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PROJECT

Progress and Regress in Morals and Politics

We are in a disturbing age, rife with moral and political regress. In some major liberal democracies, we can no longer take it for granted that politicians need even pay lip service to the rule or law; to honesty; to the rights of refugees; or to the need to protect the environment for future generations. Conspiracy theories about public health measures and election results are thick on the ground. On the other hand, there is moral progress as well. The rights of women and those in non-heterosexual relationships have meaningfully improved in many parts of the world; Apartheid in South Africa has been replaced by a more just system.

Yet it is a formidable task to articulate just what moral progress and regress is and how to resolve disagreements about whether we are going forward or backward. These disagreements play out around the family dinner table, as well as in philosophy.

My project is to make sense of how moral and political beliefs are objective or aimed at getting things right. We all think that it is not merely an individual's values or a culture's conventions that makes it wrong to torture an animal or sexually assault a child. But we also know that our beliefs have developed in ways that are contingent on all sorts of historical accidents – the evolution of the human brain; the way language-users have posed questions and answered them; power relations; the ways in which different technologies developed in different societies at different times; and political and economic aims. We human beings, with our evolved and historically contingent characters, capacities, and limitations, bring moral norms into being and then go on to shape them.

How can we aim at getting things right, yet see, as the American pragmatist Williams James put it, that “the trail of the human serpent is over everything”? Are we not left with a relativist “anything goes” or “might is right” position – a position that seems alien to our actual human moral practices?

I will try to resolve these fundamental tensions by developing a theory of truth and objectivity, along pragmatist lines, that does justice to both the subjective and objective dimensions of our moral and political lives and deliberations.

Recommended Reading

Misak, Cheryl. *Truth and the End of Inquiry: A Peircean Account of Truth*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991. Expanded paperback 2004.

–. *Cambridge Pragmatism: From Peirce and James to Ramsey and Wittgenstein*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.

–. *Frank Ramsey: A Sheer Excess of Powers*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. Revised and expanded paperback 2022.