

# Looking back, looking forward: Progress, hope, and history

Jakob Huber

Research Centre "The Formation of Normative Orders", Goethe University Frankfurt, Frankfurt am Main, Germany

## Correspondence

Jakob Huber, Research Centre "The Formation of Normative Orders", Goethe University Frankfurt, Frankfurt am Main, 60629, Germany.

Email: [j.huber@em.uni-frankfurt.de](mailto:j.huber@em.uni-frankfurt.de)

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

In his famous interpretation of Paul Klee's painting *Angelus Novus*, Walter Benjamin (2007, pp. 257–258) sets out to bury the idea of progress. Progress is depicted as a storm that "blows in from paradise" and "irresistibly propels" the angel of history into the future. His back to the future, the angel faces the past and "sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet." History's countless victims are nothing more than stepping-stones along the path of an irresistible development.

Benjamin's memorable image speaks to the unease and skepticism with which philosophers approached arguments from moral and political progress throughout the 20th century. The enlightenment belief in progress had been shattered not only by the Holocaust and two World Wars but also by the fact that it fed into self-congratulatory discourses of civilizational superiority and moral development that, in turn, had served to justify imperialism and colonial domination. Philosophically, moreover, the teleological philosophies of history that typically framed progressive narratives had widely come to be seen as outdated. The widespread view, then, was that the idea of progress should be left in the "dustbin of history along with other exploded rationalist projections" (Goldman, 2012, p. 499).

Lately, however, progress is making a comeback across moral (e.g., Appiah, 2010; Kitcher, 2011; Roth, 2007; Singer, 2011) and political (Anderson, 2014, 2015; Buchanan & Powell, 2018; Moody-Adams, 1999) philosophy. Replacing metaphysically contentious enlightenment conceptions with elements from naturalism or pragmatism, these authors seek to identify certain historical dynamics that facilitate, under the rights condition, human efforts to bring about progress (Section 2). While I welcome this renewed philosophical attention to the idea of progress, my aim in this article is to show that "neoprogessivists" do not go far enough in distancing it from the philosophy of history. The idea that we could point to something like a general logic of progress forces us to draw a continuous line between past, present, and future (Section 3). This is problematic in particular insofar as we relate to historical time as agents (rather than observers), for it constrains our ability to fully appreciate the contingency and complexity of social change and transformation (Section 4).

Rather than giving up on progress, however, we should foreground more radically its practical aspect, which is encapsulated in the idea of hope (Section 5). In representing progress as possible, hope allows us to anticipate a desired future that is not a projected continuation of the past. The hopeful agent can pick out historical events as particular

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instances of progress without representing them as tied to together by an underlying dynamic that plays out across history. This allows us to complete the “practical turn” in thinking about progress that neo-progressivists indeed deserve credit for initiating and to fully emancipate the notion from the philosophy of history.

## 2 | THE RETURN TO PROGRESS

Let us start by getting a clearer picture of the recent return to progress. Its proponents are well aware of the philosophical and political pitfalls associated with enlightenment conception such as those of Kant, Hegel, or Marx, who had understood progress in the strongest possible terms: as a necessary, inevitable, and unified process driven (behind our backs) by providential nature, absolute spirit or the development of the forces and relations of production (cf. Allen, 2016, p. 44)—a process approaching a final goal or telos defined in terms of the Highest Good, absolute knowledge or communist utopia. Neoprogessivists seek to emancipate themselves from this framework by replacing the traditional philosophies of history with elements from pragmatism and naturalism. Consequently, their updated conceptions of progress are *nondeterministic*, *nonmetaphysical*, and *nonteleological*. Let me unpack this in more detail.

First, contemporary proponents of progress avoid conceptualizing progress as inevitable and operating independently of human agency. While they insist that there are certain mechanisms or historical dynamics inherent to human coexistence through which progress typically unfolds, they deny that those will do the work *for us*. Enlightenment philosophies of history had often been accused of dithering what precisely there is left for us to do if history already inheres a self-sustaining and indeed irreversible momentum directed towards a given end state. In response, neoprogessivists argue that it is all up to us to improve the world—given that the requisite social and political circumstances pertain.

How likely the prospect of progress ultimately is, though, depends on how hard the respective authors take the requisite conditions to be to come by.<sup>1</sup> Elisabeth Anderson, for instance, argues that moral learning is often hampered by the limited capacity of the powerful in particular to identify and correct their cognitive biases. Similarly, Buchanan and Powell (2018, p. 218) seek to point out that “highly favorable conditions,” from biological and psychological forces to social and political institutions, need to be in place for progress to be widespread and sustainable. Knowledge of these conditions is a prerequisite for human beings’ ability “to ensure that the arc of the moral universe continues to bend steadily, if not inexorably, toward progress” (Buchanan & Powell, 2018, p. 395). By contrast, Moody-Adams (1999, p. 168) argues that we have reason at least for “cautious optimism” about the prospect of human betterment, given how effectively progressive moral insights have been disseminated in the past. Yet even on her account, what we have license to be optimistic *about* is our own ability to further contribute, as moral-political agents, to historical progress.

By implication, neo-progressivists also stay away from contentious metaphysical assumptions in narrating how certain progressive tendencies play out. This is a second important departure from enlightenment conceptions and a vital aspect of their attempt to distance progress from the philosophy of history. Progress is facilitated not by anonymous forces such as spirit, providence, or nature. Instead, neoprogessivists focus on learning-processes that occur in the course of a collective’s attempt to regulate its coexistence. These are often described either as a correction of epistemic errors or as an expansion of the “catchment area” of given moral and political principles, that is, of their domain of application and the relevant addressees.

