

LIBERTY AGAINST PROGRESS*

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Abstract: The epistemic approach to liberalism not only clarifies some of the core features of progress-based arguments for liberty. For two reasons it provides grounds for doubting those arguments' persuasiveness. The first reason emerges from the epistemic liberal explanation of economic recessions and of social regress as necessary consequences of our enjoying the individual liberty to adapt to our circumstances. Precisely because it secures personal choice with respect to the ends of life and the means to pursue them, liberty must be construed as at best necessary for the imperfect and costly realization of the interest individuals may have in personal advancement. Second, and in revealing the underlying logic of the economic and cultural processes that liberty makes possible, epistemic liberalism shows that it is to the notion of complex adaptation that we must look when seeking to evaluate the overall or aggregate results of liberty. Crucially, however, this means rejecting the notion of progress as fit to perform this ethico-historical evaluative role.

KEY WORDS: liberty, progress, epistemic liberalism, complex adaptation, Hayek, Mill, liberalism

I. INTRODUCTION

The relationship between liberalism, liberty, and progress may at first appear to be an uncomplicated one. Liberty, it is claimed, makes possible the innovation upon which progress and human advancement are built, and to the extent that we do not enjoy it, society is therefore all the more diminished. Such a view, found in different guises in the work of Turgot and Condorcet, of J. S. Mill, and of Popper, forms one of the central grounds upon which defenses of liberty may be built. In this essay I will claim that while helping us to understand why one may wish to affirm that liberty is required for progress, there are good reasons to initially question and ultimately reject this traditional view. First, and if one adopts what I have called elsewhere an epistemic reading of liberalism, accepting that liberty is required for progress crucially depends upon whether one is considering progress in personal or social terms — that is, as a feature of our lives as individuals, or of the course of human history.¹ With regard to the first, we will see that precisely because it explains why individuals should

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¹ Adam J. Tebble, *Epistemic Liberalism: A Defence* (London: Routledge, 2016).

be permitted to respond to their circumstances as they see fit, liberty at best secures progress imperfectly. The epistemic liberal standpoint is also significant with regard to liberty and human advancement more broadly construed. Regardless of any doubt one may have about the consequences for personal progress of the exercise of liberty, there is an important sense in which we may question whether liberty should be defended on the grounds of its connection to human advancement at all. More specifically, if one accepts liberalism's epistemic rather than ethical foundations, then regardless of what we do with our liberty, or of the judgments we make about its results for individuals, there is reason to believe that ethical judgments of its success or lack thereof at securing human progress are misplaced.²

To substantiate these claims my argument will be conducted as follows. Subsequent to a discussion of the general features of the idea of progress, in Section II, I will outline the liberal account of the connection between it and liberty insofar as it may be construed, following J. S. Mill, in terms of both individual and social advancement. Subsequent to this, in Section III I will look at the epistemic liberal justification of liberty as a response to what is called society's knowledge problem. Here liberty is valued because it secures complex adaptation to the totality of ever-changing circumstances with which no individual can be fully acquainted, but which are nonetheless relevant to the decisions that one may take to further personal progress. Moreover, and understanding complex adaptation both as the adjustments made by individuals to their circumstances and as the overall results of those adjustments, I will consider whether the relationship between liberty and progress is as straightforward as liberals often suppose. Here I will argue that economic progress, where personal setback is just as central as advances in standards of living and technological innovation, can be as costly as it is beneficial. I will then consider the extent to which the underlying logic of the epistemic explanation of the costliness of economic progress is applicable to individual moral progress. I will argue that, precisely because it permits us to adhere to conservative conceptions of the good, one may have even less reason to be persuaded by the progress-based defense of liberty. The second objective of this essay will be to employ the epistemic liberal standpoint to consider the nature of complex adaptation insofar as it may undermine progress-based defenses of liberty with regard to general human advancement. More specifically, in Section IV I will show that if liberty is justified insofar as it secures overall human progress, it does so at the risk of begging the question of how the relevant measure of progress may be identified in the necessary absence of full knowledge of the circumstances that would be relevant to doing so.

² "Progress" and "advancement" will be assumed to be coextensive for the purposes of this enquiry.

II. PROGRESS, LIBERALISM, AND LIBERTY

Before commencing our exploration of the relationship between liberty and progress, let us first consider the different understandings of the most general features of the notion of progress, four of which warrant particular attention for the purposes of the argument I will make here. Similar to the broader notion of historical change of which it is just one example, the first feature of the notion of progress concerns what is held to advance. Some, such as Condorcet, Saint-Simon, Comte, and Hayek, conceive of progress in terms of the growth of human *knowledge* and in this respect are joined, with particular emphasis upon *scientific* knowledge, by Bacon, de Fontenelle, Popper, and Michael Polanyi.³ In contrast to these narrower epistemic conceptions, others such as Turgot view historical advancement as encompassing broader social and cultural development of which the growth of human knowledge is but one, albeit important, driver.⁴

The second feature of progress concerns its universality, where not only is the human condition held to improve over the course of history, but to do so according to identifiable laws that explain past advancement and predict future development to varying degrees. Particularly notable examples of this universalist conception are Turgot's two laws of development, Hegelian dialectic, and the historical materialism of Marx.⁵

Two additional aspects of the notion of progress that are particularly significant for my argument are worth noting at the outset. Thus, the third aspect of progress is premised upon the distinction between conceptions of even, or integral, progress and uneven progress. This distinction is concerned with the comprehensiveness, or lack thereof, of progress — that is, with the question of whether human advancement occurs across all spheres of social life at the same rate, or at different rates across different spheres. It is in this respect that Marx, Saint-Simon, and Comte consider progress to be integral, while others, particularly earlier writers in France such as Turgot, Fontenelle, and Condorcet, accept that the march of progress may be uneven.⁶ The fourth aspect of progress that will be significant for my argument is the

³ J. B. Bury, *The Idea of Progress* (Teddington: The Echo Library, [1920] 2006), 1–11; chaps. 2 and 5. See also John Plamenatz, *Hegel, Marx and Engels, and the Idea of Progress* (London: Longman, [1963] 1992), 306–14. See Bury, *The Idea of Progress* for the claim about knowledge in the case of Francis Bacon. Plamenatz disagrees with Bury, pointing out that not all thinkers reduce questions of progress to those concerning the growth of knowledge. See Plamenatz, *Hegel, Marx and Engels, and the Idea of Progress*, 306–309. For an overview of similar arguments in the work of Michael Polanyi see Tebble, *Epistemic Liberalism: A Defence*, 7–9. For Hayek's account of the relationship between progress and knowledge see Friedrich A. Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960), 40–43.

