The definition of «moral progress». Material vs. formal definitions of «morality»

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Abstract

The paper aims to analyze the definition of «moral progress». Most of the works in this field are focused on the notion of «progress», but the analysis of this term is not sufficient to convey the concept clearly. Nevertheless, this point received less attention. Explaining the notion of moral progress implies not only the analysis of what «progress» is but also of what «morality» is. After presenting some methodological instances and some of the theories regarding progress, the paper will concentrate on the notion of «morality», namely on Hare's and Warnock's theories: the first as an example of a formal method on the definition of «morality», the second as an example of a substantive one. The paper argues in favor of the second. Lastly, a definition of «moral progress» will be proposed.

Key Words

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Abstract

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1. Introduction

Most of people think that during the last centuries global society has achieved some success in morality, namely that some behaviors, which are better than ones of previous eras, have become widespread and approved as the standard. Most likely, nobody in the world thinks that slavery is a good practice and that a world with slavery is better than a world without it. For different reasons, we all agree that the abolition of slavery constitutes a sign of progress, either because it guarantees more respect for human dignity, or because it produces more happiness than its retention. I could paraphrase Parfit's words[1], considering the abolition of slavery to represent moral progress made by «climbing the mountain» by different sides, or the Rawls's expression as an «overlapping consensus»[2]. The abolition of slavery is a positive achievement for both consequentialist and deontological theories, as well as for virtues theories. Normative theories concur on the practical result that each human being is born free[3], and on the fact that «no one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms»[4].

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[1] Parfit 1984; 2011: 411-419; see also Macklin 1977; Evans 2017.

[2] Rawls 1993.

[3] UN 1948: art. 1.

[4] UN 1948: art. 4; see also Buchanan 2013.

Some points of criticism can arise even at this point. For example, an opponent can say that even if slavery is legally abrogated and prohibited, there are new forms of slavery. According to the Global Slavery Index[5], in Europe and Central Asia, 9% of the population is in a state of modern slavery. «Modern slavery» can be defined as an umbrella term, referring:

> to situations of exploitation that a person cannot refuse or leave because of threats, violence, coercion, deception, and/or abuse of power. (…) Different countries use different terminologies to describe modern slavery, including the term slavery itself but also other concepts such as human trafficking, forced labour, debt bondage, forced or servile marriage, and the sale or exploitation of children.[6]

None can deny these conditions exist. People all over the world, including in the western countries, are deprived of their freedom and exploited in labor without any rights nor protection. An opponent can use this data and evidence to affirm that there has not been any progress at all. However, this is not what is exhibited by the data, which at least shows that progress is still in progress. Indeed, the number of slaves has decreased, and the law forbids the practice of slavery. Exploited people exist, but this condition is juridically subject to sanctions, and whoever treats people as a slave is punishable.

Moreover, people think that these «modern slavers» are doing real evil. People are prone to believe that even those who are engaged in modern-day slavery must feel that they are doing something wrong, or at least be aware that this is something prohibited by the law. Intuitively, people think that moral progress does occur, that during our history, we have dismissed some practices and behaviors and have adopted better ones. Maybe the abolition of slavery constitutes the most evident instance of moral progress, but an agreement can be reached on the list proposed by Appiah[7], the abandon of duel (and private justice), the disuse of foot binding, and the growing respect of women's right and equality, all represent moral progress. People can maintain those are significant mutations in our behavior, and these mutations constitute progress: this is the intuitive idea or the *Naïve Conception*[8] about moral progress.[9]

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[5] Global Slavery Index 2018: https://www.globalslaveryindex.org/2018/findings/highlights/. Accessed 27/06/2018.

[6] Ibidem.

[7] Appiah 2010.

[8] Jamieson 2002a: 318.

[9] See also Rorty 2007.

