethics*: Other advances in normative ethics concern the deontic part of welfare ethics, i.e. the part of welfare ethics that deals with the implementation of moral evaluations in moral commandments. One of the new proposals that qualitatively goes well beyond act utilitarianism or ideal rule utilitarianism is a particular form of rule utilitarianism, as developed by Richard Brandt (Brandt 1996: 123-163) and Brad Hooker (Hooker 2000: 2), which is better referred to as 'conscience utilitarianism'. According to this, the morally right thing to do is the thing prescribed by the ethics whose anchoring in people's conscience would be optimal. An alternative proposal is real rule utilitarianism (e.g. Urmson 1953: 33-39; Miller 2009: 5-28) or progressive normwelfarism (Lumer 2002: 93-97). – This is a normative-ethical progress for analogous reasons as in the development of new criteria for distributive justice: the development of new criteria for moral duties has enriched a discussion that had become bogged down on a few alternatives with differentiated alternatives that attempt to solve the problems of the initial alternatives. At the same time, new problems of these initial alternatives were discovered and a search for further creative solutions was stimulated.

3. *The emergence and certain diffusion of prioritarianism*: Prioritarianism (e.g. Parfit 1997) is a normative-ethical advance over both utilitarianism and the maximin or leximin criterion. It is a synthesis of the two: on the one hand, it preserves the efficiency of utilitarianism and the consideration of the interests of each person, as in utilitarianism, but on the other hand, it introduces a criterion of distributive justice that particularly takes into

account the interests of the less well-off. In addition, prioritarianism, on the one hand, retains the special concern of Maximin and Leximin for the less well-off, but on the other hand, it eliminates the uneconomical and unjust exclusive focus of Maximin and Leximin on improving the lot of the worst off. In addition, prioritarianism can be justified internalistically from compassion, because compassion is also much more strongly triggered by the unhappiness of the worse off, but it also does not exclude the pleasure about the well-being of the well-off (Lumer <2000> 2009: 589-632; 2005: 22-39; 2021a). It thus fulfils the criterion of motive internalism.

Fundamental *progresses in knowledge in applied ethics* over the last 50 years have been made, for example, in *political applied ethics*. In addition, however, a wealth of other fields of applied ethics have been opened up, which has then led to the establishment of a number of new morally good standards in these fields. Some examples are the development of standards and theories on the following topics:

1. deliberative democracy,
2. more recently, effective altruism,
3. rights or concerns of future generations,
4. international justice and development ethics,
5. rights of minorities or the oppressed, especially women, homosexuals, queer persons, ethnic and national minorities,
6. animal rights and animal welfare,
7. climate ethics and climate justice.

In all these areas, philosophers have also been politically active and have supported existing social movements in both practical and theoretical ways. This, too, is a form of knowledge advancement, in that the corresponding moral knowledge is now very widespread among the population.

9. Progresses and regressions of morals and moral systems – some examples

The progress of moral systems in containing violence: The previous presentation of ethical progress contained only examples that perhaps reveal a certain trend, but no overall evaluation of historical development. This would require a very extensive and very specific study of the history of ethics, which I am not aware of to date. We are in a better position with regard to the question of the historical progress of moral systems. In his monumental study «The Better Angels of Our Nature. Why Violence Has

Declined» (Pinker 2011: esp. chaps. 4; 7; 9), Steven Pinker has shown that interpersonal violence has significantly decreased historically – despite the barbaric excesses of the 20th century. He also explained this development by what has been called here the ‘improvement of moral systems’. For one thing, there has been a significant expansion of the sources of morality, namely empathy, and for another, of the instruments for morally improving the world. He mentions the following instruments: self-control (against violent acts of affect), the state’s monopoly on the use of force, the abolition or restriction of cruel punishments and the death penalty, the prohibition of slavery, the legal restriction of despotism, more humane warfare and humanitarian law of war, the introduction of civil rights and the state’s action against lynch law, pogroms and blood feuds, the introduction and strengthening of rights for women, homosexuals, children and animals. These are moral advances because these improvements increase human well-being: the curtailment of well-being through violence is eliminated, and fear of acts of violence also decreases.

Other improvements in moral systems: In addition to these improvements in moral systems that specifically led to a reduction in violence, some other historically relatively stable improvements in moral systems can be added that have improved human well-being in other ways and also contributed to greater justice: the introduction of judges and then of an independent judicial system to arbitrate on all kinds of conflicts and of an independent police force to protect rights; generally the introduction of laws enforced by sanctions; the diffusion of democracy; the diffusion of fundamental rights and, in more recent history, the diffusion of liberal rights such as: right to abortion and divorce, LGBTQ+ rights. More generally, the set of beneficiaries protected by morality has expanded to include: people outside one’s clan, slaves, people in distant countries, animals. (This development, ‘the expanding circle’, is for many ethicists *the* fundamental and lasting moral progress: Singer <1981> 2011: in particular 96-124; Sauer 2023; Buchanan & Powell 2018: 153-158; Tomasello 2016.) In a great many countries, there is progressive taxation, which also serves the redistribution of material goods via the payment of community tasks and thus also social justice. In many countries, welfare state systems have been introduced and expanded that serve in particular to improve the well-being of the disadvantaged and thus also promote social justice. And historically, the number of genuine democracies with the rule of law has increased in the long term – despite recent setbacks. Also since Kant’s times, in many countries there have been considerable moral improvements with respect to Kant’s republican ideals

and desiderata regarding institutional moral progress: self-determination of peoples, evolution of a republican constitution, rule of law, outlawing of war (Kant 1798: A144-145 / AA VII: 85-86).

Regressions in moral systems: Unfortunately, the progress is also accompanied by a series of moral regressions. In recent decades, there has been a plethora of systemic barbarities, such as National Socialism, the Cultural Revolution in China, Stalinism in the Soviet Union, the Khmer Rouge's regime of terror, and the return to authoritarian rule in Russia and China. The intrinsic humanitarian regression is the resulting suffering of the affected populations. The regressions in the moral systems include: the abandonment and violation of human rights; structural: the abolition of important parts of (morality respecting) democracy, which is an instrument for realising moral norms; persecution or curtailment of the opposition (freedom of expression, freedom of the press); introduction of propaganda tools and disinformation systems; abolition of substantially democratic elections.

Moral improvements of moral action itself: Kant made the following prediction regarding improvements of moral action itself:

Gradually, there will be less violence on the part of the powerful and more obedience to the laws. There will be more benevolence, less bickering in lawsuits, more reliability in keeping one's word, etc., partly out of a love of honour, partly out of well-understood self-interest in the community, and ultimately this will extend to the peoples in their external relations with each other, until we have a world civil society (Kant 1798: A157-158 / AA VII, 91-92; *my translation*. – C.L.).