⁴ Plamenatz, *Hegel, Marx and Engels, and the Idea of Progress*, 310.

⁵ On Turgot's two laws of development see Bury, *The Idea of Progress*, 84. On Hegel see Bury, *The Idea of Progress*, 137–38; Plamenatz, *Hegel, Marx and Engels, and the Idea of Progress*, chaps. 1–2. On Marx see Plamenatz, *Hegel, Marx and Engels, and the Idea of Progress* chaps. 3–4. A related question is whether progress occurs via predefined stages. On this see Plamenatz, *Hegel, Marx and Engels, and the Idea of Progress*, 310–11.

⁶ Plamenatz, *Hegel, Marx and Engels, and the Idea of Progress*, 312–14.

idea that conceptions of this notion typically assume an account of an ethico-historical *telos*, or measure of the good, toward which or in virtue of which human efforts, or what Hayek called “the process of civilization,” are said to move or may be retrospectively judged.⁷ Unsurprisingly, and along with the diversity of understandings above of what *kind* of process historical progress is, understandings of this *telos* vary from thinker to thinker, although all typically assume some or other account of human well-being, whether cashed out in terms of happiness, moral perfection, wealth, equality or some other master value or values.

Of course, whether progress is conceived as universal, integral, in terms of an ethico-historical *telos*, or against a measure of the good tells us little about the normative preconditions for its occurrence. Indeed, progress may be considered in this sense to be serviceable to the defense of a variety of standpoints. Notable early defenders of *liberty* as an essential precondition for progress were the Physiocrats, Turgot and Condorcet, each of whom sees human advancement as best secured by individual freedom, and later arguments in a similar vein can be identified in the work of liberals such as Mill, Popper, and Polanyi.⁸ By contrast, and far from being a precondition of progress, for Marx and Engels the liberal conception of freedom, particularly in its economic manifestation, is an obstacle to progress’s realization.⁹ Similarly, and equally ideologically distant from liberalism, an appeal to the notion of progress is evident in the thought of those for whom national or racial struggle, rather than liberty or class struggle, was the engine of human progress. It is clear, therefore, that progress is, as Nisbet comments, “hydraheaded” and may mean

the constant increase in knowledge, in free institutions, and in creativity, as it did to the Founding Fathers and their kindred spirits in England and France. But it may also mean the relentless enhancement of the political state, the ever-more intrusive role of the state — and its military and police — into our individual lives, or the equally relentless ascent to domination of the world by a given race.¹⁰

The importance of these nonliberal conceptions notwithstanding, it will largely not be my concern in this essay to approach the question of their

⁷ Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty*, 34.

⁸ Anne Robert Jacques Turgot, “A Philosophical Review of the Successive Advances of the Human Mind” and “On Universal History,” both in Ronald L. Meek, ed., *Turgot on Progress, Sociology and Economics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1973); Marquis de Condorcet, “Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind,” in Steven Lukes and Nadia Urbinati, eds., *Condorcet: Political Writings* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012) 1–147.

⁹ Karl Marx, and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1988).

¹⁰ Robert Nisbet, “Idea of Progress: A Bibliographical Essay,” Liberty Fund, On-line Library of Liberty, <http://oll.libertyfund.org/pages/idea-of-progress-a-bibliographical-essay-by-robert-nisbet#lf-essay004lev2sec14>.

relationship to progress. Rather, I will be concerned solely with the question of liberty's relationship to progress. Among the earliest thinkers to connect liberty, and particularly *economic* liberty, to progress were the Physiocrats who, according to Bury, held that it "stimulates human efforts."¹¹ More specifically, writers such as Quesnay, Mirabeau, and Lemer cier de la Rivière "believed in the future progress of society towards a state of happiness through the increase of opulence which would itself depend upon the growth of justice and 'liberty'."¹² Moreover, for these earlier thinkers economic liberty serves an additional progressive purpose insofar as it leads to creativity and innovation, a point not lost on Marx for whom capitalism's "[c]onstant revolutionizing of production" is a central if historically intermediate stage in humankind's wider progressive unfolding.¹³

Among subsequent writers the connection between liberty and progress is particularly evident in the work of Popper and J. S. Mill.¹⁴ Similar to the concerns of predecessors such as Bacon, de Fontenelle, Turgot, and Condorcet, Popper initially establishes the normative significance of this link in the particular case of the growth of scientific knowledge. Central to Popper's approach in this respect is the critical spirit in science, for it is in virtue of it that we may determine which theories ought to be discarded and which are best in terms of their explanatory and predictive power. Popper's view that the growth of scientific knowledge is a particular example of the growth of human knowledge more broadly construed links to his wider concerns in *The Open Society and Its Enemies* about the connection between liberty and progress. In opposition to the stance of authoritarians, and just as the interests of progress in science are satisfied by employing the critical spirit to abandon theories that are false, so Popper holds that it should also be sustained in politics. Here, Popper claims that this requires a society of a certain kind, an open society, where citizens enjoy the democratic right to scrutinize government policies so that the most undesirable among them may be modified and, if need be, politically falsified, or rejected. It is upon similar grounds, moreover, that Popper defends liberty, including economic liberty, as it is through it that social problems can be solved and the unnecessary suffering that comes with authoritarian and totalitarian regimes avoided.¹⁵ Finally, Popper defends what he calls piecemeal social engineering rather than utopian planning

¹¹ Bury, *The Idea of Progress*, 93.

¹² *Ibid.*, 94.