In this paper, I intend to analyze the definition of «moral progress». Firstly, I will make some considerations regarding feasible methods in the analysis of moral progress. Secondly, I will display some theories about the definition of progress, and I want to argue that the only analysis of this term is not sufficient to clarify the concept. Thirdly, I will engage in an attempt of defining «morality». I shall argue against formal theories (like Hare's one) and in favor of substantive theories (like Warnock's one). Lastly, summarizing the main points, I propose a definition of «moral progress».

2. Exploring the Naïve Conception

Moral progress has not been an over-analyzed issue in moral philosophy. However, there are many issues related to it, which could deserve more attention: its metaethical presupposition, methods of ascertaining moral progress, examples of moral progress, and many others. Here I shall concentrate only on the concept of «moral progress» and how it relates to the conception of «morality»[10].

Two methods of analyzing moral progress can be isolated. The first method is top-down. It starts from the top, defining what «moral progress» does mean, and then it goes down to which situations can be defined in such a way in the world, and which normative and metaethical theories satisfy this condition. An example of this method can be Jamieson's works[11]. In all those essays, Jamieson begins with a rough definition of what «moral progress» is, and then proceeds to analyze its relation with metaethical and normative theories until he proposes a more accurate description of what this phenomenon is.

The second method is bottom-up. In this case, the work proceeds in the opposite direction: the analysis starts from some instances of moral progress, and at this point, a broader reflection is built. For example, Appiah[12] is an influent representative of this method. He assumes that specific facts constitute moral progress, and then he analyses the mechanism by which they have happened. Appiah's work is fascinating and illuminating. He shows how the call to honor (both individual and towards one's own country) is the driving force behind the moral mutations he describes. This way of proceeding is evident in the following passage:

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[10] In this work, I use «morality» and «ethics» synonymously.

[11] Jamieson 2002a; 2002b; 2017.

[12] Appiah 2010.

This book began with a simple question: What can we learn about morality by exploring moral revolutions? I was led to ask it because historians and philosophers have discovered a great deal about science through the careful study of scientific revolutions. (…) And so I began to examine a number of moral revolutions, looking to see what could be learned from them.[13]

He starts from some intuitions regarding which changes constitute progress, and then he proceeds to establish how it works. Indeed, he observes that moral pressure and argumentation for change had been present long before the institution of the change itself and that the actual motor is the honor. According to Appiah, this discovery makes us more aware of the ways by which we can change the world: «my aim (…) is to suggest ways in which making sense of honor can help us grapple with other contemporary problems»[14]. This method of proceeding presents some problems. Firstly, it seems more like a study of political sciences rather than morality; his work has great importance if we are investigating the proper means by which to push people to change their behaviors, but it is irrelevant in choosing which are the aims we are supposed to achieve. Secondly, and more generally, objections can also rise against the method itself. He assumes that some behavioral changes are instances of moral progress, that moral progress has happened during human history, and starting from these assumptions, he starts to reflect on these changes. However, his assumption seems to be excessive. Firstly, he should explain why some behavioral revolutions are defined as «progress» and others aren't. Surely change in morality and behavior have happened, slavery was legally abrogated, and this seems to be a positive change, but what is the difference between this change and the change of morality during the Nazi era? Appiah's argumentation works if he speaks about «revolution» or «mere change», which are more descriptive words, instead of «progress», which is an evaluative one. Using the word «progress», he assumes a theory of what is good, and what constitutes an improvement.

This paper aims to provide a definition of «moral progress». I want to clarify the definition of «morality» in order to have a good definition that can give an account of instances of moral progress. For this reason, the method I shall use is more deductive and top-down.

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[13] Appiah 2010: 1.

[14] Appiah 2010: 3.

Jamieson makes a rough definition of moral progress: «Moral progress occurs when a subsequent state of affairs is better than a preceding one, or when right acts become increasingly prevalent»[15]. It is the *Naïve Conception.* It can account for our intuition of what moral progress is: something morally good or right becoming prevalent and wide-spread. However, this notion should be philosophically analyzed.

