

## MORAL PROGRESS

Peter Robinson  
University of Texas at El Paso

The philosophers of the Enlightenment were the first to speak convincingly and in concert of human progress and for them an essential element of progress was moral progress. In general they thought that when mankind began to develop reason and live in accordance with it, that this itself would be progress. With that the superstition of religion and the acquiescence in traditional authority would evaporate. The development of reason would be a sufficient condition for the decline of religion and traditional authoritarianism. An individual's life in accordance with the newly found strength of reason would be more moral. The moral progress of individuals taken collectively would constitute the moral progress of mankind.

Kant could be regarded as the first and the last philosopher of the Enlightenment to treat the concept of moral progress with technical philosophical virtuosity and his answer to the question of whether there is or can be moral progress is paradoxical.<sup>1</sup> The problem for Kant is that progress, if it can be talked about meaningfully, must be recognizable and measurable. It must exist in the phenomenal world, whereas action can only be moral, if it is free. We cannot know that there are any moral acts. We must only hypothesize the existence of moral acts for there to be a subject called ethics and then for us to understand it. The source of moral acts is strictly noumenal and for that matter, immoral acts also. Only a noumenal God, which we could not know either, or some other denizens of the noumenal world could 'know' of free acts and 'know' whether they were right or wrong. (I have put know in quotes since for Kant knowledge can only be of the phenomenal world.) For while we recognize, by applying the formal criteria of reason, whether an act conforms to the categorical imperative or not, that is not enough. The act must will the moral law not merely conform to it. As Lewis White Beck says, "A categorical imperative which is 'practically right' must be one that commands an action which is motivated by a maxim that fits the formula. . . And a man may act on what is, in fact, a maxim that fits this formula, and yet do it without having his action determined by the formula. In this event, his action is legal, but not strictly moral."<sup>2</sup> As we might guess from Kant's pietistic background, it is the individual's intentions in his or her heart that count and only God

could see inside and be sure what they are. Not only can other men not judge whether an act is truly free or compelled by some inner constraint but whether an act is truly moral or merely in conformity with moral law.

Kant is quite aware of the self-duplicities of individuals. So while there must be free acts, acts that are right, and the possibility of willing pure evil, if morality is to exist, it is not only not necessary but in principle impossible to know them, for to know is for phenomena to be placeable under a rule but these acts are spontaneous and their source is noumenal. An individual may think that he or she is acting freely but in fact could do no other or they may excuse their action for being compelled but in (noumenal) fact have done it freely. An individual might be convinced that not only did they act the way they did because it was in conformity to the moral law but that they willed their action because it *was* the moral law whereas in fact they willed it because it had some sadomasochistic pleasurable consequence and they willed it out of purely evil intention. Again only a God could know for sure whether Kantian moralists try to act in accordance with the categorical imperative out of benevolent and fair intentions or out of love for binding up their desires and those around them in chains, even if the chains are merely forged of Kant's iron logic of reason and whether they flagellate themselves and those around them in order to attain the only real morality that is completely distinct from sentiment and desire or because they have grown to like the pain. In any case, progress can only be progress if it can be measured and so only phenomena are subject to progress. Morality for Kant can be hypothesized and hoped for but it cannot be known to be, or to increase.

What Kant ends up with when he tries to assess human progress and affirm the optimism of the Enlightenment are the phenomenal correlates of moral progress. Morality and moral progress are of highest importance to Kant. To talk about progress and not include morality is impossible for Kant but it is equally impossible for Kant to assess moral progress itself. So, he is left with its social and political counterparts. These are phenomenal and can be assessed. Thus, nations and the designers of nations that encourage the reason, freedom and integrity of citizens are progressive.

Political progress in the phenomenal world is a possibility for Kant. Rule by superstition and arbitrary authority are recognizable phenomena and could be seen to decline. Laws which promote individual autonomy and enable the individual to act in accordance with his or her own reason could be promulgated. The causes for such changes are also phenomena. Kant follows Hobbes. Human beings wish to realize their desires and to be free from mortal dangers and external constraint. Therefore they will strive for a

government which will insure human rights, property, separation of church and state, and eventually for international laws and a league of nations. But all this is the result of purely natural causes which are the desires of men pushing society as a whole inexorably in that direction. Kant is an optimistic Enlightenment philosopher with regard to political progress. He is sure that the strength of its natural causes in the desires of all mankind will bring political progress. But the source of any moral progress still lies unknown in mankind's noumenal self.