¹³ Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 212.

¹⁴ On Mill see Abram L. Harris, "John Stuart Mill's Theory of Progress," *Ethics* 66, no. 3 (1956): 157–75. For a recent discussion see Alan Ryan, *The Making of Modern Liberalism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), esp. part 3.

¹⁵ To be sure, Popper's arguments about the open society, democracy, and liberty do not lead him to endorse the free market without qualification. Indeed, he claims that it must be curtailed in important respects. On this see Karl Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies*, Vol. 2 (London: Routledge, [5th ed., 1965] 2002) 333.

on the grounds that it “permits repeated experiments and continuous readjustments” as part of a wider process of advancement.¹⁶

J. S. Mill’s discussion of progress and its preconditions is of particular significance insofar as it anticipates two core aspects my argument. The first of these relates to what kind of liberty liberals defend, while the second concerns for whom such liberty is valuable. What Mill says about this in *On Liberty* is particularly significant in this regard. In the first instance, Mill defends liberties of conscience and of expression, and with regard to the question of for whom these are valuable, claims that it is not just important that we exercise them as individuals to fulfill our nature as progressive beings. The enjoyment of liberty of conscience and of expression by individuals, he adds, makes possible the truth testing that is vital for human advancement in a broader sense. Secondly, and especially telling for the argument about liberty and progress that I will make, is Mill’s concern that we enjoy the liberty not just to express but to *act* upon our knowledge — an argument given expression when he famously discusses the idea of the liberal state securing our liberty to engage in “experiments of living.”¹⁷ Moreover, and as in the case of the argument for liberty of conscience and of expression, the two-pronged nature of Mill’s justification of experiments of living is evident when he claims that these are valuable not just because they secure one of the central elements of individual well-being, where “the mental and moral, like the muscular powers are improved only by being used.”¹⁸ The liberty to act upon our beliefs is a crucial element of processes of *social* learning and progress. “As it is useful that while mankind are imperfect there should be different opinions,” he writes, “so is it that there should be different experiments of living; that free scope should be given to varieties of character, short of injury to others; and that the worth of different modes of life should be proved practically, when any one thinks fit to try them.”¹⁹ In the cases of both Mill and Popper, then, and to anticipate much of the substance of the argument to be made later, a central element of the progress-based argument for liberty is the role it plays in facilitating both personal and social advancement via experimentation and adjustment.

A. Individual progress and the creative destruction objection to liberty

In the economic sphere the distinction between the individual and social benefits of liberty also opens the way for an important objection to the liberal case for it that we will presently see shapes my argument. Central here is the distinction between the impact of an agent’s own decisions

¹⁶ Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, Vol. 1, 153.

¹⁷ John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, [1859] 2005), 57.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 59.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 57.

upon his chances of personal progress or advancement and the impact the decisions of others have upon his chances. In both cases there is good reason to claim that, with regard to the question of our personal interest in liberty as progressive beings, liberals do not appreciate the full implications of their own doctrine. First, and precisely because the enjoyment of liberty means that we are legally sovereign in our decision-making with regard to resource use, there is no impediment to our choosing to remain faithful to antiquated production processes. The case of restrictions upon the use of technology within Amish communities is an instructive one in this regard.²⁰ The Amish, of course, are famous for choosing conservatively by exercising their economic liberty to *refrain* from using modern technologies such as automobiles and, with qualification, electricity. Indeed, under a regime of liberty, it is at least logically possible that *all* could choose conservatively, thus adding further weight to the claim that liberty may be injurious to the prospects for human advancement, at least insofar as this is construed in terms of technological innovation and increases in material standards of living.

To be sure, even if it were possible for all to choose conservatively, it is highly unlikely that they would, and it is here where our chances of personal progress are impacted by the choices of others. More specifically, under a regime of liberty it is often the case that the hands of those who would prefer to choose conservatively are forced in a progressive direction by the unintended results of the like exercise of liberty by the innovative and entrepreneurial. The problem here is not so much that of the tempting presence of new technologies and production processes that innovation and entrepreneurial behavior make possible. Depending upon the tenacity with which the conservative were to cling to his conception of the good, he could after all simply refrain from adopting them. Rather, it is the introduction of new technologies by others that render economically unviable those to which the conservative-minded would otherwise remain loyal — a phenomenon famously captured by Joseph Schumpeter's notion of creative destruction — that provides reason to doubt the first objection to the liberal claim about progress.²¹ Here it becomes evident that, far from securing the possibility of successfully satisfying every economic preference, liberalism may be said instead to socialize free choice insofar as it only secures the liberty of each to choose from a range of options that is shaped in large part by the exercise of the liberty of all the rest. To the detriment of the objection that liberty means that we can always choose conservatively, then, Schumpeter's insight shows that even conservatives are often compelled, despite themselves, to choose progressively where the constellation of resources and production possibilities open to them is a function of the

²⁰ For an informative discussion see Donald B. Kraybill, *The Riddle of Amish Culture*, rev. ed. (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), esp. chap. 8.

²¹ Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (Floyd, VA: Wilder Publications, [1946] 2012).

choices of others. Of course, accepting this does not entirely vanquish the suspicions one may have about the liberal claim to economic progress, for there is good reason to stop short of viewing having one's hands forced by the invisible hand of the market economy as evidence of personal advancement. Indeed, and as we shall explore in greater depth in the penultimate section of this essay, whether having one's hand forced can be viewed as progressive depends not only upon the conception or measure of the good in virtue of which judgments of progress are made, but upon whether it is meaningful to view history in terms of progress at all. For conservatives, and for those who do not view historical time as a progressive unfolding, the unintended consequences of the exercise of the economic liberty of others may with reason be viewed as ethically calamitous, a point to which we will return in Sections III and IV.