Some of these forecasts of progress are certainly dubious (law-abiding, keeping one's word) to clearly wrong (processes), but others are correct. Above all, the violence of the powerful has decreased as a result of the worldwide reduction of absolute rule and the submission of the executive powerful to the rule of law. And individual acts of kindness have increased as a result of larger circles having more resources at their disposal, better information about the situation of other people, even those far away, but above all through a growing understanding of the situation and the feelings of people in miserable circumstances, instead of even condemning them or blaming them for their situation, as often happened in the past. The historical trend in the number and scale of wars is controversial; often, estimates are distorted due to a failure to take into account the size of the world population. Taking into account the enormous historical population growth, Pinker comes to a progressive diagnosis: the number and deadly potential of wars have historically decreased relatively, with the

increasing revulsion at the horrors of war and the greater peaceableness of democracies also playing a major role (Pinker 2011: chapters 5-6).

10. Progresses and regressions of mundane developments in the world

Bajohr [...] said [...], the well-known question to historians, about all the things that used to be better in former times, can be answered with a single word: «Nothing». – [...] Magnus Brechtken particularly liked this bon mot. Not in every detail, but overall, 500, 200, 100 and certainly 80 years ago, nothing was better than it is today. People had far less prosperity, security, health, freedom, self-determination and opportunities for development.

(The historian Magnus Brechtken on his colleague Frank Bajohr – Süddeutsche Zeitung, 24 December 2024: Was kann man aus der Vergangenheit für die Zukunft lernen?; my translation. – C.L.)

The most important drivers of the *mundane improvement of the world*, i.e. of social well-being, through non-specifically moral means are scientific and technical progress, economic progress through a better economic system and increased productivity as well as less heavy physical labour, medical and hygienic progress and that of health systems, but also the dissemination and improvement of education, in particular school education, the enormous expansion of access to information through the internet and technical communication possibilities. The increased material wealth – even the proportion of the absolute poor in the total population has decreased in recent decades – has led to the satisfaction of basic needs and the spread of consumer goods among a large proportion of the population. As a result, people live significantly longer on average than in the past. Their subjective well-being has increased due to the elimination or reduction of many sources of fear – to a particularly strong extent due to extensive social security systems, but also due to technical safety and medical precautions – as well as the convenience of leisure and consumer

goods, and opportunities for self-determined realisation of one's own potential, and finally techniques of psychological control. And education, as well as the expansion of knowledge and skills, have also increased the qualitative side of well-being. (On all this: Easterlin & O'Connor 2025.) These advances are fairly stable and, according to the current state of knowledge, will continue into the future for the time being, because they are also based on cumulative effects, in particular the acquisition and dissemination of new knowledge and new technologies.

Well-known associated *mundane deteriorations of the world* are environmental degradation and the depletion or reduction of non-renewable or difficult-to-replace resources, an increase in stress.

These developments are, of course, well known. But sometimes it is good to be reminded of them in the face of gloomy future prognoses and end-time moods.

11. APPENDIX: Discussing alternative theories of moral progress, and justifying the prioritarian criterion

In this appendix, some alternative approaches to the conceptualisation of ethical and moral progress developed here are discussed, first with regard to ethical progress and then with regard to moral progress.

Normative-ethical progress according to moral realism: There are a number of alternative theories of moral progress, but hardly any of *ethical progress*, and even then only of normative-ethical progress, not metaethical progress. The most important theory of normative-ethical progress is implied by ethical realism: *Ethical realism* implies the objectivity of morals in the sense of morale-semantic cognitivism (according to which moral judgements can be true or false), but goes beyond this through the ontological thesis that moral facts are independent of subjective performances (in particular, evaluations, emotions, desires and desirability criteria, insights...) of the moral subjects (though they often depend on the subjective performance of the moral beneficiaries, for example when they evaluate their suffering negatively); that is, there is an autonomous moral reality (e.g. Boyd 1988: 182; Dancy 1998: 534a; McNaughton 1988: 7). From this ontological and epistemological thesis, a simple criterion for (normative) ethical and applied ethical progress emerges: *Ethical progress* exists precisely when moral subjects gain a new, better or better justified cognition of moral reality. The epistemic component of this criterion is that the new belief must be an insight or cognition, i.e. it must be acceptable and

well justified. The moral relevance of the ethically progressive cognition, instead, simply arises from its content: it is a realisation of a piece of moral reality. Unlike the criterion developed above, this criterion does not recur to the moral subject's prudential desirability criteria.

Discussion of the realistic criterion of normative-ethical progress: If ethical realism were correct, its criterion for ethical progress would indeed be immediately plausible and also correct according to the criteria PK1-PK4 developed above (see above, Section 2). The problem with the criterion of ethical realism, however, is that the underlying ethical ontology is false, so that the conditions for the application of this criterion are not met. This is not the place for a full justification of this claim of falsity. The following note will only touch on some of these criticisms.

Mackie's arguments of queerness against ethical realism: Mackie summarised the most important arguments against ethical realism in his 'arguments of queerness' (Mackie 1977: 39-42): *Epistemological queerness*: 1. Ethical realism is actually an ontological position. But somehow we must have access to the asserted reality, otherwise ethical realism would remain a completely groundless, empty assertion. In ethical realism, the associated epistemology is regularly methodological intuitionism. However, this is a refusal from an epistemological point of view: the advocate of ethical realism has some supposedly realistic intuitive beliefs, but cannot explain where these come from, and thus cannot even begin to prove that they are anything other than mere imagination (Mackie 1977: 38-39). In short: if talk of moral reality is not to be completely empty, we must have access to it and be able to explain that access. (We take our visual impressions, for example, as signs of an isomorphic external reality because we can explain visual impressions as causal consequences of events in this external reality itself: light rays fall on the object, are partially reflected, penetrate through the cornea of the eye, etc. to the retina, etc.) Ethical realism offers nothing of the kind (Mackie 1977: 38-39). 2. There are, of course, – competing – psychological explanations for the emergence of moral opinions, in particular intuitive ones. These recur to emotions or criteria acquired through socialisation and one's own processing, which are applied to the situation, etc. Not a single explanation points to an origin in another, empirical reality. The epistemology asserted by realism is therefore empirically false (Mackie 1977: 38). *Ontological queerness*: 1. Moral insights should motivate morally and usually do so at least to some extent – which does not exclude the possibility that this motivation is trumped by other motives. A few ethical realists may deny these requirements for moral insights, but only at a high price: moral insights would no longer be practical attitudes, but insights into the world without an orienting function; how we dealt with these insights would depend on quite different, actually practical attitudes. Ethical realists are therefore well advised to want the motivational effect of moral insights. According to their theory, however, this effect must come from the moral facts alone: if someone has recognised these facts, these must also cause these insights to have the corresponding motivational effects – quite independently of the subject's other psychological makeup. The moral facts would thus have a strange ontological dual structure: on the one hand, they would be the real counterpart of our moral judgements, but on the other hand, they would be causally effective facts that could directly shape our psyche to produce

corresponding motivations independently of our predispositions. Perhaps in the future a neurosurgeon, who plans exactly which circuits he has to establish for this purpose, may be able to do the latter; but it is difficult to imagine that a moral fact should also be able to do this (Mackie 1977: 41). 2. Moral facts, especially evaluations, are supervenient: Natural events in the world are evaluated, for example; the moral facts have the natural ones as their object. According to subjectivist, especially constructivist ontologies, this second level arises from the fact that the subjects mentally relate to natural reality: they represent natural reality and develop an attitude towards it. But how is this possible in a non-mental moral reality? And how does this second level arise, and what does it mean? There is no implication relation between the natural and the moral property; the fact that the natural fact is morally bad or morally right is an independent fact. But what kind of fact is this? (Mackie 1977: 41).