In so doing, some take inspiration from the pragmatist tradition, arguing that societies incrementally develop better norms, practices, and institutions as they attempt to solve problems and cope with crises or contradictions. According to Anderson (2014), for example, societal norms are updated “intelligently” when biases inherent to widely accepted views are counteracted or “experiments in living” reveal alternative, more successful solutions to the problems of interpersonal cooperation. Others construe the evolution of moral norms as driven by forces of natural selection. As already mentioned, Buchanan and Powell (2018) develop a “biocultural” theory according to which safe and stable ecological and social circumstances make progress towards moral inclusiveness likely. Philip Kitcher’s *pragmatic naturalism* actually combines a Deweyan picture of ethics as growing out of the human social situation with a broadly naturalistic

refusal “to introduce mysterious entities— ‘spooks’—to explain the origin, evolution, and progress of ethical practice” (Kitcher, 2011, p. 3). These authors generally agree that progress should be thought of as a collective learning process that occurs as we work out how to live together.

Finally, neoprogessivists offer *nonteleological* models that do away with the idea that progress is unidirectionally aimed at a specific, predetermined goal. On their view, we should not think of history as a steady march towards a perfect end-state that could be specified in advance, with each determinate sociohistorical stage representing a cumulative advance relative to its predecessor stage. Rather than teleologically approaching an antecedently fixed goal, societies confront a new set of problems in each historical moment that they have to overcome in order to move forward. Whether progress (rather than regression and stagnation) has actually occurred can only be determined in hindsight and not in relation to a given end point. Roth (2007, p. 385–386), for instance, rejects the “utopian view,” according to which “progress is a matter of getting closer to our ultimate moral destination.”<sup>2</sup> Instead, she offers a model of progress that gets along without positing a final stage and even allows for the possibility that “our standards of evaluation or the ethical ends toward which we aim change.”

The departure from teleology allows neoprogessivists to dodge a number of further critiques traditionally directed at progressive narratives. First, they can think of progress as nonlinear, allowing for episodes of interruption and even regression. According to Buchanan and Powell (2018, p. 7), acknowledging the “bloodbaths of the twentieth and early twenty-first century” requires abandoning “linear conceptions of progress” that imply “continuous progress or at least rule out major regressions.” Second, they make space for a pluralist notion of progress that means different things for different collectives at different times (e.g., Kitcher, 2011, p. 281). Wary of the enlightenment view of history as a totality consisting of predictable stages of development through which all societies or civilizations are supposed to pass, they are keen to decenter the frame of reference for progress. And third, they can offer localized narratives according to which claims about progress do not have to be global judgments but can be constrained to “relatively circumscribed domains of concern” (Moody-Adams, 1999, p. 169; see also Kitcher, 2011, p. 242ff.). For instance, we can detect progress in moral reasoning, moral standing or moral responsibility, respectively (Buchanan & Powell, 2018, p. 382), or isolate concrete historical instances of progress (say, the abolition of slavery) without being committed to diagnosing that progress has taken place all things considered or that a society as a whole is more moral than it used to be.

To sum up, neoprogessivists update enlightenment conceptions along several dimensions. In particular, they push back against the idea that history inheres anything like a continuous, cumulative, irreversible change directed towards a given end state, instead foregrounding the role of human practical activity in shaping our social and political environment. Most importantly, they carve out a clear role for human agency in bringing progress about. I believe that this “practical turn” in thinking about progress is timely and important. Yet, as I hope to show in the remainder of this article, it does not go far enough. For, neoprogessivists retain one important aspect of their enlightenment predecessors: the idea that we can identify something like a general theory of historical dynamics, an account of the mechanisms and tendencies by way of which progressive change typically takes place, even if driven by human agency. Progress does not occur necessarily, but when it does, it follows a certain logic—or so the argument goes.

### 3 | PROGRESS WITH A PRACTICAL INTENT?

In the preceding section, I introduced the recent return to progress in moral and political philosophy. While the different accounts take inspiration from diverse philosophical traditions, they are united in a timely ambition to distance the notion of progress from the philosophy of history. My aim in the present section is to understand better how far they get in this attempt. I suspect that the vestigial remnant neoprogessivists retain from their enlightenment predecessors—the idea that in every instance of progress we see a broader historical dynamic play out—ends up reducing the space for agency.

In order to pave the way for my critique, I will introduce a distinction loosely borrowed from Amy Allen (2016, pp. 11/12).<sup>3</sup> In thinking about conceptions of progress, we can distinguish between a backward-looking from a

forward-looking perspective. The former is oriented towards the past. It employs the idea of progress as a principle of historical interpretation that helps us make sense of past events and developments *as progressive*. The latter is forward-looking, highlighting the way in which certain assumptions about progress frame, constrain, and orient our action going forward, as we seek to bring about further progress. It thus conceives of the idea of progress as part of a distinctly practical attitude. Every account of progress, I want to suggest, unavoidably (though often implicitly) operates simultaneously on both of these two levels, which are often interrelated in complex ways. We can always ask what a particular framework commits us to in terms of progress in the past, and how that, in turn, frames our efforts to bring about progress in the future. In other words, we always relate to historical time as both observers and agents.