These considerations notwithstanding, there is another respect in which our Schumpeterian insight may lead us to doubt the progress-based argument for economic liberty. Here it may be noted that, to the extent that they occur at all, long-run developments in productive forces and the advances in living standards those developments stimulate are typically accompanied by cyclical downward adjustments in the form of recessions and, *in extremis*, depressions. Contrary to the argument put forward by liberals, then, and recalling a distinction made by earlier thinkers such as Turgot and Condorcet, we may claim that overall progress under conditions of liberty is at best imperfect, or inexorable. We will return to this objection with regard to judgments about overall human advancement later on in this essay. For now, however, it is worth pausing to consider the role that economic recessions and cyclical downturns play in the argument for liberty with regard to individual progress. Most tellingly, under circumstances where society's productive forces become misaligned with the exigencies of underlying conditions, the exercise of economic liberty by some often *damages* the chances of progress of others, most notably when employers are compelled to lay off workers, or to reduce their consumption of the resources provided by their suppliers with all the negative effects this entails. Indeed, precisely because recessions are not only permitted but are an essential aspect of the regime of economic liberty, economic liberty can on this view be held to be as inimical as it is conducive to our interests as progressive Millian beings. The decentralized and disaggregated economic process that liberty facilitates, that is, is at least in part constituted by often costly personal reversal in what may be called the unhappy creative-destructive disjunction between individual and overall progress. In contrast, then, to the *damage* that creative-destruction does to the objection to the progress-based argument for economic liberty, there is good reason to claim that it is *strengthened* by this phenomenon. To be told that one's personal misfortune at least contributed to a wider process of technological innovation and overall increases in material living standards would, after all, be of scant consolation to the randomly

chosen unemployed progressive being. Of course, and without failing to acknowledge the often profound hardship and sense of personal dislocation that the experience of unemployment often brings, we may say that the force of this objection is also diminished, at least to the extent that unemployment usually turns out to be a temporary setback relative to the full course of one's working life. It is at this juncture, therefore, where the distinction between *costless* and *costly* progress becomes significant. Rather, than being an example of how liberty is the enemy of individual progress, the creative destruction objection merely shows the argument that economic liberty secures the *costless* realization of individual progress to be false and that if it is the friend of individual progress at all, then liberty is progress's friend at best contingently.²²

III. EPISTEMIC LIBERALISM, PROGRESS, AND LIBERTY

A. *The knowledge problem and the necessity of liberty*

The considerations above give rise to two important questions. First, is individual progress under liberty *necessarily* costly? That is, is there something that may be identified about the exercise of liberty that shows that it must support individual progress only contingently? Second, and if so, does this deal a fatal blow to progress-based defenses of liberty advanced by liberals? I noted earlier that a diversity of theorists ranging from Bacon and Condorcet to Popper, advance what we may call epistemic progress-based defenses of liberty. Here it is claimed that liberty is an essential precondition for progress insofar as it fosters the growth of knowledge, including scientific knowledge. It is at this point, however, where we may introduce a different set of epistemic considerations that are significant for my argument in two respects. First, these contrast with the traditional epistemic progress-based defense insofar as they emphasize the role that liberty plays, not as an essential precondition for the *growth* of knowledge but, rather, for its *effective utilization*. Second, in doing so they also allow us to claim not just that liberty is both a necessary precondition for progress and that the progress it makes possible is necessarily imperfect and costly, but to explain why. Central here is what has come to be called, following epistemic defenders of liberalism such as Friedrich Hayek, society's economic knowledge problem, where the knowledge necessary for adequate decision-making about resource use is uncentralizable. I have discussed the nature and significance of the economic knowledge problem at greater length elsewhere, but for now the following points are worth mentioning.²³ The first reason for the uncentralizability of this knowledge — of our needs and wants, and

²² Turgot, "A Philosophical Review of the Successive Advances of the Human Mind," 44; Condorcet, "Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind," 37–38.

²³ Adam J. Tebble, *Epistemic Liberalism: A Defence*, 27–37.

of the most appropriate means of satisfying them — is that it is the subjective or personally held knowledge of individual economic agents about local and often temporary circumstances, including their own circumstances. Most significantly, the knowledge relevant to the fruition of economic plans is not only unique to the individuals who possess it. It is also knowledge possessed by individuals who in the overwhelming majority of instances are not directly connected to one another. It exists, therefore, only “in the dispersed, incomplete, and inconsistent form in which it appears in many individual minds.”²⁴ Finally, this knowledge is tacit in form and embodied in what we may call ethical dispositions and inherited traditions and practices. “Though our civilization is the result of a cumulation of individual knowledge,” Hayek writes,

it is not by their explicit or conscious combination of all this knowledge in any individual brain, but by its embodiment in symbols which we use without understanding them, in habits and institutions, tools and concepts, that man in society is constantly able to profit from a body of knowledge neither he nor any other man completely possesses. Many of the greatest things man has achieved are the result not of consciously directed thought, and still less the product of a deliberately coordinated effort of many individuals, but of a process in which the individual plays a part which he can never fully understand.²⁵

How, then, does the existence of an economic knowledge problem lend support to the case for economic liberty? It is here where epistemic liberalism’s distinctive argument for liberty emerges, for if an adequate response to the knowledge problem is to be had then we need to secure significantly more than Millian liberty of thought, conscience, and expression, which Hayek also endorses.²⁶ Responding to the knowledge problem, that is, not only requires the expression of our explicit propositional knowledge of facts about ourselves, others, and the world, as Plamenatz appears to suppose.²⁷ As dispersed, fleeting, and often tacitly held, the knowledge relevant to the success of our economic plans is only communicated to each if all the rest enjoy the liberty to *act* upon it. Similarly to Mill’s discussion of experiments of living in *On Liberty* and, therefore, central to the epistemic liberal case is the extension of liberty from thought, conscience, and expression to action.

This commitment to liberty of action makes it possible to respond to the knowledge problem in two distinct although related ways. First, the

²⁴ Friedrich A. Hayek, *The Counter-Revolution of Science: Studies in the Abuse of Reason* (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, [1952] 1980), 50.

²⁵ Hayek, *The Counter-Revolution of Science*, 149–50.

²⁶ Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty*, 32–35.