Criteria for moral progress (in the narrow sense) in the literature: While there is so far only one alternative to the criterion of prudentially good epistemic progress developed here for ethical progress, a whole series of criteria for *moral progress (in the narrow sense)* has been developed. Some important ones will now be discussed. These can be systematised as follows:

CP1. General abstract criteria:

CP1.1. Betterness criterion: moral improvement of the world: ‘An event, a state or a development is a moral progress if it makes the world morally better (compared to what would have to be expected alternatively).’ – This ‘criterion’ for moral progress is actually only a scheme for such criteria, or rather it is not *a single* criterion, but a whole group of criteria, because ‘morally better’ is a variable here for which very different moral concepts of desirability can be inserted. The criterion for moral progress developed above belongs to this group. For this criterion, ‘moral desirability’ is specified by the result of normative-ethical research on the topic. And the result of this research that is currently best justified in my opinion is prioritarianism, i.e. a welfare ethical evaluation that gives greater weight to changes in utility for the worse off than for the (relatively) better off. – According to the types of events that become morally better, one can further distinguish different types of moral progress: progress in the sources of morality, the instruments of morality, in moral action, in mundane developments.

CP1.1.1. Intentional moral improvement: improvements in or through moral capacities: An alternative to the general criterion of moral improvement limits moral progress to improvements with specifically moral content: Moral progress is (i) improvements of moral capacities – namely of moral reasoning, moral emotions or moral ideal self-images – or (ii) improvements (with a moral content, namely improvements of social

manners) that are brought about by these capacities. The restriction of moral progress to specifically moral content in this provision occurs in three ways. Firstly, changes in moral capacities, but not in other capacities with usually morally good consequences are included. Secondly, positive consequences of the application of these moral capacities, but not the positive consequences of the application of other capacities, such as scientific or technical ones, are included. Thirdly, with regard to the morally good improvements that result from the application of moral capacities, only those with a moral theme in the narrow sense are considered, namely those that deal with social interaction. One idea behind this restriction to the moral sphere is to limit moral progress to intentional moral improvements in a narrow sense.

The conception just presented is due to *Buchanan and Powell*. My presentation summarises several pieces of text from their exposition:

Among the improvements from a moral point of view «only changes that either involve [i] improvements in moral capacities or [ii] come about through the exercise of those capacities are instances of moral progress in the most full-bodied sense» (Buchanan & Powell 2018: 46). «Moral progress in the most full-bodied sense is [...] change that is desirable from a moral point of view» and «[ii*] involve[s] the exercise of or [i] improvements in the moral powers» (ibid. Buchanan & Powell 2018: 51; similar 107). And they explain ‘*moral capacities*’ as follows: «moral capacities [...] i.e., [a] moral reasoning, [b] moral emotions, and what Jonathan Glover calls [c] “moral identities” – individuals’ conceptions of the sorts of persons they ought morally to be» (ibid. 52).

Another specification in the above description, namely that moral progress must involve improvements with a *moral theme*, namely *improvements in social interaction* with one another, is not explicitly stated by Buchanan and Powell, but it follows implicitly from the examples of «improvements from the moral point of view»: the abolition of slavery, the reduction of racial or ethnic discrimination, the extension of participation rights, the recognition of women’s rights, better treatment of animals, the abolition of cruel punishments, the spread of the rule of law, the reduction of the rate of killing, international standards to ban apartheid and colonialism, increased religious freedoms (ibid. 47–48). In these examples always improvements in behaviour itself as well as in the social norms governing it are meant. – The formulations that the improvements «come about through the exercise of» (ibid. 46) or «involve the exercise of» (ibid. 51; similarly 107) the moral capacities / powers contain an interpretational difficulty. If the progresses just listed and recognised as such by Buchanan and Powell are to be progresses according to their definition, then moral progresses must emerge in particular from morally externally effective actions, which in turn must go back to the exercise of moral capacities. However, not a single one of the three capacities (a, b, c) mentioned can alone cause moral actions. Accordingly, the formulations mentioned must be interpreted broadly, namely in such a way that the three capacities together, in pairs (e.g. emotions in connection with reasoning) or in conjunction with other abilities, cause the actions. Whether this interpretation is compatible with a good theory of moral action and moral motivation remains to be seen.

In comparison with the extension of the concept of moral progress developed here, the

definition of Buchanan and Powell includes all ethical progresses (P1) (since these are improvements through moral reasoning), but excludes all mundane progresses (P3) because they have no moral content. Of the practical-moral progresses (P2), it completely includes the moral improvements of the sources of morality (P2.1), however, of the moral improvements of the instruments for moral improvement of the world (P2.2), it only includes those brought about by moral intentions, but not those that are accidental or based on other intentions. One example of this is the exclusion of the reduction in the lethal use of force in Europe since the early modern period as moral progress, because this reduction is a consequence of the enforcement of the state monopoly on the use of force (ibid. 49-51), which, one must probably add, was an amoral project of the absolutist princes to enforce their absolute power. And the improvements of moral action itself (P2.3) only includes the improved intentional moral action (P2.3.1), but not the improved action controlled only by moral instruments (P2.3.2), especially not the morally improved action motivated by (morally good) social sanctions, that is, not, in Kantian terminology, merely morally compliant action – an example of which is again the already mentioned exclusion of the reduction of lethal force, because citizens did not refrain from violence for moral reasons, but because of the corresponding incentives (ibid. 50). In this comparison, a certain Kantian trait becomes apparent in Buchanan's and Powell's definition (even if they do not refer to Kant), namely the insistence on moral motives or, in Kant's terminology, on good will (Kant, GMM: BA 1-4 = A.A: IV: 393-394) as a necessary condition for moral progress.

CP1.1.2. Character improvement: Some authors consider only improvements with moral content to be moral improvements and therefore limit the scope of moral improvements to only some of the objects that can improve morally according to criteria of welfare ethics, as a moral improvement, e.g. to character improvements.