Analyzing the concept of «moral progress» implies defining the domain of morality and the concept of progress. Progress can happen in different domains. We achieved new knowledge in medicine and biology, and this has allowed healing more diseases compared to one century ago. We can talk about progress in computation, in science, and electronics. Therefore, we should specify which domain we're dealing with when approaching the concept of progress. Moreover, also, the concept of «progress» should be clarified.

The concept of progress has received the most attention, albeit some have given an account of «morality», for example, Jamieson's index[16] and Macklin's two principles of humaneness and humanity[17]. Nevertheless, also in these accounts, the focus has been on the notion of «progress», for example, Macklin claims:

> A related point about the concept of moral progress is that its normative or value component arises out of features related to the notion of *progress*, and not to the notion of *morality*, contrary to what one might expect.[18]

Both attempts seem to come out of an analysis of the changes identified as progress. The abolition of slavery, the disapproval of the war, the rights of minorities are instances of moral progress, in these shared characteristics can be found, which can be identified as the values toward which progress has been made, and therefore which are the main features of morality. This move is particularly evident in Jamieson, which identifies an index, that is a list of moral progresses, and he sees if it is compatible with the various normative theories, thus trying to find a common nucleus to all these. This approach seems to conflict with the analysis of «progress» both Macklin and Jamieson propose, which instead is deductive, top-down. I want to try to do a top-down analysis and see if there is moral progress based on this definition. The

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[15] Jamieson 2002a: 318; but also in 2002b, 2017.

[16] Jamieson 2002a: 326-332.

[17] Macklin 1977: 375-382.

[18] Macklin 1977: 371.

theory I will provide of morality does not differ much from that of Macklin and Jamieson but is obtained differently.

Now, I will summarize the results in the meaning of «progress». I present a unified theory, and from this point, I will move on to the other term of the concept, the notion of «morality».

In her paper, Macklin maintains that the concept of moral progress is a «two place relational predicate»[19]. When someone says that a certain society, culture, or situation has made «progress», she is saying that that society, culture or situation is better than another version of itself or something other than it. According to Macklin[20], there are two components in the notion of progress: a descriptive element and a normative one. The descriptive element consists of the observable changes between two different cultures or societies. The normative component, instead, is «the pro-attitude, favorable evaluation, or positive assessment expressed when any judgment is made that progress of some sort has occurred»[21].

For this reason, she thinks that the normative or value component arises from the notion of progress itself, without considering the notion of morality. On the one hand, Macklin is right: as we noted, the concept of progress is in part evaluative, we should refer to it as a «thick» concept[22] because it is not a mere change, but a change we value positively[23]. On the other hand, the notion of «morality» is necessary to understand what kind of progress we are talking about. People can speak in a strict sense of technological progress or progress in computer science, meaning it is easily verifiable that we have had progress in abilities and speed of computers from the 1970s up until today. The concept of «progress» applies to different settings, and the word «moral» identifies one of these settings. For this reason, to analyze the concept of «moral progress», I cannot limit myself only to the notion of progress.

Godlovithc[24] takes the point that the word «progress» is evaluative and it does not denote a mere change, and distinguishes three different senses of progress:

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[19] Maclin 1977: 370.

[20] Macklin 1977: 372.

[21] Macklin 1977: 373.

[22] See Williams 1985.

[23] See Jamieson 2002a: 318.

[24] Godlovithc 1998.

1. The Raw Progress or Mere Change. In this case, the use of «progress» is completely descriptive and identifies «nothing more than the course of change in the form of a narrative»[25]. In this case, it is not required that there be an improvement, or that I have a normative theory under which I judge if there is something better.

2. The Teleological or Culminative Progress. In this case, there is something more than mere change. There is a «goal» to achieve or an ending point of this process. It may also involve an established succession of steps or a program. Differently from the first conception of progress, this meaning «presupposes the existence of norms in nature and cannot thus be demonstrated merely by appeal to the simple law-likeness of some progressions»[26]. This kind of progress can be labeled in different ways.