²⁷ Whilst Plamenatz’s view is epistemic in that he denies that “all the knowledge acquired by mankind were the possession of one possessor,” he nevertheless assumes that the knowledge in question is only explicit, propositional knowledge. On this see Plamenatz, *Hegel, Marx and Engels, and the Idea of Progress*, 348.

benefits of economic liberty and the private property rights it makes possible tie in directly with the epistemic function of market prices. As Hayek's example of the buying and selling of tin in "The Use of Knowledge in Society" makes clear, leaving individuals free to buy and sell rights to property from one another generates market prices which in turn serve to communicate information about factors that are relevant to the fruition of their plans, but which are known only to unseen distant others.²⁸ It is, therefore, because of the prices emergent from our enjoyment of economic liberty that, despite our not being in a position to centrally direct efforts toward particular ends, including progressive ends, "[t]he whole acts as one market." It does so, moreover, "not because any of its members survey the whole field, but because their limited individual fields of vision sufficiently overlap so that through many intermediaries the relevant information is communicated to all."²⁹ Economic liberty produces, therefore, "an *adaptation* to countless circumstances which in their totality are not known and cannot be known to any person or authority," and which "cannot be brought about by a central direction of all economic activity."³⁰

Economic progress, of course, is but one aspect of the individual progress with which defenders of liberty may be concerned. As Hayek makes clear "it is very questionable whether there are any actions which can be called merely 'economic'" and the economic preferences that we do have only emerge as a result of our values and conceptions of the good. "Economic considerations," he continues, "are merely those by which we reconcile and adjust our different purposes, none of which, in the last resort, are economic."³¹ In addition to the question of the connection between liberty and economic advancement, therefore, a similar question arises with respect to the institutional preconditions for cultural or moral progress, and so it remains now to see whether the objection to liberalism's progress-based argument for economic liberty can be sustained here. One reason to reject the objection in the case of moral or cultural advancement, and to affirm the connection between liberty and progress, emerges from the underlying complex adaptive and creative-destructive logic of the process of civilization. As I have argued elsewhere, just as it is marked by an economic knowledge problem, society is also marked by what we may call a cultural knowledge problem with respect to the selection of conceptions of the good out of which our economic preferences emerge.³²

²⁸ Friedrich A. Hayek, "The Use of Knowledge in Society," in Friedrich A. Hayek, *Individualism and Economic Order* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, [1945] 1948), 85–86.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 86.

³⁰ Friedrich A. Hayek, "The Economy, Science, and Politics," in Friedrich A. Hayek, *Studies in Philosophy, Politics and Economics* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, [1962] 1967), 263, emphasis added.

³¹ Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty*, 35. See also his *Law, Legislation and Liberty* (London: Routledge, 1982) vol. 3, 168.

³² Tebble, *Epistemic Liberalism: A Defence*, 44–46.

Here, and similar to the economic case, the knowledge that is relevant to the determination of questions of ethical value and of appropriate cultural practice is not only tacitly held by us in the form of the inherited traditions and cultural rules that motivate our action, but is also dispersed among us. Most significantly for the question of the necessity of liberty, the important consequence of this cultural knowledge problem is that we are unable to make adequate centralized judgments about which conceptions of the good and constituent practices should persist in the interests of progress and which should be rejected. We need, therefore, to conceive the problem of moral progress as not one of deciding which *conception of the good* is most appropriate in the light of our possession of all the ethical knowledge relevant to doing so, but of identifying the *procedure* in virtue of which that ethical knowledge may be coordinated under complex conditions so that such a conception may emerge.

It is here that the epistemic liberal standpoint lends itself to a defense of a stance of state permissiveness rather than restriction with respect to cultural practice, so that individuals may be at liberty not just to express but to act upon what they know and believe about the good life.³³ Similarly to Hayek's discussion of the private property rights case discussed above, the reason why liberty is required in this respect is because it makes possible the communication of the ethical knowledge relevant to the determination of the value of particular conceptions of the good and their constituent practices. Moreover, and just as the economic process is driven at the margins by entrepreneurs and innovators, so in the realm of culture and cultural value a similar phenomenon becomes apparent with respect to the activities of what I have called ethical trail-blazers — those individuals who either revise the circumstances in which they honor inherited rules and practices or else reject and break them altogether and who are subsequently imitated by others, thus inducing an imitative ripple-effect of cultural change and transformation.³⁴ On this reading, then, liberty makes possible what we may call a complex cultural adaptive process where, via the discrete choices of a multitude of only indirectly connected individuals who adhere to or renounce specific cultural practices, a wider process of value and practice arbitration is established. Finally, and recalling Bury's observation about progress and the possibility of the self-conscious direction of the social and economic process, it becomes apparent how if neither knowledge problem were to exist, the case for economic and cultural liberty would be redundant. If we already knew all that we needed to know in order to make the decisions required to bring our plans to fruition there would be no need for the adjustment activity that liberty secures.

³³ *Ibid.*, chaps. 6 and 7.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 52.

B. Liberty and the necessary costliness of progress

We turn now to the question of the implications our epistemic liberal reading of the preconditions for the pursuit of progress has for the progress-based defense of liberty. Two of these in particular are worth scrutinizing. The first is that the knowledge problem not only necessitates liberty but confirms the view that personal progress under liberty is, by necessity, occasionally costly. The reason for this is that the knowledge problem is not a problem to which a once-and-for-all solution can be given, thus obviating the need for liberty. Rather, it is a problem of our having to coordinate knowledge of complex circumstances that are themselves continuously transformed, not just because of occasional exogenous shocks, but precisely because of the endogenous impact of our ongoing exercise of liberty. Hayek is helpfully clear about how, because of the very exercise of liberty in response to them, the circumstances to which individuals need to adapt continuously change, thus necessitating further adaptive responses. "Every change in conditions," he writes,

will make necessary some change in the use of resources, in the direction and kind of human activities, in habits and practices. And each change in the actions of those affected in the first instance will require further adjustments that will gradually extend throughout the whole of society. Thus every change in a sense creates a "problem" for society; even though no single individual perceives it as such; and it is gradually "solved" by the establishment of a new over-all adjustment. Those who take part in the process have little idea why they are doing what they do, and we have no way of predicting who will at each step first make the appropriate move, or what particular combinations of knowledge and skill, personal attitudes and circumstances, will suggest to some man the suitable answer, or by what channels his example will be transmitted to others who will follow the lead. It is difficult to conceive all the combinations of knowledge and skills which thus come into action and from which arises the discovery of appropriate practices or devices that, once found, can be accepted generally. But from the countless number of humble steps taken by anonymous persons in the course of doing familiar things in changed circumstances spring the examples that prevail. They are as important as major intellectual innovations which are explicitly recognized and communicated as such.³⁵

Most importantly, this insight into liberty and the ever-shifting nature of the knowledge problem also provides a deeper explanation than that provided by the creative destruction objection of why liberty must be costly.