Albersmeier, for example, defines first: Moral progress is a durable and actualised moral improvement in character that also leads to better consequences (Albersmeier 2022: 177). She then specifies: «*moral progress is (a) a durable change for the better in moral performance, (b) on given occasions, (c) that is sufficiently suited to effect change for the better in states of affairs*» (ibid., emphasis in the original). Albersmeier explains: *a* stands for actual progress; *b* excludes the possibility that the progress consists only in improved dispositions that are never put into practical use; *c* states that one expects moral progress to improve outcomes (ibid). In this context, «in moral performance» is apparently to be understood as a disposition to moral action, that is, as a character trait and thus as a virtue.

CP1.2. Progressive moral rightness: The deontologist counterpart to the axiologist criterion of progress (1.1) is the criterion of the expansion of moral rightness: the number and proportion of morally right (law-abiding) actions is increasing.

Kant, for example, states: «Not an ever-increasing quantum of *morality* in the mindset, but an increase in the products of their *legality* in dutiful actions, regardless of the driving forces behind them; that is, in the good *deeds* of humans, which will become ever more numerous and better, thus in the phenomena of the moral nature of the human race, the yield (the result) of the processing of it [= human race] for the better

alone will be able to be set» (Kant 1798: A156-157 / AA VII: 91; *my translation.* – C.L.)

CP1.3. Moral improvement or progressive moral rightness: Because Jamieson wants a criterion of moral progress that is neutral in normative-ethical terms and open to all theories, he proposes a disjunction of the axiologist and deontologist criterion: the «*naïve*» *criterion of progress*: «Moral progress occurs when a subsequent state of affairs is better than a preceding one, or when right acts become increasingly prevalent» (Jamieson 2002: 318).

CP2. Concretistic progress criteria: The opposite of general abstract progress criteria are concretistic progress criteria, which list the possible moral advances.

CP2.1. Jamieson's progress index: Because Jamieson seeks a universally acceptable criterion for moral progress and because even the naïve criterion for progress still excludes certain normative-ethical theories (Jamieson 2002: 328), he finally proposes a *substantive index for moral progress* that lists several developments that are almost universally regarded as morally progressive: the abolition of war and slavery, the reduction of poverty and class privilege, the expansion of freedom, the empowerment of marginalised groups and respect for animals and nature (ibid.: 321; 325).

CP3. Moral realist criterion of progress: According to a moral realist criterion, progress consists in approximating the world to the objective, realistically understood moral order or in conforming more closely to the criteria of that order.

According to moral realism, «moral progress is assessed on the basis of how adequately our moral thought and action reflect this objective order in temporally successive stages» (Jamieson 2002: 320).

CP4. Moralistic criterion of progress: The moralistic criterion of progress states: Moral progress consists in the expansion of morality, namely in the fact that moral reasons in decisions have an ever greater weight than prudential reasons (cf. Nagel 1986: ch. 9), with the ultimate goal of they alone determining decisions (cf. Jamieson 2002: 326; Nagel, in contrast, explicitly excludes this final state of complete moralisation; Jamieson also only describes this idea without subscribing to it).

CP5. General substantive criteria: Concretist moral progress criteria specify *particular substantive* moral progress. An alternative is to specify progress still in substantive, but in *general* terms.

CP5.1 Expansion of the set of beneficiaries (the expanding circle): A general substantive criterion of moral progress is '*the expanding circle*': moral improvement consists (exclusively or substantially) in the practical

expansion of the set of beneficiaries until all sentient beings are taken into account (cf. Singer <1981> 2011: 120; see also Buchanan & Powell (2018)) or even all beings that have (or could have) an inherent value, i.e. the development towards practical pathocentrism or biocentrism. – ‘*Practical* extension of the set of beneficiaries’ here means that the moral subjects *in moral practice* treat more beings as beneficiaries of the applicable morality, for example by granting these new beneficiaries rights of protection that they had not previously been granted. This is to be distinguished from the *theoretical expansion of the set of beneficiaries*, i.e. that as a result of a development of normative ethics (such as that of a particular moral community) more beneficiaries are taken into account in its moral criteria. At this point, i.e. in the discussion of the criteria for moral progress (in the narrow sense), the issue is the practical expansion; the theoretical expansion is part of ethical progress. Then a distinction must be made as to whether one regards the empirical (or theoretical) expansion of the beneficiary set as moral (or ethical) progress – according to some independent criterion for moral progress –, or whether one regards the empirical or theoretical expansion of the beneficiary set even as the *criterion for* moral or ethical progress. Peter Singer, for example, presumably takes the following positions: (i) He regards the practical and the theoretical expansion of the beneficiary set (= the expanding circle) as historically and factually given. (ii) He regards both as moral or ethical progress. (iii) But for him, the practical and theoretical expansion of the beneficiary set is *not* the *criterion for* moral or ethical progress. (iv) For him, the criterion for practical moral progress, instead, is presumably the utilitarian measure of moral improvement. I essentially agree with these four (presumed) positions of Singer’s – with the exception of the commitment to utilitarianism, which I replace with prioritarianism.

CP6. Evolutionalist criteria of progress in terms of survival fitness: Evolutionary ethics examines the phylogeny of morality from the point of view of how morality has developed as an instrument for improving survival fitness. When these theories speak of ‘moral progress’, the ‘moral’ does not refer to the *criterion of* progress, but to the object of improvement, namely morality, while the criterion of improvement is evolutionary: what change in morality increased the survival of the moral community? In this context, ‘survival’ can be understood in different ways.

CP6.1. Biological-evolutionalist criterion of progress: According to the biological-evolutionalist criterion, moral improvement is an improvement in biological fitness through morality (cf. Jamieson 2002: 321).

CP6.2. Cultural-evolutionalist criterion of progress: According to the cultural-evolutionist criterion, however, moral improvement is an improvement in socio-cultural fitness, especially in competition with other social groups or moral communities through morality (cf. Kitcher 2011: sections 10-14; 16; see also the discussion of Kitcher's theory above, in Section 6).

These criteria for moral progress (in the narrow sense) will now be briefly discussed. Following the line of argument developed so far, the betterness criterion of – or, more precisely, a specific betterness criterion, namely prioritarianism (which then serves as the basis for moral instrumentalism) – will be justified and defended, while it will be shown that the other concepts of progress have considerable disadvantages in comparison, and are therefore worse.