   2.1. Strongly teleological, only when I know that the change is culminative, and I know the end-state of the process.

   2.2. Weakly culminative, when I do not know if the change is culminative, but I can make some hypothesis about it.

3. Improvement or Ameliorative Progress. As expressed by Godlovich this sense of progress expresses a «gainful change, where some developmental stage approvingly supersedes another»[27]. While the teleological progress is forward-looking, because it heads toward a goal to achieve, this kind of progress is backward-looking, because I can judge that things are going better only if I compare the present situation to the previous, and not because they tend toward an ending point, or because the interests are not fixed and can change over time.

According to Godlovich[28], the notion of moral progress involves a mix of the meanings at points two and three. Indeed, it requires a comparison between a present state and a past one, and a judgment that the state of affairs is better, but also at least a weak notion of the goal toward which society should tend. Namely, when people speak about moral progress, they think that there is an optimum or a perfect world in which each person behaves morally, and all people have nothing to complain about regarding their situation. I may not be sure that that world is the moral optimum, and I may not be sure that this is the right route to achieve it: for this reason, moral progress is a mix of ameliorative progress and weak culminative progress.

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[25] Godlovithc 1998: 273.

[26] Ibidem.

[27] Godlovich 1998: 275.

[28] Godlovich 1998: 276.

Therefore, the notion of moral progress can be seen as a mixture of two kinds of perspectives, backward-looking and forward-looking[29].

Nevertheless, it should be noted that a new practice that can represent a sign of progress can be overturned. For example: on October 30th, 1786, the Great Duke of Tuscany Peter Leopold (after he became emperor of Austria, he changed his name to Leopold II), issued the *Leopoldine Codex*, a reformation of criminal law in Tuscany, by which he abolished capital punishment. It was the first state in the world to do so. For many of us, those who believe that this kind of punishment is at least problematic or immoral, it represented a significant instance of progress. So it was, because in those times not only murderers were executed, but also dissidents and political opponents. For this reason, even for those who sustain the permissibility of capital punishment, it was a great result. Innocent people, who did not deserve death by the hand of the State, were no longer executed. Over the next years, the legislation changed several times by the hand of Peter Leopold and his successors, reintroducing and eliminating capital punishment for certain crimes.[30] In the first years after Italian unification, Tuscany had an exemption from applying capital punishment, contemplated in the new kingdom law. Thereafter it seemed as though the Tuscan position prevailed because, in 1889, the new criminal code prohibited capital punishment in all the kingdom. However, when Mussolini took power, in 1930, this status was reversed, and capital punishment was reintroduced. It was definitively abolished with the victory of the Allies and the new constitution in 1948.[31] It was only by chance that the abolitionist position won; if fascists had won the war, it could be possible that Italy could have capital punishment enforced nowadays. Another example was the homosexual life in Berlin during the Weimar Republic.[32] Moral progress might be unstable and reversible.[33]

For this reason, a third condition should be added, according to Schinkel and de Ruyter[34]. This condition is the presence of a trend, a consolidating process making progress widespread and widely accepted. In the first case, I can label weak moral progress that can be fleeting. In

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[29] See Rønnow-Rasmussen 2017.

[30] See Vannucci 2003.

[31] See Tedoldi 2018.

[32] See Stümke 1989.

[33] See Moody-Adams 1999; 2017.

[34] Schinkel and de Ruyter 2017.

the presence of a trend, there is strong moral progress; subverting forces are faced with greater difficulties in destroying the obtained progress.

My point here is to show that the aim of these scholars in analyzing the concept of moral progress is incomplete and leads to misunderstandings. I accept what I have summarized here about the concept of progress. These features can be put together in an integrated theory of what constitutes a sign of progress. However, it is not sufficient to give a complete account of the notion of «moral progress». I need an analysis of the other term: «moral». For instance, Godlovitch maintains that the notion of moral progress is a mix of ameliorative progress and weak culminative progress. The culminative progress is defined in such a way because it tends toward a goal or a scope. How can I define such a goal? Should the goal be getting a more powerful computer or a flower with brighter colors? Our question can be answered only by a definition of «morality». What does morality tend toward? If I know, at least roughly and broadly, what morality is, and what its aim is, I can answer the question of which is the ending point of progress.