To illustrate, let us try to make sense of the predicament associated with the classical philosophies of history along these lines. We notice that it is precisely these authors' claims as to the supposedly unavoidable and irreversible historical processes that leaves them unable to clearly carve out a space for human agency. Kant's practical teleology is a useful case in point. While he is eager to clarify that we should read history as progress "with a practical intent" (IUH 8:15),<sup>4</sup> that is, from the perspective of practical agency, he simultaneously defends the assumption that "the human race has always been in progress towards the better and will continue to be so henceforth" (OQ 8:84) and even talks of nature or providence as "guaranteeing" that progress occurs independently of human efforts (e.g., PP 8:365). A subject who thinks of herself as an agent with the capacity to cause change in the world, he seems to suggest, cannot but comprehend the developmental process that precedes her as the gradual achievement of something better. Unfortunately, it is precisely this claim that progress is *actual* (rather than possible or even likely) which obscures what role there is left to play for human agency.

We have already seen that neoprogessivists dial down radically on the strength of these claims. Rather than aiming to show that history as a whole actually *is* progressive, they confine themselves to identifying the empirical conditions under which progress is likely to occur. And yet, the relation between backward-looking and forward-looking aspects remains a fraught one. Generally, neoprogessivists are well aware that their accounts have practical ramifications. As Lea Ypi puts it, for instance, "the idea of progress is unavoidable because without it, our efforts to do the right thing seem to have very little orientation" (Ypi, n.d.). According to Stephen Pinker, another prominent proponent of progress, our answer to the question whether "the strivings of the human race over long stretches of time have made us better or worse off" is fundamental to our "sense of meaning and purpose" (Pinker, 2011, p. 1). And Buchanan and Powell agree that theorizing progress "is not merely an 'academic' exercise for moral and political theorists," for "whether there has been moral progress [...] matters also from a perspective of moral and political agency" (Buchanan & Powell, 2018, p. 11). It seems that neoprogessivists ascribe to the idea of progress the ability not only to help us understand history but also to guide moral and political agency—namely, in at least one of two ways, strategic and normative, respectively.

The thought is, first, that a better comprehension of the dynamics of social change and transformation helps us strategically to the steer the future in our direction. In her work on the abolition of slavery, for instance, Anderson (2014, 2015) tells a story how a worldwide consensus in 1700 that slavery was acceptable was destabilized by conscience-driven mid-18th century Quakers and then replaced by the abolitionist movement, which eventually resulted in today's antislavery consensus. She construes this development as a genuine case of moral learning, that is, a change in attitudes and beliefs brought about as the arguments underpinning slavery came to be seen as unjustifiable and biased. Highlighting the important role of social movements in exposing and correcting the moral biases and ignorance of the powerful, she is ultimately interested in the "social epistemology of moral learning" more generally, that is, how social groups learn moral lessons from history as they seek to realize progressive goals going forward.

In contrast to Anderson, Appiah (2010) disputes that social transformation comes about through appeals to reason(s) or argumentative claim making. Instead, he points out that practices, from dueling in aristocratic Britain to foot-binding in China and the Atlantic slave trade, are eradicated only once they come into conflict with honor. Importantly, conceptions of honor have not only propelled "moral revolutions" in the past but could also do so in the future, for instance, when it comes to the fight against "honour killings." Hence, we are well-advised (for strategic reasons) to align morality with honor, mobilizing contempt and shame rather than simply appealing to rationality, humanity, or sympathy. Notice that while Appiah disagrees with Anderson about the specific dynamics of social change, they

concur about the action-guiding implications of their respective progressive narratives: the very mechanisms that have propelled us forward in the past will do so in the future.

Now, the second sense in which (some) conceptions of progress are meant to guide action is normative rather than strategic. Here, the idea is that a progressive reading of history (or certain instances of it) provides normative grounds for committing to one goal or course of action over others. Progressive narratives thus contain justificatory force—they are thought to yield a distinctly temporalized sense of normativity. The idea that normative standards are immanent to existing practices and institutions is usually associated with the left Hegelian tradition. Indeed, its contemporary proponents such as Rahel Jaeggi insist that it is only “from within an understanding of an emancipatory or meaningful succession of historical moments that we can judge trajectories of transformation” (Jaeggi, 2016, p. 234). Similarly, according to Axel Honneth’s “experimental understanding of history” (Honneth, 2017, p. 124), the results of past learning processes are inscribed in existing social practices and institutions. And even Jürgen Habermas can be read as grounding normativity in a progressive reading of history, given that his commitment to a theory of social evolution positions modernity as the outcome of a process of moral-practical learning (Allen, 2016, pp. 92–165).

Surprisingly, though, the idea that progress can only be determined from within a given historical moment is not exclusive to authors from the Frankfurt School tradition. In fact, it is shared by many of those who instead take their cue from pragmatism or naturalism. Kitcher (2011, p. 221), for instance, describes progress as a learning process in which systems of norms evolve over time in the direction of an increasing capacity for problem solving. Importantly, in the course of this process the background problem itself shifts and thus what counts as a good response in relation to it. Along similar lines, Anderson (2019) follows Dewey in arguing that the test whether an experiment in living contributes to moral learning is not by the lights of a standard of success external to a practice, but internal to it.

In each case, the evaluation of a transformative process is indexed to a particular reading of historical dynamics as shaped by the underlying theory of progress. And while these authors certainly distance themselves from a vulgar type of Hegelianism according to which progress is what has led up to “us,” there is a sense in which our own commitments are at least partly vindicated with regard to the learning processes from which they emanate. Amanda Roth, for instance, worries that *without* a notion of progress “we seem to lose all ground for thinking that our current racially (more) egalitarian beliefs and practices are preferable to Jim Crow beliefs and practices” (Roth, 2007, pp. 384–385).