On CP1.1. Betterness criterion: Advantages of the prioritarian betterness criterion are:

1. Multi-level theoretical justification: This criterion for moral progress has a multi-level theoretical justification, starting with the (S1) ¹² prudentially justified adequacy conditions for a good conception of morality, the application of which leads to (S2.1) axiologism in conjunction with a theory of instruments for improving the world. (S2.2) A specification of the adequacy conditions for the moral desirability concept (S2.3) is then the basis for the development of the prioritarian moral desirability concept (see below, 1.1). The specific moral desirability concept is itself the theoretical result of an initially open-ended development and justification, and thus the fruit of a metaethical and normative-ethical progress that increasingly specifies the adequate moral desirability concept. As the respective end product of this development, the specific moral desirability concept is maximally justified. It is, of course, possible that such a preliminary endpoint is wrong, but this must be shown in each case; a merely *possible* falsity is not a reason for rejection. And such a justified criticism may be the starting point for a new, better justified moral desirability concept, which then advances to become the most strongly justified moral desirability concept. – Some philosophers assume that, because the metaethical and normative-ethical development of concepts of moral value itself is progressive and probably not complete, the theory of moral progress should therefore remain as theory-neutral as possible, which would also lead to a general (or at least very broad) acceptance of the progress criterion. However, as will

¹²These abbreviations take up the numbering of the justification steps from Section 4, but specify these steps in more detail, so that in the following, sub-steps (S2.1 etc.) of the justification steps differentiated above are also considered.

be shown in more detail below (see the critique of criterion CP1.3. ‘Moral improvement or progressive moral rightness’), this idea is an illusion: the theory-neutral openness of the criterion must lead to inapplicability or to extreme contradictions in its application, such that sometimes one and the same change in the world would be classified as both progress and regression at the same time. The only better alternative is to apply the *right*, well-justified criterion for moral progress, as proposed here. However, not everyone will agree with this criterion by a long shot – otherwise normative-ethical dissent would not exist.

1.1. Outline of the justification: Only a few hints can be given here for a specific justification of the prioritarian concept of desirability as the criterion of moral progress: *On S2.1: The structural decision in favour of an axiological ethics* – in which, that is, value concepts are definitionally, ontologically and epistemically primary and with the help of which, in the second step, the moral instruments can be justified instead of, for example, a deontological morality – is based on anthropological, decision-psychological and rationality-theoretical considerations: Decision systems with intrinsic values and desirability concepts, which can be used to identify optimal courses of action, are evolutionarily more advantageous than rule-based (plus reinforcement) decision systems: they are much more flexible, future-oriented, actively planning rather than reactive, constructive rather than schematic (Lumer 2004: 47-58). *On S2.2: A specification of the adequacy conditions for moral desirability concepts* assigns to them the function of being a canon of values that is largely binding and motivating for the moral community, that can decide in the event of conflicts of interest and form the basis for the realisation of community projects. To achieve this, the construction of the moral desirability concept must refer back to motivational desirability functions that are shared within the moral community (approximately equal evaluation of identical value objects) and independent of morality (Lumer 1999: 97-205; <2000> 2009: 577-589). *On S2.3:* These conditions are fulfilled above all by a very specific desirability function, namely the prudential desirability of our expected empathic reactions to others. (My pain is hedonically relevant for me, your pain for you. If everyone hedonically values their own pain, *different* objects are valued; if everyone hedonically values the same pain of the same person, the same object is valued but intersubjectively very differently: the sufferer negatively, the others neutrally. But our expected *empathic* feelings for third parties, with whom we are not specifically connected, may be interpersonally roughly the same.) Although this empathy-based prudential desirability function makes up only a small proportion of our

individual total prudential desirability functions, it could form the point of convergence in the search for a desirability function that is shared by all and recognised as authoritative for community concerns, precisely because it captures a certain interest of all. On this basis, a special welfare ethical, namely *prioritarian desirability function*, can be determined as prudentially generally shared desirability function and defined as a moral value function (Lumer <2000> 2009: 589-632; 2005: 32-39; 2021).¹³ For the further discussion, this specification specifically to prioritarianism is not yet necessary; it suffices to adopt one of the common welfarist moral value functions (with the exception of leximin and a radical sufficientarianism, according to which individual increases in utility beyond a certain level no longer count morally).

2. *Generality and abstractness for openness to development*: One could further specify the criterion for moral progress, for example, by including very specific developments as regards content. Instead, the criterion proposed here for moral progress is general and abstract: ‘The state *b* is morally better than the preceding state *a*.’ This guarantees maximum openness, does not prejudge future theoretical discoveries about the specific and concrete content of morality, and also allows for adaptation to situational changes, so that, for example, once progressive moral norms can at some point become morally obsolete.

3. *Completeness in capturing all moral progresses*: The generality of the criterion – the states *a* and *b* to be compared can be of any kind – allows us to include all changes relevant for the moral beneficiaries and for society as a whole and thus to arrive at a balanced overall assessment that includes all aspects of the world situation in the moral evaluation. But it also makes it possible to limit the moral evaluation to individual aspects.

4. *Applicability as a criterion for moral decision-making*: The generality and abstractness combined with the precision of the criterion also makes it suitable as a compass for decision-making, especially for major social decisions, which one, to put it neutrally, is the morally preferable, namely the morally progressive option. The moral progress criterion thus has a practical, instrumental function for shaping the world beyond the mere retrospective evaluation of past development.

¹³The prioritarian function roughly arises as follows: a model is developed that shows the extent of empathy we develop over the course of a lifetime when we encounter people with a certain mean well-being. Because of our stronger reaction to others’ sufferings than to their pleasures, the derived function – the extent of empathy as a function of mean well-being – is not linear, but concave, prioritarian: improvements for the worse off improve our empathy more than improvements for the better off.

On CP1.1.1. Improvement of moral capacities themselves or through them: The progress criterion ‘improvement of moral capacities or of the moral improvements achieved by them’ also defines moral progress in terms of moral improvements, but then narrows the criterion of moral improvement from ‘is morally better’ to ‘is morally better and has a moral content’, and thus excludes a number of improvements that, according to the criterion developed here, are moral improvements – albeit without a moral intention – from the ‘moral improvements’, and it does so on the basis of a certain Kantian orientation.

1. *General problem: Due to the conceptual limitations of moral progress, many moral improvements are excluded from moral concern:* The critical point about this Kantian insistence on the moral intention is that it loses sight of what actually interests us about morality, namely the well-being of sentient beings, and that it limits itself to mere means to that end and even only to specific means to that end. If certain developments are morally good but not regarded as morally progressive because of their non-moral origin according to criterion CP1.1.1, then there is less reason to support the preservation of the results of these developments and their expansion through one’s own moral action and to resist their disappearance; as a consequence of this criterion, one would thus stand idly by and watch the world morally deteriorate. This general criticism can be specified for the individual restrictions imposed by the intentional-moral concept of progress, following the above (sect. 3) justifications of the broader concept of moral progress advocated here.

2. *The exclusion of all mundane progresses (P3) from moral progress* concerns, for example, the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, the victory over pathogens, the reduction of absolute poverty, more prosperity through economic growth, better health care and social services. If all this is no longer included in moral progress, and if the concept of moral progress is to have the assumed moral orientational function for our moral decisions, then we should no longer support all these things for moral reasons either, but at most for personal reasons. This means, however, that the component of the well-being of our fellow human beings improved by this mundane progress is no longer of moral interest to us. We are then still morally interested in whether the respective way of *human interaction* is conducive to the well-being of people, but we would not care about the rest of their well-being. Whether other ethics consider this to be problematic is not something I want to examine here; but it is certainly not what welfare ethics want.