If we stick to this account which incorporates an ontological gulf between the teleological ethic of social values and the deontological ethic of morality, there is no more to be said about moral progress or even of the knowable existence of morality and I believe Kant is scrupulous in sticking to it in his writings on history. Morality, moral progress and freedom are strictly 'as, if' affairs. However in some places, especially in *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, Kant sometimes speaks as if moral acts and free choices really exist and are known. If this were so, while they would still have no causes and therefore we would be able to give no explanations or predictions for any advances or declines in morality, we could, however, identify moral acts, being on this view knowable entities, and be in a position to make the claim that there was an advance or a decline in morality. We could just use a measure analogous to the crude utilitarian yardstick of the greatest good for the greatest number. If we know how to identify a free choice and whether its intention was moral or immoral, we could count them. If over a period of time there were more moral acts per person and fewer immoral ones, then we could assert moral progress. However this would make morality a phenomenon and this would destroy the structure of Kant's philosophy, as John Silber says in his criticism of Kant:

Kant attempted to resolve the problems of interaction without resorting to the theory of pre-established harmony by holding that the noumenal world is timeless and therefore that decisions made therein (having no causal antecedents) can be regarded regulatively as causes of temporal sequences in the phenomenal world. But the results of this are disastrous. In the first place, if the series of phenomenal events is in no way altered by the intrusion of noumenal free causes, the latter are clearly superfluous, as long as acts of moral volition cannot alter the determination of events in the phenomenal world, all categorical demands that they do so are in vain. Second, Kant erred either in designating the moral

realm as the noumenal realm or in denying that the noumenal realm is temporal, for moral volition is ineluctably temporal. The will is tempted in time, decides in time and depending on its decision, feels guilty or satisfied in time.<sup>5</sup>

The alternatives of either placing moral acts within the structure of time or leaving them in the noumenal world seem to be neither Kantian nor appealing on other grounds. One must either change Kantianism into an interactionist dualism in which noumenal freedom intervenes in the phenomenal world in the case of moral acts or render the temporally phenomenal world an illusion and, in Parmenidean fashion, consider the history of mankind already complete in a timeless present, mankind having timelessly done their good or evil deeds and being already saved or damned.

If we turn away from Kant toward what appears to be a philosophical point of view which will allow an untroubled account of the concept of moral progress, Kantian type problems still seem to arise. If we take a teleological ethic based on some phenomenal goal (according to a Kantian point of view) such as utilitarian happiness, the fact of there being greater happiness for a greater number or on some other ethic, an increase in the goal what ever it is, does not seem to constitute moral progress. For the increase in the goal could come about fortuitously and without human moral concern. But rather an increase in the acts or choices that are performed to bring about the goal would seem to be the units of measure for moral progress. How to know and assess the intention of an individual choice in order to count it as an instance of morality would be a problem for a utilitarian or any other goal oriented ethic. A utilitarian could assert the existence of progress, if there were more happiness for more people, however that result were obtained, but he could not assume progress in the means, in other words more and more effective action on the part of individuals. And morality does seem to be a quality of individuals, in particular of their intentions, choices and actions. But true intentions, freedom to choose and the point of action are all often so shrouded in obscurity that they may as well be in the noumenal world.

Kant too introduces teleological considerations into his criteria for judging the morality of human acts, although he tries to explain their possible rejection as being against reason. In the last two of the difficult cases for his thesis that Kant treats in *The Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, the case of the man who lets his talents rust and the case of "a fourth man, for whom things are going well, sees that others (whom he could help) have to struggle with great hardships," and he asks, "what concern of mine is it? Let each one be as happy as heaven wills, or as he can make

himself; I will not take anything from him or even envy him; but to his welfare or to his assistance in time of need I have no desire to contribute."<sup>4</sup>

Kant in explaining the wrongness of these moral stances says:

Fourthly, with regard to meritorious duty to others, the natural end which all men have is their own happiness. Humanity might indeed exist if no one contributed to the happiness of others, provided he did not intentionally detract from it; but this harmony with humanity as an end in itself is only negative rather than positive if everyone does not also endeavor, as far as he can, to further the ends of others, for the ends of any person, who is an end in himself, must as far as possible also be my end, if that conception of an end in itself is to have its full effect on me.<sup>5</sup>

If Kant were to count acts which fit the categorical imperative and therefore were morally "legal" as indirect criteria for judging that the action was the intended outcome of willing the categorical imperative, he could also use the growth of human happiness as an indicator of the effective result of moral acts, since for Kant it is also irrational and immoral to will against the happiness of all mankind, and it would be as good a measure, and in this case the same measure as that of the utilitarians. But Kant with his preoccupation with the separation of the ethical and the rational from the empirical would not consider such a move.