We now have a better grasp of the way in which neoproggressivists take their respective accounts of progress to orient and guide action. The particular dynamics of social change and transformation do not only help us make sense of the past *as progressive*, they can also be exploited to bring about further progress in the future. The underlying account of historical dynamics constitutes a strong link—in fact, a kind of continuity—between past, present, and future. For it is tasked to both help us understand the past and act going forward. I will lay out more specifically in the subsequent section in what way this is problematic.

## 4 | THE NEOPROGRESSIVIST PREDICAMENT

I argued in the preceding section that we can distinguish between backward-looking and forward-looking perspectives contained in accounts of moral and political progress. Neoproggressivism connects these two in a particular way. Given that it retains from the classical philosophies of history the idea of a general theory describing the dynamics of historical change, there is a sense in which our reading of the past (as progressive) inscribes a direction into the future: by acting in a certain way, we conceive of our ourselves as contributing to a larger historical process. In the present section, I want to show why this entails a continuity between past, present, and future that remains too strong to provide useful practical guidance.

Let me start with the strategic sense of action guidance. The thought, recall, was that a theory of progress provides crucial insights into the dynamics and mechanisms that drive history. I now want to cast doubt on the idea that this actually facilitates our own attempts to contribute to progress in the future. In order to do so, I draw on Celikates’ (2018) critique of Elisabeth Anderson’s work on the abolition of slavery that I introduced above. Anderson, recall,

argues that slavery was brought down by the fact that it got in the way of rational social organization and was increasingly out of sync with the public's considered moral judgments. On Celikates' view, the idea that slavery was primarily overcome through a transformation in moral consciousness brought about in response to critique and argumentative claim making not only underestimates the significance of structural (e.g., demographic, economic, and geopolitical) circumstances. Anderson's heavy focus on the abolitionist movement also ignores the disruptive and resistant agency of slaves themselves, who worked to subvert the power structures underlying the relevant practices and institutions rather than persuading those who supported them.

I take it that the evidence in this regard is inconclusive. While some historians agree with Anderson that the abolitionist social movement did constitute a turning point in history (e.g., Brown, 2006; Davis, 1999), others dispute this (recently, e.g., Tam, 2020). But my point is not so much one of historical accuracy. Rather, I am concerned with the very attempt to generalize the underlying progressive logic and thus to project it into the future. Recall that this is what Anderson seeks to do. She takes the slavery example to illustrate a point about the "social epistemology of moral learning," which concerns the form of progress in general. I worry that this (implicit) forward-looking aspect of her progressive narrative may function as an "epistemological obstacle" (Celikates, 2018, p. 144) going forward—not only as we go on to fight the remnants of slavery where they continue to persist in the modern world but similarly when we seek to bring about progressive change in other domains. Some instances of social change will take the form of learning processes induced by argumentative claim making, others are likely to depend on material and structural factors. The point is simply that fixating on a particular mechanism or dynamic is unlikely to help us appreciate the complexities—including the discontinuities, contingencies, and dead-ends—of social transformation. Again, this is not so much a question of whether Anderson's specific claim about the role of moral bias of the "powerful" in her preferred example is accurate. The problem is rather that, even if we get history right in that case, we still cannot expect to exploit those same mechanisms going forward.<sup>5</sup>

I proceed now to the second, normative sense of action guidance that some neoprogressivists endorse. Here, the thought is that progressive narratives yield justificatory grounds for the (continued) pursuit of certain ends or projects. My worry is that this temporalized sense of normativity gives us reasons of the wrong kind to endorse certain projects that are in need of independent and indeed ongoing critical scrutiny in their own right. To illustrate, take the case of modern human rights, an example that figures prominently in numerous progressive narratives. Theorists of human rights typically tell an uplifting story how human dignity and legal equality were progressively realized in the course of a historical process that usually begins with the 18th century revolutions and proceeds via the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and post-World War II decolonization (e.g., Moody-Adams, 1999, p. 174; Beitz, 2009; Ignatieff, 2001). This development is often presented as an exemplary instance of moral as much as political progress. For Buchanan and Powell (2018, p. 379), the ascendancy of the modern human rights movement is even "the most robust instance of progress" we have at our avail, one that attests to a genuine improvement in moral understanding.

Critics have recently questioned this narrative and argued that the history of human rights was actually a more precarious, contingent, protracted, and uneven development, one of "construction rather than discovery and contingency rather than necessity" (Moyn, 2010, p. 20). Again, historical accuracy shall not be my primary concern here. Instead, I want to question to what extent we can derive normative conclusions from this narrative. This, I take it, is what proponents of so called "political conceptions" of human rights, such as Rawls (1999), Beitz (2009), or Raz (2010) at least implicitly do. Beitz, for instance, takes issue with "the tendency to identify human rights with natural rights"; which, on his view, represents "a kind of unwitting philosophical dogmatism" (Beitz, 2003, p. 38). Instead, human rights are a distinctly 20th century global phenomenon. Their normativity is contained not in an underlying moral theory but in human rights practice, including the international legal documents that co-constitute it, alone.