³⁵ Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty*, 28. See also Tebble, *Epistemic Liberalism*, 40.

Precisely because of the mutual distancing between individuals, it is not just the case that in exercising our liberty to respond to our circumstances as we see fit we *directly* impact the chances of progress of others as the creative destruction objection makes evident. Rather, it is also the case that economic decisions that agents make in response to their own circumstances induce ripple effects across the economy via the price mechanism that in turn impact the decisions of all the rest in ways that cannot be foreseen or controlled. One may make an economic decision, for example, to foster progress, but in the absence of ever knowing what all the rest were doing under circumstances that only they were familiar with, and even if they too were concerned with furthering progress, it could never be guaranteed that the decision would yield the desired result. Indeed, when combined with the decisions of those others of which the actor knows nothing at all, it could turn out to be entirely counterproductive to the stated objective. Thus, even if each were *motivated* to exercise his or her economic liberty to secure progress for all the rest, and unlike the state of affairs in a small-scale community where concerted action in furtherance of collective ends is possible, the attempt to do so would be defeated by the insuperable obstacle that complexity presents to the direct coordination of decisions that would be required for success under ever-changing conditions.³⁶ If liberty drives personal progress at all, then, it must only ever do so imperfectly and often at great cost precisely because, when the circumstances suggest they should, it permits individuals to choose in ways that are both beneficial and harmful to the advancement of others. Epistemic liberalism therefore vindicates the view that, while economic liberty is necessary to make an adequate response to the constraints imposed by the knowledge problem possible, the complex adaptation that it facilitates must also inevitably involve personal cost.

As we have seen, central to the idea of liberty is that individuals are left free to decide for themselves what kind of life they wish to lead, just as they are left free to decide upon the means that they will employ to lead it. This insight brings us to the second implication of the epistemic view for progress-based defenses of liberty; that some may choose to maintain conservative if not reactionary lifestyles and practices, of which conservative religious revivals are instructive examples. It is here, however, where an important difference between economic and cultural liberty becomes apparent. Unlike the former, where it is relatively rare for obsolete production processes to be reemployed, this is not the case in the social domain. Indeed, and as the reemergence of the practice of *hijab* amongst religious Muslim women shows, the whole point of a conservative religious revival is that it represents the *readoption* of a practice or cluster of practices once considered by many as retrograde or out-of-date. Rather, then, than confirming our finding with regard to economic liberty — that progress under liberty is at best often costly to at least some — the example of conservative religious

³⁶ Ibid., 29–30.

revivals issues in a stronger claim. Precisely because they can be readopted in ways that old-fashioned production processes generally cannot, the example of conservative religious revivals shows in more unambiguous terms how liberty may be neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for progress, costly or otherwise. The exercise of liberty, that is, does not necessarily lead to inevitable, if at times costly, moral advancement of the kind presupposed by the Whig interpretation of history, and which does appear more evident in the economic domain. As an example not of a pause in a process of progressive unfolding, but of a *reversal* of that process, the exercise of liberty may in fact lead to just the opposite.

Yet this is not the end of the matter, for we may claim that just as in the case of the conservative chooser in the economic sphere, under a regime of liberty the choices of cultural conservatives would for at least two reasons be constrained by those of their more liberal-minded fellows. First, individual choices regarding cultural practice are significantly constrained precisely by economic factors. Refusing to work on particular days, in certain trades, with particular goods, or with particular kinds of people all serve to impose costs upon those who do so relative to those with a more liberal disposition. Second, under a regime of liberty such pressure would also manifest itself beyond the economic domain. Thus, even if they were legally permitted, the degree to which one could wear a *burqa* or discriminate against those who did not conform to the moral dictates of one's conception of the good would be limited to the degree to which others with whom one interacted approved of such practices. Despite this, one could nevertheless claim that the hands of conservatives would be forced only in cases where they were less numerous than their liberal-minded fellows and where the impact of social sanction would therefore be more keenly felt. In contrast to the case of conservative economic choosers, therefore, cultural advancement and the gradual displacement of retrograde conceptions of the good and their associated practices occurs under a regime of liberty only to the extent to which the majority does not already choose progressively. Luddites may over the long run always be victims of the innovation brought about by the choices of economic innovators and entrepreneurs, but this is not so in the cultural sphere. Here advancement is contingent upon the degree to which those who enjoy liberty are already liberal and progressive. It is clear, however, that even if conservatives were numerically superior to liberals, the advantage of the liberal-minded would still exist, insofar as their less-restrictive ethos would afford them greater opportunity to participate in the labor market. Moreover, upon closer examination the counter-objection is not telling even in the case of practices that impose discriminatory burdens upon others.³⁷ Even in cases where a retrograde discriminatory norm were locally prevalent,

³⁷ This is not to say that discrimination is morally acceptable, even if it may be legally permissible. For a discussion see Tebble, *Epistemic Liberalism: A Defence*, 214–30.

under conditions of liberty those who imposed it would over the long run lose out to more liberal-minded employers because of their self-limiting access to the talent pool. Progress would therefore be secured, albeit at a slower rate than in the economic sphere owing to the stickiness of norms relative to production processes, a point that corroborates the traditional view about the unevenness rather than the comprehensiveness of progress under liberty.³⁸ This difference notwithstanding, our epistemic conception gives us reason to arrive at similar conclusions with regard to individual progress in the economic and social or cultural spheres. To the detriment of the naïvely rosy version of the progress-based argument typically put forward by liberals, personal progress under liberty may occur, but does so at considerable cost to some and quite possibly at a slower rate in one sphere than in the other.