3. Also the *exclusion of the moral improvements of the instruments for the*

moral improvement of the world, which are not based on moral intentions (part of P2.2) (example: enforcement of the state's monopoly on the use of force by absolutist princes for reasons of power), from moral progress prevents one from supporting the continued existence of these instruments in the moral interest – in particular, the continued existence of the monopoly on the use of force. Because of the deterioration in well-being that would then be expected (an increase in the number of lethal acts of violence in particular), such a moral retreat would certainly be fatal. It also seems paradoxical that, according to the criterion of moral intentional improvement, the moral fight for the continued existence of morally good instruments should definitely be taken up if these instruments had been introduced with moral intentions – that is, if the monopoly on the use of force were not based on absolutist striving for power but, for example, on the concerned decisions of early modern city councils. It is paradoxical since the different origin makes no difference to the effective moral value of the disputed instruments for improving the world.

4. Also the *exclusion of morally improved actions controlled only by moral instruments (P2.3.2)* (example: compliance with moral norms because of the otherwise impending sanctions) would, again assuming that the concept of moral progress is to guide our moral decisions, have fatal consequences. If the morally better action incentivised by social norms were not moral progress, then in the case of worsening compliance with these norms (due to some new developments), one would not have to advocate for moral reasons for the maintenance of compliance with these norms – for example, through better monitoring, changes in sanction practices, updated regulations – because it would not be about preserving progress. But this lack of commitment means that one of the most powerful instruments for the moral improvement of the world is no longer being cultivated. The consequences of this lack of cultivation for our well-being would be literally fatal: the sanction-based norms that secure our fundamental rights, such as physical integrity, would erode. – Furthermore, it seems conceptually odd that, on the one hand, the intentional-moral social enforcement of certain moral norms for the moral improvement of action should be moral progress, while on the other hand, the achievement of the goal itself, namely that the subjects then act morally better because of the social validity of the moral norm, should not be moral progress. Insisting on the intentional-moral component would imply precisely this oddity.

5. *The criterion is only a definition scheme:* Incidentally, the criterion for moral progress introduced by Buchanan and Powell is not a complete

definition, but *only* the *scheme of a definition*, because the concept of ‘morally better’ used in the definition is not specified.

On CP1.1.2. Character Improvement: To take only the character improvement as a criterion of moral progress instead of all moral improvements has several disadvantages, not to mention the fact that Albersmeier does not clarify the concept of ‘(morally) better’.

1. *Only a scheme of a concept of progress:* The progress criterion is completely undetermined because it leaves open which moral concept of desirability is used in it. It is only the scheme for a great many possible progress criteria.

2. *A morally good character is not intrinsically good, but a moral instrument:* A morally good character, a virtue, is not morally intrinsically good, but as a rule a morally very good instrument for improving the world. In the functional justification of the moral concept of desirability via empathy, as outlined above, the well-being of humans and other sentient beings is not only the object of empathy, but therefore also the object of *intrinsic* moral evaluation. A character that is usually considered ‘morally good’ is only morally good because it usually has good consequences in terms of well-being. If morally good character is not intrinsically good, then the criterion of progress ‘moral character improvement’ does not capture all moral progress, and the – rare – character improvements with disastrous consequences is wrongly assessed as progress.

3. *Wrong extension:* Clarifying what is actually intrinsically good is not only a question of conceptual precision, but also of the *extension* of moral progress: a character that is morally good according to conventional standards can have serious morally bad consequences if it is coupled with epistemic or practical inability and corresponding false self-assessment and if it then also motivates particularly strong moral commitment. Conversely, there are moral improvements that are completely independent of character improvements, such as the enforcement of social norms supported by sanctions, which prescribe actions that are good for general well-being, but which enforce these actions precisely in people who lack the corresponding moral character. (Of course, it would be even better if the same or an even greater improvement in action were achieved through purely moral motivation. But so far, people do not have that much good moral motivation. And until eventually we do, the introduction of standards enforced by sanctions is a moral improvement.) To sum up: The conception of moral progress as character improvement is much too narrow, occasionally too broad, and misses what is actually morally important.

4. *Structural moral progress is excluded*: The conception is also purely individualistic, and thus excludes structural moral improvements – such as the introduction of human rights – as moral progress.

On CP1.2. Progressive moral rightness: The objections to the criterion of progressive moral rightness, i.e. dutifulness, are partly analogous to those against the criterion 'character improvement'.

1. *Progressive rightness is the moral concept of progress of deontologism – which is criticised here*: 'Rightness' or, in Kantian terms, 'duty-conformity' is not the fundamental ethical concept. As indicated in the above justification of axiologism, a deontological ethics that makes it the fundamental ethical concept has significant disadvantages compared to axiologism (inflexible, situation-bound, reactive, schematic). An axiological ethics with the basic concept of 'moral desirability' is therefore ethically better and should also define the concept of moral progress accordingly.

2. *Extensionally much too narrow*: Progressive moral rightness is *one* form of moral progress; but there are others: more or greater supererogation; new socially accepted moral norms; new social institutions of morality; moral knowledge; in addition to which there is mundane progress. All this is not covered by the criterion of 'progressive rightness'. The criterion is therefore too narrow. This narrowness reflects once again the narrowness of the underlying conception of decision, which is rule-based and thus remains tied to actions, while the concept of moral desirability can be used to evaluate all causally effective events.

3. *Extension very unclear*: As long as the content of moral duties is not determined, the concept of progressive moral rightness is only a *scheme* for a concept of moral progress. Because deontological ethics lack a justification based on the concept of moral desirability, they have notorious difficulties in justifying the content of moral duties – and thus in completing the criterion of moral progress.

On CP1.3. Moral improvement or progressive moral rightness ('naive concept of progress'): Jamieson's idea behind the disjunctive criterion is that it is shared by as many ethicists or laypeople as possible. However, this idea also leads to a number of problems that arise in all moral progress criteria that aim for consensus. (Albersmeier also claims that a theory of moral progress must be neutral with respect to the various normative-ethical and metaethical approaches (2022: 45-46).)

1. *Some ethics are still excluded*: Despite the intended breadth, the criterion still excludes some ethics and the progress criteria developed from them – as Jamieson himself also sees (Jamieson 2002: 320-321) – e.g. virtue

ethics or evolutionary ethics. (For Jamieson, this seems to be the reason for abandoning the naïve criterion in favour of the progress index.)

2. *Consensus is no proof of truth or adequacy*: Consensus, by its very nature, provides relatively broad approval, but as a criterion of truth or correctness, it is wrong and also provides an *incorrect justification*: Truth or adequacy of the progress criterion do not depend on consensus but on the fulfilment of truth or adequacy criteria – whereby the latter may include a broad consensus as a desideratum, but must certainly go beyond it. Jamieson also does not show that the ‘naïve’ progress criterion fulfils any truth or adequacy conditions.