At least implicit in this framework, I want to propose, is an attempt to derive the validity of (certain) human rights from a progressive historical trajectory. Beitz argues that we arrive at an understanding of human rights by observing and interpreting current human rights practice, that is, by rendering explicit the implicit normative commitments constituting what he takes to be an "emergent discursive global practice" (Beitz, 2003, p. 44) in post-WWII global politics. Beneath this, I take it, lies the assumption that this practice in fact constitutes an achievement, the result of something

like a learning process that we should welcome. Otherwise, we would have no reason to take our cue from political practice for justificatory purposes.

Interestingly, there are two very different—in fact, contrasting—sets of objections to this line of reasoning. On one side, we find proponents of “orthodox” conceptions (e.g., Griffin, 2009, Tasioulas, 2012), according to whom human rights are important moral rights that people hold simply in virtue of being human. Deriving the content and indeed the validity of human rights from a contested and largely contingent political practice bereaves us of the argumentative resources, they argue, to subject that very practice to normative critique. Hence, we should think of human rights as having an existence in the moral order independently and irrespectively of their enshrinement in positive legal documents and conventions, for which they provide a justificatory standard.

A second and indeed more fundamental line of critique comes from the opposite direction and is concerned more explicitly with the underlying progress story. These critics worry that the overwhelming focus on human rights as the culmination of a historical development has come at the expense of competing moral and political concerns, in particular of demands for broader social and economic justice. The human rights project, they argue, has “stigmatized only the shame of material insufficiency while turning a blind eye to galloping material inequality” (Moyn, 2010, p. 176), it “sweep[s] the systemic basis of inequality under the carpet” (Marks, 2013, p. 235) and has helped to legitimate a neoliberal global order that is said to be at the root of rising economic inequality (Brown, 2004, p. 461). If the history of human rights is told “as if it were simply the future waiting to happen” (Moyn, 2010, p. 11), we are bound to be kept from subjecting that project to the necessary ongoing normative scrutiny, including the costs it involves. In other words, if in looking back we see a centuries-long, relentless progression, we will hardly be attuned to alternative trajectories as we go forward.

On one level, the two lines of critique could hardly be more different: according to the first, “political conceptions” underestimate the normative validity of human rights, according to the second, they overestimate it. And yet, they converge on one crucial point: the ascendancy and contemporary prominence of the human rights project itself does not provide any normative grounds for affirming it—we cannot derive the validity of human rights from a particular progressive historical trajectory. To obtain such grounds, we would need an independent, self-standing normative standard. Where they disagree is whether such a standard is to be had.

Both cases—the strategic as well as the normative continuity—reveal why the neoprogressivist framework is problematic specifically as far as our relation to historical time *as agents* is concerned. Given that its proponents stick to the idea of a general dynamic of social change and transformation that plays out through history, the forward-looking perspective is essentially derived from and thus, to some extent, determined by the backward-looking perspective. Differently put, there is a sense in which the neoprogressivist imposes order onto the past at the cost of projecting linearity into the future. The problem is that this unnecessarily narrows down the space for agency.

As already mentioned, neoprogressivists do deserve credit for distancing progress from the philosophy of history by freeing it from any kind of “necessity” in a metaphysical sense. However, the idea that there are certain dynamics of social change and transformation that we can trace through history constitutes a problematic remnant from enlightenment accounts of progress. While progress is man-made, there remains a sense in which the (man-made) future is conceived of as the projected continuation of the (man-made) past. In order to overcome this problem and complete the shift towards a genuinely practical conception of progress, I suggest that we foreground in a more radical way its forward-looking dimension. As I show in the subsequent section, this shift is encapsulated in the turn to *hope* for progress.

## 5 | HOPE FOR PROGRESS

From my argument in the preceding section, it may be taken to follow that I agree with Benjamin’s reluctance, mentioned outset of this article, to ascribe much prominence to the idea of progress in our practical lives. Given that it seems imbued with the remnants of a philosophy of history and the attendant problems, it may be tempting to do away



with progress altogether. Indeed, not only Benjamin but an array of thinkers from Nietzsche to Heidegger, as well as their contemporary heirs (e.g., Dienstag, 2009; Gray, 2004; Scruton, 2011), have thus foregrounded alternatives such as disappointment, despair or fatalism, attitudes that express a fundamental skepticism about our capacity to shape the future in line with our desires and preferences.

I doubt, however, that these are viable future-directed orientations in moral or political life. This, for the simple reason that human beings are “future-oriented creatures” (Calhoun, 2018, p. 72) who live and act under an idea of what lies ahead of them; our assumptions about the future constitute an important component of any type of practical activity. More precisely, we have a need for anticipation: in order to act and sustain our resolve to do so, we need to be able to conceive of the future as open and hospitable to our agency. At least to the extent that we think of ourselves as agents, the idea that the world is entirely closed off from intervention from the outset is unsustainable. For we would hardly be able to bring ourselves to act and pursue ends we take worthy of pursuit but rather despair or resign.<sup>6</sup>

This, I take it, is the reason why the idea of progress forms an inextricable part of the way modern individuals think and, more importantly still, act politically: it is tied to our need to conceive of the world as open to our efforts. The need, moreover, for such a progressive aspiration is all the more urgent in the face of setbacks or when things do not seem to go our way—an observation that can be taken to apply to our present historical moment, which is often read (including by neoprogressivists) as a moment of crisis in which “some of the monumental moral gains of the previous century appear to many to be under serious threat” (Buchanan & Powell, 2018; p. 41). In times like these the prospect of despair and resignation looms particularly large.