There is, however, an additional problem that liberals face when seeking to justify liberty in terms of its conduciveness to personal moral progress that may lead us to refrain from conceding even this much. As was suggested in the discussion of the unintended economic consequences that the exercise of the liberty of others has for conservative economic choosers, whether or not one experiences liberty as beneficially progressive or ethically calamitous is dependent upon the conception of the good to which one subscribes. In order to sustain the claim that such consequences are uniformly progressive, therefore, liberals would first need to establish that a progressive comprehensive conception of the good of the kind often attributed to Mill is the appropriate yardstick of progress in virtue of which the results of liberty's exercise may be judged.³⁹ As we will see in the next section when discussing progress and the overall results of liberty, however, and regardless of any *ethical* objections one may have to it, there are strong epistemic reasons to doubt whether such a view is sustainable.

C. *Is the costliness of progress a uniquely liberal problem?*

Having utilized the epistemic liberal perspective to establish that personal progress under a regime of liberty is at best necessarily imperfect and costly, it remains to consider our second question of whether these deficiencies are uniquely liberal. This question is important because if it can be shown that there is an alternative to liberalism and liberty that does not suffer from imperfection or costliness we may have a reason not just to doubt liberalism's progress-based argument for liberty but to reject it, and liberalism, altogether. One such alternative, as Bury explains, would be socialism. Here one could suppose that not only would the imperfection and costliness of progress under liberal freedom fail to arise, as all decisions aimed

³⁸ Plamenatz, *Hegel, Marx and Engels, and the Idea of Progress*, 312.

³⁹ William Galston, "Two Concepts of Liberalism," *Ethics* 105, no. 3 (1995): 516–34.

at securing it would be collectively taken, but that the need for *further* progress would disappear. "If the millennium can be brought about at a stroke by a certain arrangement of society," Bury notes in his discussion, "the goal of development is achieved; we shall have reached the term, and shall have only to live in and enjoy the ideal state — a menagerie of happy men."⁴⁰

The socialist view, however, is mistaken and our epistemic liberal reading of liberty's relationship to progress is again of great assistance in this respect. The existence of the knowledge problem does not depend upon the *kind* of political arrangement under consideration. Rather, it is a background circumstance in virtue of which all such arrangements need to be evaluated. That is, as a problem that emerges due to the complexity of underlying social conditions, the imperfection and costliness of progress is not unique to liberalism, but is rather an unavoidable part of the human condition and exists regardless of the particular account of political association one may wish to endorse. The reason for this is twofold and also tracks our distinction between progress understood as a property of individual lives and of the process of civilization more generally construed. With regard to the first, and as Plamenatz argues, precisely because we would never have full access to the knowledge of the circumstances to which we would need to respond to secure progress for each individual — assuming that we have a settled view not only of what counts as progress, but that we should judge quality of life in ameliorative terms — even under socialism the sacrifice of the advancement of some for the progress of all, and with it the personal costliness of progress, would be unavoidable.⁴¹ Indeed, the significant difference between liberalism and socialism in this respect is not that such sacrifices must be made, but in how they are made. In contrast to what we have seen is the impersonal complex adaptive selection mechanism⁴² made possible by liberalism's regime of liberty, where winners and losers turn out to be the unintended results of a multitude of discrete individual choices, in the case of socialism this would occur via a centralized and intentional feedback mechanism. Similarly, it is far-fetched to assume that humanity's moral advancement could be secured by what we may call the central planning of history, when the knowledge relevant to successfully coordinating human endeavors towards progressive ends is not only beyond our reach, but is undergoing constant complex adaptive transformation subsequent to our responses as individuals to circumstances known only to ourselves and to those in our nearest circle. The epistemic account therefore shows that the appropriate question is not whether progress's imperfection and costliness give us reason to reject progress-based arguments for liberty advanced by liberals. No theory of politics can secure perfect and costless progress and to suppose otherwise is to work from an untenable assumption. Rather, the

⁴⁰ Bury, *The Idea of Progress*, 127–28.

⁴¹ Plamenatz, *Hegel, Marx and Engels, and the Idea of Progress*, 348.

⁴² Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty*, 45–46.

appropriate question is how imperfect and costly with respect to individual progress the process facilitated by the regime of liberty is *relative to any other possible regime*. Given, however, that the extent to which liberty is permitted is the extent to which we may coordinate with one another in furtherance of progressive ends under ever-changing circumstances, there is a clear sense in which, despite the personal costliness of the complex adaptive process it makes possible, the progress that liberty secures is the best that we can hope for.⁴³

IV. LIBERTY, PROGRESS, AND TELEOLOGY

I noted earlier in discussing the creative destruction objection to progress-based defenses of liberty that the account of well-being in virtue of which we may say that our lives progress is subject to contestation and that, for those with conceptions of the good that impose restrictions on the use of technology, economic innovation cannot be seen as progress to the extent that it undermines their ability to adhere to them. Even, therefore, if there are powerful reasons for claiming that a regime of liberty is the best that can be hoped for with regard to personal progress, there still remains the question of whether it is in any case coherent to predicate progress of the overall results of a regime of liberty, or of the results of any other account of personal association that seeks to secure it, and that progress is therefore a value upon which such an account may be justified. Thus far we have been led to the conclusion that this is a reasonable assumption in the case of personal progress. After all, one only has to *ask* an individual if they believe their own choices and those of others have led to their personal advancement relative to their stated aims and objectives in order to confirm this. Our epistemic approach, however, provides reason to doubt whether the same can be said with regard to overall progress, or what we may call human advancement. Such a claim, of course, may be surprising. In the first instance, and recalling our discussion of the connection between liberty and economic recessions, we saw that it is meaningful to predicate progress of the results of liberty, especially insofar as recessions may be understood as *periodic* society-wide complex adaptive setbacks along an otherwise upward trajectory. Similarly, we have seen that it is also reasonable to claim that the readoption of hitherto discredited cultural practices represents a temporary, if somewhat more sticky, regression within a wider trajectory of humanity's moral advancement. Thus, despite explaining the inevitability of economic and cultural setback, the complex adaptive effects of liberty do not show that one must reject liberalism's progress-based argument altogether.