3. The concept of «morality»

The notion of morality can be ambiguous. Indeed, with the term «morality» I can identify two different notions: on the one hand moral theory, and the other hand, the «*target* of moral theorizing»[35]. This ambiguity is clear in analyzing a simple statement, such as «Hitler was a moral person». In one interpretation, this statement can be translated as «Hitler was a person with his own morality», in a second one as «Hitler was a morally good person». In the second interpretation, the word «moral» stands for a positive evaluation of the judged person: I am praising Hitler and judging him positively. Instead, in the first interpretation, the word «moral» is only describing the fact that Hitler owns a morality (whatever such morality could be), but I am not committing to evaluating him or his behavior. Following Frankena's terminology[36] I can distinguish a *formal* and a *material* meaning of «moral».

If I choose the material meaning, I will isolate progress only within one morality and ethical theory. In this case, I create a proliferation of moral progresses: the moral progress according to utilitarian theory, according to Kantian moral theory, and so forth. However, when I speak about moral progress, I do not have in mind the concept of progress for a specific theory; I

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[35] Gert and Gert 2017.

[36] Frankena 1980: 51-54, see also Baier 1995: 197.

instead imagine some sort of positive progression according to all moral theories. As I have said at the beginning of this paper, it seems that revolutions labeled as «moral progress» are perceived as good by each one of the theories, and it seems that they are overlapping. The material meaning of «morality» is not the meaning employed in the phrase «moral progress». Moreover, as underlined by Jamieson[37], some moral theories are rejecting what I identify as moral progress. These ethical theories are those which are constituted by religious values, for which moral progress consists of the dissemination of that religion and the obedience to its norms. For example, people tend to think that acceptance of the recognition of women's rights and gender equality is good progress, albeit still ongoing.[38] However, for a radical Christian morality, this is not real progress, but moral regression. If I literally interpret the words of Paul «Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord»[39], I should think that gender equality in marriage is not a good thing. Moreover, it is possible to build moral theories, similar to Nazi ethos, and continue on this path, demonstrating that what I identify as moral progress, according to others, is not so.

Therefore, I should consider the meaning of «moral» in the formal sense. «What is morality?» is not a simple question. There are two different strategies to answer this question: the first proposes formal conditions that morality should fit. The second consists of some contents specific to morality, i.e., its subject-matter.

Formal criteria of morality define morality by some logical or structural feature that a morality should present. These features do not refer to content, or objects to which they apply, to aims; these features are all formal and logical, and they all are necessary and sufficient to identify a morality. Whatsoever principle respecting this form can be defined as a «moral principle», the same for a morality. The attempt to define «morality» by formal criteria received most of the attention in research. It was common during the «golden age» of metaethics up until the '70s. It was widespread for several reasons. The first reason is historical, and it is the influence of non-cognitivism. According to this metaethical view, we all lack knowledge in morality, and moral terms don't possess any descriptive meaning (or if they do, it is not relevant or predominant). For this reason, giving a specific content for «morality» as «increasing happiness» does not fit with the general aim of non-cognitivism.

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[37] Jamieson 2002a: 329.

[38] See Appiah 2010: Chap. 4.

[39] Ephesians 5:22.