3. *Some of the evaluations are necessarily false*: Axiology and deontology, which are, after all, in competition with each other, cannot both be right, and come to different conclusions in many individual decisions. Accordingly, some of the classifications made according to this criterion must be false.

4. *Contradictory evaluations*: For the same reason, this criterion also leads to contradictory classifications and recommendations: What is a moral progress according to one disjunctive member of the criterion can be a regression according to the other disjunctive member.

5. *Only a scheme for a criterion, specification is missing*: This ‘criterion’ too is in fact only a scheme for a criterion, because it does not specify what ‘(morally) better’ and ‘morally obligatory’ are supposed to mean. If one allows arbitrary substitutions here – as may have been intended by Jamieson – this further exacerbates problems 3 and 4. For another thing, even more of the orientational and guiding function is lost.

On CP2.1. Progress Index: Jamieson also pursues a consensualist goal with the progress index. Accordingly, many of the problems just mentioned also arise with the progress index:

1. *It excludes some ethics*: The progress index also excludes certain ethics, e.g. theological or perfectionist ones – something that Jamieson freely admits (Jamieson 2002: 329-330).

2. *Wrong Justification*: The index of progress is wrongly justified, namely, as consensual, whereby consensus is not a criterion of truth and cannot show the correctness of the content of the consensus.

3. *No Consensus on the Index*: In fact, there is no consensus on the events mentioned in the index. The lack of consensus is obscured by the fact that Jamieson’s only aim is to ensure that as many ethicists as possible accept at least *some* of the developments mentioned as moral progress. However, this does not rule out the possibility that they do not regard

other developments listed in the index as moral progress. The index thus feigns a consensus on progress that does not actually exist.

4. *No criterion of progress because only examples are given*: The index cannot be a criterion of progress because it only lists examples and therefore cannot be used to classify other cases. It also leaves out entire dimensions of moral progress, e.g. the development of autonomy, solidarity, cooperation, empathy.

5. *It does not help with orientation*: For the same reason, it often does not help with the orientation and guidance of our decisions, namely when it comes to developments outside the spectrum mentioned. But it also does not help with decisions within the spectrum if individual options include both progress and regression – e.g. poverty reduction while at the same time intensifying slavery – because it neither quantifies nor weighs the individual index components against each other. (That is why it is not a real *index*, but an indicator.)

The criticisms of the two criteria introduced by Jamieson show the problems of the consensualist approach. The only alternative is then conceptions of moral progress that *are determined in terms of content* but are justified theoretically – one of which has indeed been proposed here.

On CP3. Moral realist criterion: The moral realist criterion of moral progress is considerably more problematic than those discussed so far.

1. *Presupposes the problematic ethical realism*: It presupposes the truth of ethical realism. This has already been criticised above (at the beginning of this appendix).

2. *The moral-realistic ‘criterion’ is only a scheme for a criterion*: Even the ethical realists are far from agreeing on what the realistically understood moral order or individual approximations to it should look like. The moral-realistic ‘criterion’ for moral progress is therefore again only a *scheme* for a criterion that stands for a plethora of possible specifications.

3. *The criterion is even radically indeterminate*: Unlike the previous ones, this *scheme* is even radically indeterminate because, due to the lack of epistemic procedures for accessing the asserted moral reality, nothing can be said about its content that can be verified intersubjectively. Moral realism is just metaethical speculation without normative-ethical content. The moral content that is nevertheless occasionally gathered under the title ‘objective, realistic moral order’ and ‘approximation to this order’ is only held together by the fact that its representatives proclaim themselves prophets of ethical realism, claiming direct access to this reality for themselves. (In terms of content, the *formulation* of the criterion itself

does not provide more than this: moral progress exists precisely when the world becomes more moral.)

4. *The diversity of interpretations of the moral-realistic criterion can only increase*: Due to the lack of epistemic procedures and thus non-falsifiability, the diversity of realistically conceived morals and moral progress criteria cannot be reduced, but only increased with the appearance of new prophets.

5. *The criterion does not help with orientation*: As a result of this vagueness, the moral-realistic criterion of progress *does not help as orientation* for moral decisions.

On CP4. Moralistic criterion of progress: It is indeed a moral improvement that moral reasons have gradually gained more weight in our decisions over time.

1. *Complete moralisation is neither (motivationally) possible nor (because of total heteronomy) morally desirable*: But complete moralisation cannot be the goal. 1.1. Complete moralisation cannot work motivationally. This is because people primarily want to satisfy their own prudential desires. Morality only sits piggy-back on this primarily prudential orientation as a way to increase one's own utility – this is the idea of realistic contractualism – or as a *component* motivationally supported in various ways (by empathy, social rewards and punishments, moral satisfaction and moral pride...) in the prudentially made decision.¹⁴ 1.2. Because of this prudential primacy, the attempt at complete moralisation can only lead to the moral enslavement of the subjects, to the abandonment of their own projects and person (see Wolf 1982; Nagel 1986: 185-188).

2. *The moralistic criterion ignores efficiency as a further dimension of moral progress*: The metaphorical description of moralisation is spatial or weight-oriented: morality, moral criteria are given more and more space or weight in decision-making. The criterion of moralisation disregards the idea of efficiency (as much moral progress as possible per resource used) – which, on the other hand, is included in the concept of moral betterness, i.e. higher

¹⁴Nagel and Jamieson seem to criticise the complete moralisation as logically, or rather analytically, impossible and thus perhaps mean the following: In deontological ethics, for example, moral desirability is an aggregation of individual utilities; if individual utilities disappear through moralisation, then moral desirability also disappears (Nagel 1986: 185-188; Jamieson 2002: 326-327). – However, the moralistic criterion of progress does not speak of a 'disappearance of individual utility', but rather of the fact that the individual utility of the actor has less and less or no weight at all in the decision. Even if it has no weight at all, it is still possible to determine what the individual utility of the action is. Thus, complete moralisation is perfectly possible from an analytical point of view.

moral desirability: According to the criterion of moral betterness, one can, under certain circumstances, achieve moral improvement, i.e., moral progress, despite the same or even less space/weight for morality; according to the moralistic criterion, however, there would be moral stalemate or even regression in such cases. This means that the idea of moralisation does not cover everything relevant that the idea of moral improvement does (better moral results (i) through greater weight of morality or (ii) through more efficient use of moral resources); conversely, however, the conception of moral improvement includes what is useful about the conception of moralisation (namely: better moral results (i) through greater weight of morality).

On CP5.1. Expansion of the set of beneficiaries: The practical expansion of the set of beneficiaries of a morality, such as the new inclusion of slaves or sentient non-human animals, is, if it is combined with improvements for the new beneficiaries – e.g. the acquisition of protective rights – *ceteris paribus* a moral progress, because the new beneficiaries are usually better off as a result. But the practical expansion of the set of beneficiaries is not the *criterion for* (practical) moral progress for the following reasons.