Kant is duly famous for his championing of "higher" values than the utilitarians. Values such as freedom, dignity, integrity and autonomy. Kant also prizes these values not just in individuals but as they appear in the communities and nations that engender them. But these values do not have to be treated deontologically or adverbially, as qualities of action. They could be hypostasized as the utilitarians did happiness and treated as additional values of human life both of individuals and groups. Then individuals and groups could be judged as to whether they embody more or less of them, along with happiness and the resulting measure used as an indirect criterion for judging moral progress.

For Kant any community which is set up to encourage freedom, rationality, community cooperation, fairness, justice etc., is nothing but "pretense and glittering misery," if there is not the good will of individuals within it. But, again, in Kant we cannot know if choices are really free and intentions really good. Not only is Kantian freedom inaccessible to knowledge, it is a worse than useless notion because it is an uneffectable, inalterable given of morality. Kant has removed freedom and morality from our world

altogether, where we know perfectly well the causes of freedom and of the lack of it. Phenomenal freedom is something that can be gained or lost. We can make an assessment of people's autonomy and have some ideas about what made them the way they are. We can recognize when a person's mind is closed to some aspect of rational thought and though it is nearly impossible, there may be something that can be done for the neurotic, compulsive, obsessive, paranoid or fanatic. We know the lack of freedom that results from mental retardation, mental disease and drug dependence. We know that stress, fear, concern for the necessities of life of oneself, friends and family put a strain on rationality and the ability to cope. Prosperity, ease with one's self and the ability to interact successfully with others is freedom and causes freedom to increase, in a positive feedback, whereas the lacks of freedom mentioned before are causes of more constraint. Totalitarian government and superstition are still, as they were in the Enlightenment, symptoms of the lack of moral progress. Natural impediments to human freedom and rationality are the causes. On-going information manipulation, economic stress, poor education and an in-place irrational community, especially if they include your family and friends produces a lack of freedom and irrationality. Kant's notion of freedom because it is uncaused and is unenhanceable is itself a cause of acquiescence. Kant was a champion of the values of the Enlightenment and foresaw the triumph of those values but at the same time he relegated that advance to merely political progress. Moral Progress remained unassessable. But this conception renders the advancement of human freedom and the encouragement of morality impossible. It gives respectability to views such as Karl Popper's in which because people are intrinsically free and rational, governments can only transgress freedom, they cannot produce it.

Once Kantian values are placed along side utilitarian values in the phenomenal world we can act on them and they can be used as criteria for judging moral progress. Unfortunately, when we do it on a world wide scale, the impression that one gets is that happiness has decreased (due primarily to over-population) and that all the other Enlightenment values have declined as well. Ludwig Von Bertalanffy may well have been right when he said, "There is no use in glossing over reality with sociological, astronomical or genetic utopias. The Decline of the West is not a hypothesis or prophecy: it is an accomplished fact, arrived at a somewhat earlier date than Spengler and Aldous Huxley expected."<sup>6</sup>

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> In my account of Kant's discussion of moral progress I

believe I am following and in agreement with the conclusion of Gregg Franzwa's "Problems in Kant's Teleology of History," *Southwest Philosophical Studies* vol. viii no. 3 (Spring, 1983) 114-122.

<sup>2</sup> Lewis White Beck, "Apodictic Imperatives" in Immanuel Kant. *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. by Lewis White Beck with critical essays edited by Robert Paul Wolff (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969) 148.

<sup>3</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Religion with the Limits of Reason Alone*, trans. with introduction and notes by Theodore M. Greene and Hoyt H. Hudson with a new essay, "The Ethical Significance of Kant's Religion," by John R. Silber (New York: Harper, 1960) xcviij-xcix.

<sup>4</sup> *The Foundations* 47.

<sup>5</sup> *The Foundations* 55.

<sup>6</sup> Ludwig Von Bertalanffy, *Robots, Men and Minds: Psychology in the Modern World*. (New York: George Braziller, 1967) 110.