Such a definition could have been criticized for example, by the open question argument to fall in the naturalistic fallacy[40]. The second reason is the need to describe the multiplicity of morality. A definition of «morality» has to be sufficiently broad to allow different normative theories to fall within it. If the definition is «increasing happiness», it is possible that Kantian theories fall out of morality. The third reason is that finding a common normative content for all the moralities can be difficult. Indeed, it seems that in the world, there is great variability of normative standard and moral views. Moreover, for certain theories, ethics seems to be something social or relational, concerning us in relation with other people or groups of them. If I were alone on a desert island, I'd not need ethics. For virtues ethicists, it seems that ethics primarily regards us and our characters, the flourishing of each one of us as an individual. Also, it is difficult to identify a common feature which reunites these diverse theories. Lastly, defining «morality» by its content, I take the risk of introducing some normative contents at the metaethical level. Indeed, if I define morality as a «behavior whose aim is to increase people's happiness», it seems that I am introducing in the metaethics (whose aim is to define normative terms, but not give principles of action) a principle of action. Metaethics should be neutral towards normative theories.[41]

For example, Hare[42] had a theory of this kind, and another kind was Hart's theory[43]. They tried to define what a morality is only by formal criteria. I restrict myself only to the analysis of Hare's theory, but what I say also applies to Hart's view.

Hare presents three criteria characterizing every morality; here, I propose a brief scheme:

1. *Prescriptivity*. A moral judgment or principle is prescriptive; namely, it serves to answer the question of what I ought to do. Moral judgments possess a descriptive meaning and an evaluative one. This evaluative meaning consists of an imperative, suggesting a course of action or behavior.

2. *Universalizability*. This is a logical property of all evaluative judgments. According to Hare, they possess this property in virtue of their descriptive meaning. Indeed, if I value a particular person or a state of affairs as «good», I value it for specific descriptive properties, and then each other thing or state of affairs presenting the same

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[40] See Moore 1903.

[41] See Hare 1997: 118.

[42] See Hare 1952; 1963.

[43] Hart 1961.

descriptive properties should be valued in the same manner. Each normative judgment is universalizable.

3. *Overridingness*. It is the feature of morality by which moral principle overrides other rules or interests, which are not moral. According to this principle, I subordinate our interests to a principle that could rule the behavior of each person who is in an analogous situation. It is linked to the previous two features of morality because it imposes to make a move from a non-moral point of view (the consideration of one's interest) towards a moral point of view (the consideration of whether these own interests are universalizable and extendable to all people in the same situation).

The first two features are not typical only of morality. Indeed, also the instructions manual of a washing machine is universalizable and prescriptive. However, the functioning rules of the washing machine are not essential for us as moral rules.

This theory[44] presents some problems, some of which I have here summarized. Firstly, it seems that the characterization of universalizability is ambiguous. Hare seems to swing between an entirely logical definition of universalizability (each moral position should be extended to all others if they are in the same condition), and a version of universalizability closer to impartiality toward the preferences of each one and identification in other people.[45] For example, Warnock argues that reasoning about universalization is based entirely on interests and identification. However, the point is not what a person wants, the point is what a person would morally approve or find morally objectionable, and these two things are not the same thing. This seems more evident in the analysis of the «fanatic». Hare seems to think that a Nazi should abandon his position, considered his interests. The Nazi thinks that each Jew should be killed. However, if he were to discover that he is a Jew, he would not like to be killed: thus he should abandon his Nazi morality (but if he can accept the consequence: in this case, he is a real fanatic). The entire discourse is about interests and preferences. It does not appear to be a logical discourse, rather a normative one. Morality seems to focus on specific content, the managing of different interests and preferences, that may conflict, with a focus on impartiality.[46]

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[44] I am aware that Hare's theory changes over his lifetime. We put aside this problem here. Let consider Hare theory as a coherent one.

[45] See Warnock 1967: 42-47.

[46] See also Brunton 1966.