1. *The development of the beneficiaries' utility is ignored:* The number of those affected by a development is only *one* dimension of moral progress. The other essential dimension is the quantity of the change in utility (original utility versus resulting utility) for these individual beneficiaries. This dimension is not taken into account in the '*expanding circle*' criterion, but it is in the '*moral improvement*' criterion. That the dimension 'quantity of change of utility' is essential can be seen from the fact that the situation of those who are practically made into beneficiaries of morality may even worsen as a result of this measure (and that of the others does not improve either) – e.g. because, in addition to their new rights, they now also have much more serious duties or because they are now *de facto* massively attacked by a minority because of their new rights. In such cases, one would be reluctant to speak of 'progress'.

2. *Progress with a constant number of beneficiaries ignored:* The progress criterion '*expanding circle*' does not allow the assessment of progress or regression with a constant practical number of beneficiaries, for example when conditions in a fixed moral community improve (or worsen). In short, the progress criterion '*expanding circle*' only captures a certain type of moral progress, but it is also occasionally wrong and does not capture many other types of moral progress.

On CP6. Evolutionalist progress criteria of survival fitness: The

biologic-evolutionalist and the cultural-evolutionalist progress criteria can be discussed together here.

1. *Different topic: not moral progress, but progress in survival through morals*: As explained above, both evolutionary criteria are concerned with *biological-evolutionary or socio-cultural evolutionary progress by means of morals* (morals as a means of increasing survival fitness) and not per se with moral progress in the sense of progress according to moral standards; the evolutionary criteria are therefore concerned with something quite different from the other criteria of moral progress discussed here. And the topic here is progress according to moral criteria. Insofar, the two evolutionary criteria are primarily irrelevant in this context – which does not exclude the possibility that the morality that is biologically or socio-culturally most conducive to survival is also morally optimal, i.e. optimal according to the criteria for moral desirability (for example, because sociocultural competitiveness requires a very strong social cohesion with simultaneous individual freedom). But being biologically or socioculturally more efficient is not the metaethical and normative ethical *criterion for practical moral progress*. – This theoretical location of the concept of ‘moral progress’ in the context of evolutionary ethics does not exclude the possibility that some theorists nevertheless advocate the evolutionalist criteria as criteria for moral progress or simply as criteria for *any kind of* progress. The following reasons speak against this:

2. *Moral progress includes fitness for survival; the reverse is not true; the former is broader in content and more broadly justified*: The criterion for moral progress presented here, which is justified epistemically and prudentially, namely the prioritarian improvement of moral systems and moral action, also includes at least a minimum of biological and socio-cultural fitness for survival. This is because the well-being of future generations, which according to the prioritarian criterion must also be taken into account, also requires that a society with this moral system and this way of acting morally, in an extremely hostile environment, for example, is sufficiently strong to defend itself in the long term while maintaining the standards of morality. In this respect, the criterion of moral improvement that I am defending here includes the criterion of biological and socio-cultural survival to a certain extent; however, the reverse is not true. The criterion of moral improvement is thus broader in content than the criterion of biological or sociocultural survival skills. And it is also more comprehensively justified, namely with epistemic and prudential reasons that aim at the long-term good of each individual,

rather than merely with the interest in the biological survival of individuals and the survival of society in sociocultural competition.

3. *Social Darwinism is unnecessary and morally bad*: To use the criterion of biological or socio-cultural efficiency as a criterion of moral progress is *Social Darwinism*. The biological fitness of humans is more than guaranteed given the current technological development and superiority over all other species. Sufficient sociocultural survival fitness of the most morally advanced moral systems and societies according to the criteria defended here in competition with other societies, especially with those less moral according to the criteria defended here, is also required by the progress criterion of moral improvement (in the welfarist version advocated here) because of the connection just explained (reason 2). However, this sociocultural survival fitness of the most advanced moral systems is not guaranteed per se and is not certain even in the possible empirical developments that can be identified with the current epistemic state. But there are at least good and well-known reasons for this sociocultural survival fitness of the most morally advanced societies: The inclusion of all promotes cohesion and the willingness of all to voluntarily stand up for this moral community; freedom of expression, political and legal freedom of action lead to the maximum development of scientific and technical capacities; deliberative democracy tends to lead to decisions in favour of political measures that are morally as good as possible and are also supported by the vast majority; etc. If, for these reasons, the morally most advanced societies are likely to be sufficiently efficient in the socio-cultural competition, then there is leeway for moral improvements that go beyond the Social Darwinism of mere biological and socio-cultural survival skills. And then the categorical renunciation of these improvements by accepting the Social Darwinian criterion of progress is an unnecessary and morally bad alternative.

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МОРАЛЬНИЙ ПРОГРЕС – КРИТЕРІЇ ТА ПРИКЛАДИ

Крістоф Лумер

Анотація. Перша частина статті (розділи 2–6) окреслює загальну, критеріальну теорію морального прогресу. Розрізняються три типи морального прогресу: 1. етичний прогрес, тобто епістемічне та моральне вдосконалення моральної теорії (етики); 2. практично-моральний прогрес або моральний прогрес у вузькому розумінні, тобто моральне вдосконалення моральних систем і моральної дії; 3. буденний моральний прогрес, тобто поліпшення світу відповідно до моральних критеріїв соціального добробуту.

Ці поняття визначаються, а запропоновані визначення обґрунтовуються без кола в аргументації. Характерними ознаками цього підходу є, по-перше, включення етичного прогресу, який уперше вводить центральне поняття моральної бажаності та може бути використаний для визначення морального прогресу у вузькому розумінні; а по-друге, те, що етичний прогрес — а отже, і обґрунтування визначення поняття моральної бажаності — має не моральний, а епістемічний характер і ґрунтується на прагматичній (пруденційній) бажаності. Далі обговорюються епістемічні проблеми цих визначень і критеріїв, зокрема їх безколове обґрунтування та самореференційність (розд. 6).

Друга частина (розд. 7–10) подає приклади трьох типів прогресу, а також відповідних регресій. У додатку (розд. 11) розглядаються деякі альтернативні теорії морального прогресу.

Ключові слова: моральний прогрес, моральна регресія, етичний прогрес, світський прогрес, епістемічний прогрес, практичне прагматичне обґрунтування, моральна бажаність, моральні інструменти, ідеалізуально-герменевтична теорія, трилема Мюнхгаузена, моральний реалізм.

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Лумер Крістоф

Кафедра філології та критики давніх і новітніх літератур
Університет Сієни
вул. Рома, 56
Сієна, Італія
53100

Lumer Christoph

Dipartimento di filologia e critica delle letterature antiche e moderne
Università degli Studi di Siena
via Roma, 56
Siena, Italia
53100



<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8700-3885>



lumer@unisi.it



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