It is against this background that we need to reflect on the significance of the idea of progress: its importance in sustaining our resolve to act. I thus propose a fundamental shift in relation to the two perspectives introduced above. Rather than foregrounding, as neoprogressivists do, the backward-looking aspect, we should prioritize the forward-looking one from the outset. In other words, instead of looking for progressive tendencies in the past that we then project forward in order to gain practical orientation, we start with the necessary practical attitude and subsequently ask what we thereby commit ourselves to in terms of the past.

This shift, I want to suggest, is encapsulated in the idea of *hope* for progress. Hope is a distinctly practical attitude that represents the future as fundamentally open to our intervention. Neoprogressivists themselves do occasionally talk about hope (e.g., Buchanan & Powell, 2018, pp. 37–38, 395), usually though without reflecting further what this entails or commits us to. That said, it is generally difficult to find a clear account of the relation between hope and progress. While it is often claimed that “progress [is] a heuristic for hope” (Goldman, 2012, p. 506), that “hope [is] embodied in utopian dreams for human progress” (Böker, 2017, p. 89), that “hope [...] is tied to faith in progress” (Mittleman, 2009, p. 19) or that the two are problematically intertwined (Allen, 2016, p. 61), the question what precisely we are doing when we *hope* for progress rather than, for instance, desiring or expecting it, is rarely explicitly addressed.

Hence, the first step is to clarify what I mean by hope. In fact, the nature of hope has recently received increasing attention in analytic philosophy. The enormous range of contexts in which we hope, it turns out, makes it very difficult to conclusively define the concept. What unites our hopes that the sun will shine tomorrow, that we will get a paper written in time or that we recover from a serious illness, beyond a very abstract sense in which we take up an affirmative stance towards the future? Fortunately, I do not need to answer this question for present purposes or indeed get involved in the increasingly popular project of defining hope in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions (recently, e.g., Kwong, 2019). What I want to get a grip on is a particular *kind* of hope that, as I shall suggest, can sustain agency in difficult circumstances.

In so doing, I will take my cue from what is often called the “standard view” (e.g., Meirav, 2009, p. 217; Martin, 2013, p. 4), according to which hope contains at least a conative and a cognitive aspect—more precisely, a desire for something that we take to be possible but not certain.<sup>7</sup> In relation to the desire component, keep in mind that I want to focus on hope as a practical attitude, that is, one that allows us to act in ways we take ourselves to have reasons to act. Hence, I am interested not just in any case where we desire something (and may not be involved agentially at all), but specifically in scenarios where we have set ourselves an end and hope to attain or contribute to attaining



it. We can call this kind of hope, where the hoped-for outcome at least partly depends on our efforts, practical hope (Calhoun, 2018, p. 69; see also Martin, 2013, p. 152). Practical hope has the success of our efforts as its very object: we actively take ourselves towards the hoped-for state of affairs. The hope for historical progress is a type of practical hope.

The second, modal component is meant to demarcate hope, whose object is taken to be at least possible, from modally less constrained wishes on the one hand (I can arguably wish, though not hope, to simply fly away by flapping my arms) and more confident expectations on the other. Admittedly, it may not be irrational to hope for something we are confident will come about. Yet, what Andrew Chignell describes as a *ceteris paribus* “assert-the-stronger” norm usually leads us to assert the strongest justified attitude that we have towards a state of affairs in order to give others a better sense of our information state (Chignell, 2013, p. 200). I thus agree with Martin (2013, p. 30) that it “rarely makes sense to speak of hoping for and expecting the same outcome.” Hope, that is to say, usually goes along with a sense that its object is *merely* possible—in contrast, for instance, to optimism, which express a higher confidence.

Now, numerous authors have noticed the problem that, on the basis of desire and modal components alone, we are not yet able to distinguish hope from despair. Imagine two men, Andy and Red, serving life sentence for murder in an unpleasant prison (Bovens, 1999, pp. 667–669). They both have an equally strong desire to escape the prison and similar estimates concerning the likelihood of success in breaking out (they both think it is possible, though not very likely). And yet, they respond differently to the situation: while Andy lives in the hope of escaping (after all, it is possible that they would make it!), Red despairs of the low odds. It thus seems that we need to supplement the standard account with a third condition. The thought is usually that hope additionally involves some kind of focus on the apparent possibility of attaining the desired outcome. How precisely to spell out this *focus condition* continues to be a matter of contention. Some argue that we must orient our agential energies towards its chance of occurring (McGeer, 2004; see also Martin, 2013, p. 69), others that we resolve to act as if the desired prospect is going to obtain (Pettit, 2004), or simply focus on the issue under the aspect of its possibility (Chignell, 2018, p. 306 fn. 36.).

While I do not want to endorse any one of these proposals in particular, let me point to a shared underlying assumption: hope often involves an exercise of imagination, a kind of “mental imaging” (Bovens, 1999, p. 674) about the projected state of affairs or pathways to reaching it. It is this third component, I want to suggest, that helps us understand hope’s motivating force. The idea is that hopeful agents are able to close the gap between their agency and the desired outcome, which might otherwise demoralize them, by visualizing what it would be like or how we might get there—they are able to imaginatively inhabit the desired future or project ourselves into it (see also Kwong, 2019).

This act of imagination—a type of representation that does not aim at things as they actually, presently, and subjectively are but as they might be (Liao & Gendler, 2020)—stabilizes and structures our connection to the desired outcome, by allowing us to see the object of our hope as a *genuine* possibility. It helps us conceive of the event, or series of events, that need to take place in order for the outcome to obtain. As Moody-Adams (2017) puts it, the exercise of the imagination can contribute to moral progress by “expanding” our perceptual space: it gets people to see the world and their place in it in fundamentally new ways, and to anticipate (hoped-for) states of affairs.