The second objection regards overridingness. What does it mean that a moral principle is a principle that cannot be overridden? We all have experienced *akrasia*, the phenomenon in which I know what I have to do, but I do otherwise. How can a principle that I allow being overridden still be moral? It seems that even in this case, Hare is moving back and forth between two explanations of overridingness. The first refers to how the person assumes the principle (the place of the principle in the hierarchy of her values); the second refers to the content of the principle. Indeed, if I admit the possibility of *akrasia*, I should preserve the morality of a principle that could be overridden by non-moral principle, and the only way to do this is via its content or function. Moreover, the place of the principle in the hierarchy does not guarantee that a principle is moral. Because it is possible that someone places an esthetical principle at the top, suppose that the central principle in the life of a dandy is «do not dress yellow and purple in the same day». It is probable that the dandy will try to not contravene to this principle, and that for him nothing is more important than that. Nevertheless, I can hardly call this principle a moral one, but I will continue to call this an esthetical one.[47]

Therefore, it seems that Hare's formal criteria to define morality are unsuccessful. More generally, it seems that any attempt to define a morality only by formal criteria does not succeed. It seems that any attempt to define what morality is needs a grasp on its content, function, or aim. The world is full of normativity: there are rules of any kind; ethics is different from law, or the instructions manual of a microwave. If I want to distinguish between ethics and any other normative fields, I should refer to something more than a formal feature.

Moreover, it seems that a substantive definition of morality is implied in such a formal definition. Somehow, they should relate to a particular kind of intentions or desires, or to a particular function to limit egoistic and selfish desires. Indeed, such a vision seems close to the intuitive function of morality implied in the Naïve Conception of moral progress. Intuitively, people think that moral signs of progress are those changes that improve equality and respect of all human beings, such as the abolition of slavery and the ending of all war. In this sense, Singer's metaphor, an «expanding circle»[48] is illuminating: there is an expansion of moral consideration, and moral progress consists of this.

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[47] See Frankena 1988.

[48] Singer 1981.

For this reason, I analyze substantive visions of morality. I restrict ourselves to Warnock's theory[49], also evoked by Mackie[50] and finctionalists[51]. Similar views are those of Frankena[52] and Baier[53]. This theory can also help to characterize what «morality» means in a broad sense (which is the target of moral theorizing), and can also help to distinguish if religious morality and Nazi ethos could be considered «morality».

Warnock defines «morality» by its function. He considers «morality» as something that one may or may not have; it is not something that everyone has. Morality is a very particular way, (or a set of ways) to lead one's life; not any way. It seems:

> That morality *has* some at least roughly content. (…) It appears at least enormously plausible to say that one who professes to be making a moral judgment *must* at least profess that what is an issue is the good or harm, well-being or otherwise, or human beings – that what he regards as morally wrong is somehow damaging, and what he regards as morally right is somehow beneficial.[54]

Warnock conceives morality as a particular point of view from which to observe personal disposition and behavior: it brings «*a particular kind* of appraisal, or "evaluation", of people and their possible or actual doings»[55]. The general idea is that any evaluation is in view of a goal, to understand an evaluation is a matter of «grasping what its object is, what is done *for*; and indeed if – *only* if – one understands this, can be in any position to assess the appropriateness, or even relevance, of the standards and criteria employed»[56]. Then the proper question now is: what is the purpose of morality? Which is its *point*? The answer given by Warnock is:

> the general object of moral evaluation must be to contribute in some respects, by way of the actions of rational beings, to the amelioration of the human

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[49] Warnock 1971.

[50] Mackie 1977.

[51] Joyce 2001.

[52] Frankena 1980.

[53] Baier 1958.

[54] Warnock 1967: 57.

[55] Warnock 1971: 10.

[56] Warnock 1971: 15.

predicament – that is, of the conditions in which *these* rational beings, humans, actually find themselves[57]

The question now is what in human condition requires improvement. It is quite clear that human condition tends for the worst, often we all face difficulties contrasting our desires and needs, and scarcity of resources sometimes imposes to make hard choices. Human life is full of problems, but it is not completely without hope. People are not always willing to do what is in their best interest. People often make considerations based on the short term, and for this reason, I can state that they are not fully rational.

Moreover, people have limited sympathy: they have a natural inclination to satisfy their own desires rather than those of others. In short, I can note a lack of resources and techniques and limited rationality and sympathy. Morality aims to respond to this limited empathy in order to «reduce the liability to damage inherent in their natural tendency to be narrowly restricted»[58]. This view presents some advantages. Firstly, although it seems similar or close to utilitarianism, because it refers to the «betterment of human condition», but it is not restricted to it. It is compatible with the main normative ethics. Indeed, also Kantian ethics with the universalization maxim tends to extend people's sympathy. Most of the virtue ethics consider the virtue of justice and benevolence. Secondly, although it seems close to naturalism, it is not committed to it nor any other metaethics. Although Warnock can be defined as an Aristotelian neo-naturalist, Mackie, which is one of the most important anti-realists, agrees with his definition of morality. Saying that moral terms don't have a descriptive meaning and that moral properties do not exist and that morality has an aim, seem to be different concepts that don't possess a causal connection. In this sense, Joyce's fictionalism[59] seems to be a perfect demonstration of this unrelatedness. Therefore, it seems that this definition is metaethically neutral. Thirdly, it seems to exclude Nazi ethos, whose aim is to restrict people's sympathy toward only one certain kind of people. The Nazi ethos is not only immoral but a-moral (out of morality). The same for certain religious ethics, indeed if their aim is only the dissemination of a certain religion and the acceptance of a divine code, they do not pursue human betterment. Of course, they can conceive human betterment in the afterlife. However, this seems to be the aim of religion rather than ethics. By what I have said, ethics aims to

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[57] Warnock 1971: 16.

[58] Warnock 1971: 26.

[59] Joyce 2001.

combat limited sympathy and scarcity of resources, not to obtain possible paradise in the afterlife. Fourthly, it can account for the history of humanity. It can be weird, but not only can morality be more or less present and strong, over time and space, but it can also disappear. Morality, as moral progress, is extremely punctuated and unstable. Regression is always possible. Certainly, if a certain moral behavior becomes stronger, it is more difficult for it to be overturned. However, it's a matter of fact that this has happened. Previously, I presented the case of capital punishment in Italy or the homosexual movement: these represent cases of moral regression or fluctuation. Lastly, this definition of «morality» seems coherent with the Naïve Conception. The Naïve Conception states: «Moral progress occurs when a subsequent state of affairs is better than a preceding one, or when right acts become increasingly prevalent»[60]. These «better» and «right» should be understood in the sense of «moral» specified above.

I can speak of «moral progress» when I compare a present situation to a previous one, and I can note a better current situation both because it produces a betterment compared to the previous situation and because it's a further step in the reaching of the goal. The betterment and goal are defined by the aim of morality, which consist in restricting the limitations of human sympathy and in the betterment of human condition, characterized by scarcity of resources and partial rationality. Interpreting in this way the notion of «moral progress», this definition can give an account of our intuition and the changes happened in human behaviors, and moreover toward which direction we all should focus to achieve more progress.

4. Conclusion

In this paper, I wanted to make the definition of moral progress clear. I started by granting that moral progress exists, or at least that there is some concurrence that certain changes in morality represent progress. Secondly, I produced some considerations on the methodology utilized in analyzing moral progress. I used a top-down model, focusing first on matters of definition, proceeding then to focus on which changes can be defined as moral progress. This does not mean that I cannot appeal to intuition, but these intuitions have to be justified, as in reflective equilibrium. Thirdly, I presented some works in the definition of «progress». Most of the works in the definition of «moral progress» focuses on the notion of «progress». Although these works claim that an analysis of «morality» is not necessary, I argued that it is.

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[60] Jamieson 2002a: 318.

Therefore, I moved to present two kinds of theories in the definition of «morality». The first kind of definition is formal, trying to define morality only by its formal and logical features. I presented Hare's theory. I objected that to be effective, these theories need to take hold of some content of morality, such as particular intentions or impartiality. For this reason, I moved on the analysis of substantive definitions. I presented Warnock's theory, and I argued that it presents some advantages. Lastly, I expose how the definition of moral progress should be intended.

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