Kwong (2019, p. 246) illustrates this thought with the example of Mandy and Scott, who are discussing the prospect of their favorite football team making the playoffs in the upcoming season. Although they both desire that the team will have a successful season, they agree that its chances are slim. Unlike Scott, though, Mandy holds out hope because she is able to *imagine* what it would be like for the team to do well: “Maybe the general manager will make a surprise trade. Or maybe last year’s rookie players will have a breakthrough year. Maybe our team will even be reassigned to a division with less competitive rivals. Maybe the injured star player will recover sooner than expected.” Mandy’s ability to map a mental path to the outcome, which she draws by way of exercising her imagination, allows her to sustain hope rather than finding herself in despair.

I should highlight that the motivational force of hope is not undisputed. In political discourse in particular, we can indeed observe something like a shift towards an increasingly skeptical attitude towards hope, which is suspected to invite complacency and wishful thinking rather than resolute action. For instance, the climate activism group Extinction Rebellion has adopted the slogan “hope dies, action begins” for their fight against global warming, that is, they

make the case for replacing hope with anxiety (of the looming climate catastrophe) as a supposedly more efficacious attitude. Similar, in the context of the current fight against racial injustice in the United States, several thinkers, such as “Afropessimist” Frank Wilderson (2020), argue that a hoped-based discourse is more likely to reproduce existing structures of repression than to fundamentally challenge them.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Warren (2015) argues that we should embrace “Black nihilism,” because a “politics of hope” preserves the metaphysical structures, including a deep-seated kind of powerlessness, that sustain black suffering.

Indeed, it is an open question whether the simple hope that a given state of affair be realized is motivationally more efficacious than alternative attitudes such as anxiety, anger (Srinivasan, 2018) or bitterness (Stockdale, 2018). The worry that hope, which has built into it already the concession that the outcome is at least partly beyond our control, may lead us to overly rely on external factors or other people is certainly not unfounded. Recall, however, that above I introduced the hope for progress as a kind of practical hope. This is a particular kind of hope that explicitly involves us as agents: it is directed at the success of our own efforts and predicated on our own contribution. This basic sense that we can make a difference, I want to suggest, is indeed a fundamental prerequisite of moral and political agency, even if based on anger or fear. In fact, practical hope is compatible with these and many more attitudes or emotions, which may very well be appropriate ways of reacting to the world under given circumstances (Milona, 2019, p. 715; Stockdale, 2019). To sum up, what I want to defend is the distinct hope to contribute to moral and political progress. This hope allows us to anticipate our own contribution to human betterment and, hence, to sustain our resolve to act in the requisite ways.

What it does not free us from is the need for a sober assessment whether it is actually possible for us to make a difference under given circumstances. But what does this mean? I take it that in rare cases, our hope can be sustained by a vague or implicit sense that its object is *not impossible*. When it comes to goals of a deeper and more life-structuring kind we need to assume more than that, in particular if circumstances are such that the chances of success are dim. In these cases, we must assume that the desired object is possible in a real practical (rather than merely formal) sense (see Chignell, 2018, p. 305). In other words, it will not suffice merely to assume that its attainment cannot be ruled out. Instead, we need to be able to point to some way in which the world is configured or arranged such that what we desire is *actually* attainable: we need grounds for hope. The absence of such grounds can be a real problem for many political agents, particular if they belong to a group that is subject to a long-standing (or even ongoing) history of injustice, oppression, and discrimination. As Lebron (2017), for instance, shows in his account of the Black Lives Matter movement, the anti-black history and the worsening situation of police brutality in contemporary America genuinely raises the question what ground there is for Afro-Americans to hope for more racial justice. As I have argued elsewhere (Huber, 2019), hopelessness thus is a real prospect particularly in societies that are deeply divided along racial, economic, social, or ideological lines, such that distrust among individual citizens or groups is deeply engrained.

That said, hope does not need much to thrive. Some hopes are inspired by the life and action of charismatic or inspirational figures such as Martin Luther King Jr (Lloyd, 2018). Others by sources from art, as Moody-Adams (2017) shows drawing on John’s Dewey’s work. Particularly when it comes to moral and political progress, though, hope is often grounded in evidence and examples drawn from history. This is so precisely because, as I have argued above, we are temporal creatures who project themselves into a hoped-for future. As such, we necessarily situate ourselves not only in relation to where we are going but also where we are coming from. So while hope requires that we imaginatively inhabit the future, what allows us to do so are often past memories and experiences. As writer and activist Rebecca Solnit puts it, “hope looks forward, but it draws its energies from the past, from knowing histories, including our victories, and their complexities and imperfections.” (Solnit, 2017). For example, Rawls (1993, p. xxxvii) argues that the main historical significance of the Reformation was that it brought with it the “discovery of a new social possibility.” While people initially (and justifiably) assumed that social stability and pluralism were incompatible and that a tolerant society was unfeasible, the Reformation as a historical event to which they bore witness provided them grounds on which they could at least remain uncertain about whether a pluralistic society could be stable over time, such that they could hope for it (see also Howard, 2019). It is a particular instance of the past that enables us to represent a better future *as possible*.

We now see that while hope, as a distinctly practical attitude, foregrounds the forward-looking perspective on progress, it often commits us to certain assumptions about history. Similar to the neoprogressivist framework, hence, the hope-based account is characterized by a complex interplay between backward-looking and forward-looking perspectives on progress. The crucial contrast, however, is that the proponent of the hope-based framework can pick out historical events as particular instances of progress without representing them as tied together by a larger, underlying dynamic that plays out across history. For the future to appear as genuinely open in the requisite sense, we do not need to conceive of them as *Geschichtszeichen* ("signs of history") that express a larger progressive pattern.

The hope-based framework thus lends itself to acknowledging history in all its contingency and complexity, including its tragic features and its dead ends (cf. Winters, 2016). The prospect of contingency in particular is one that many neoprogressivists appear to be unsettled by. Jaeggi, for instance, worries that "we lose a lot if we cannot come up with a social theory that sees history as more than unrelated events" (Jaeggi, 2016, p. 234). In hoping for progress, by contrast, we commit ourselves precisely to the claim that history *lacks* a direction or tendency. This is not to deny that we can learn from history, for instance, that certain strategies for progress that can be repeated again and again (e.g., protest, revolt, boycotts), with varying success depending on the circumstances. Yet, on the basis of hope we anticipate (pathways to) a better future *without* conceiving of that future as the projected continuation of a progressive tendency that originates in the past.

In line with my argument in the preceding section, this concerns the normative sense of historical continuity as much as the strategic one. We cannot and should not answer the first-order normative question whether a future state A would be an improvement over the present state B by pointing to some state C in the past that speaks to a larger progressive mechanism in history. Rather, each forward-looking judgment, each answer to the question *what we should hope for*, has to withstand critical scrutiny on its own terms and in relation to independent moral or political standards. This, I take it, highlights another way in which hope plays an empowering role: it allows us to fully conceive of ourselves as living in a social world of our own making, rather than thinking of our efforts as feeding into an ongoing progressive tendency that originates in the past.

## 6 | CONCLUSION

Neoprogressivists deserve much credit for bringing (back) to the forefront the question which role the idea of progress can and should play for us both as observers of and agents in history. They show that the idea of historical dynamics can be made sense of without depicting progressive trajectories as necessary and unavoidable. What I tried to show, however, is that we should go even further in emancipating the notion of progress from the philosophy of history. This "practical turn," which radically foregrounds the forward-looking aspects of progress, is encapsulated in the idea of hope. Hope allows us to anticipate a desired future—and thus to sustain our commitment to bringing it about—without drawing a continuous line through past, present, and future.

I should close by addressing one more worry. There is an additional function occasionally ascribed to theories of progress, one that I have not addressed explicitly so far: that they allow us to theorize questions of collective agency (see, e.g., Ypi, 2010). Given our finite power and lifespan, we depend for the success of many moral or political projects on what others have achieved before us and on those who will build upon our efforts once we are gone. The thought is that the idea of progress allows us to conceptually tie together the efforts of generations by presenting them as engaged in something like a shared endeavor—the abolition of slavery, the dissemination of human rights or the fight against sexism. As individuals, we can conceive of ourselves as part of a collective agent (such as a political community or humanity at large) and our efforts as involved in something like a collective moral project or learning process.

The worry is that my deflationary account of progress, with its weak theory of history and a focus on the psychological conditions of *individual* agency, no longer allows for a collective orientation of moral and political projects. Indeed, what the hope-based approach pushes back against is the idea of a metaphysically conceived transhistorical collective such as spirit, nation, or class, at least to the extent that it is conceptualized as the agent of progress. The subjects of

hope are individual agents. Yet, what they are typically concerned with is precisely their ability to contribute to endeavors that transcend their own capabilities and possibly their lifetime. This is another sense in which hope encapsulates a practical turn: away from metaphysically contentious claims about cooperate agents familiar from the philosophy of history, to the way we, as individual agents, relate to historical progress—and, in so doing, to those with whom we share the fate of having to bring it about.

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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Many thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out to me.
- <sup>2</sup> For a similar critique of this view, see Moody-Adams (1999).
- <sup>3</sup> More precisely, Allen distinguishes between “progress as an imperative” and “progress as a ‘fact.’”
- <sup>4</sup> All references to Kant refer to volume and page numbers of the Prussian Academy edition, edited by Allen Wood and Paul Guyer for Cambridge University Press. Abbreviations used are IUH (Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Intent), OQ (An Old Question Raised Again: Is the Human Race Constantly Progressing?) PP (Perpetual Peace).
- <sup>5</sup> I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting me to put it that way.
- <sup>6</sup> Reinhard Koselleck (2002) has meticulously shown that *modern* agents typically situate their agency in relation to *historical* time, that is within a larger temporal horizon between experiences of the past and expectations of the future. He reconstructs how progress became a crucial way of conceptualizing change in historical time in the course of the 18th century, when individuals for the first time started to think of themselves as part of a dynamic process that extends infinitely into the future.
- <sup>7</sup> Some proponents, however, view hope as a simple state or concept (Blöser, 2019; Segal & Textor, 2015) or as an emotion (e.g., Bobier, 2018).
- <sup>8</sup> Their opponents, such as Cornel West, claim that “real hope is grounded in a particularly messy struggle and it can be betrayed by naïve projections of a better future that ignore the necessity of doing the real work. So what we are talking about is hope on a tightrope” (West, 2008, p. 5).

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## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

**Jakob Huber** is a postdoctoral fellow with the Research Centre “The Formation of Normative Orders” at Goethe University Frankfurt. His current research project investigates the complex role of hope in democratic life.

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