⁴³ Deliberative democracy would be another, perhaps more promising, candidate regime for the pursuit of progress, but space does not allow us to consider it here.

Yet, there is reason to doubt that recessions and periods of cultural revival can be justified by defenders of progress as but temporary setbacks on a wider trajectory of human advancement, at least insofar as this presupposes an ethico-historical *telos*, or master value, in virtue of which such a justification may be made. The reason why this is problematic is that judging the overall results of social cooperation in terms of such a *telos* begs the question that we have seen the knowledge problem poses. Because the knowledge of the circumstances to which we would need to refer when deciding upon an appropriate *telos* is uncentralizable, we cannot authoritatively claim what humanity's historical vocation should be, nor even if it has one. Yet, in positing a *telos* with regard to the unfolding of human history, defenders of progress do just this. That is, they substitute the assumption of our status as mutually isolated contributing agents to rather than all-knowing directors of the process of civilization with one that holds that we have access to an Archimedean standpoint from which questions concerning history's ultimate purpose, and whether or not it has been achieved, may be judged. Thus, analogously to Hayek's critique of the foundational assumptions of neoclassical economics, in grounding historical judgment upon a conception of progress, defenders of progress erroneously assume that the knowledge of the particular circumstances that drives the process of civilization has already been accounted for and that the results of that process may therefore be coherently evaluated.⁴⁴ As we saw earlier, however, and just as Hayek points out in relation to his notion of economic liberty as a discovery procedure, the complex adaptive process made possible by liberty cannot be said to have any substantive purpose beyond that of the coordination of knowledge.⁴⁵ Indeed, if it has any identifiable purpose at all, 'progress consists in the discovery of the yet not known' — a goal whose achievement could, by its very nature, never be confirmed.⁴⁶ Just, then, as we cannot posit an ideal or optimal distributive outcome upon which to judge the performance of economic liberty because the knowledge of the particular circumstances relevant to identifying it is never given in a way that would make this possible, so we ought to reject its corollary with respect to liberty and the ultimate purpose of the process of civilization.

There are two important counter-objections that may be raised against the skepticism implicit in this view. First, there is scope to make such overall judgments if we carefully distinguish between *retrospective* and *prospective* judgments of human progress. Even if prospective judgments are fraught in the way epistemic liberalism suggests, this is not so in the

⁴⁴ Tebble, *Epistemic Liberalism: A Defence*, 80–81.

⁴⁵ Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, vol. 1, 39; vol. 2, 109.

⁴⁶ Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty*, 40. This, of course, militates against the view that Hayek defends elsewhere in *The Constitution of Liberty* that progress is associated with advances in standards of living. On this see *The Constitution of Liberty*, 42–44.

case of retrospective judgments. It is possible, for example, to consider recessions and conservative cultural revivals as backward steps, not relative to an epistemically problematic ethico-historical *telos*, but merely relative to the state of affairs that preceded them. An economic downturn on this reading is seen as a diminishment precisely because of its negative impact across key measurable economic indicators as they were before. Similarly, a cultural regression is considered as such because of the curtailment of liberties that were more widely enjoyed previously. Yet, a reason to reject this response can be found with reference to the debate about comprehensive accounts of liberalism. Here progress-based defenses of the results of social cooperation and the temporary setbacks that they include must nevertheless implicitly appeal to ethically controversial claims that are in tension with liberalism's commitment to neutrality between different conceptions of the good. Such defenses, that is, beg the question not only of why one should view humanity's historical vocation as an ameliorative one. From the standpoint of at least some, this is, to say the least, a controversial understanding of our place in the historical order, with the example of remote and uncontacted tribes who do not view the unfolding of history in ameliorative terms but who feel no less diminished because of this, or in need of colonial improvement of the kind that Mill defended, being an instructive case in point. Even if such an ameliorative understanding of the purpose of history were not controversial, an account is needed to explain why the specific conception of the good to which retrospective defenses of progress would under such circumstances implicitly appeal should be considered universally valid. Viewing a recession as a temporary setback on the path to prosperity, for instance, presupposes a materialist conception of improvement that first needs to be established. Similarly, and as was suggested earlier, viewing a conservative religious revival as a retrograde development relative to some prior state is crucially dependent upon the conception of the good that one assumes. Indeed, relative to a less pious state, such a revival would be seen by many as a step forward for humanity as much as a step backward. Unfortunately, space does not allow a proper assessment of the persuasiveness of this critique of liberal political morality. This notwithstanding, and in view of what we have claimed about the epistemically inscrutable nature of the process of civilization, it remains the case that the retrospective judgment response is also vulnerable to our critique. In assuming an ideal ethical standard in virtue of which retrospective evaluation between two points in historical time can be made meaningful, it represents a standpoint that floats freely above history's inscrutable trajectory in a way that is as inexplicable as it is allegedly effortless.

A final counter-objection is that epistemic liberals have simply misunderstood progress-based defenses of liberty. It is not the case that they assume cognitivism with regard to the *telos* of history. They could, for instance, hold a more modest and perhaps more compelling view: that

claims about human progress and claims about temporary regress within trajectories of progress are meaningful as claims merely about our movement along some measure of the good.⁴⁷ Yet, even if we concede this, it remains the case that we are confronted with the problem of the surety with which we may claim that the particular measure that we favor is the appropriate one, given that by its very nature the ethical knowledge relevant to identifying it always remains steadfastly unaccounted for. The problem, then, with this more modest view is not that it too assumes a naïvely cognitivist stance towards moral value. Skepticism about the ultimate purpose of the process of civilization does not exclude the *possibility* of an objectively-valid conception or measure of the good, and it could be *true* that a life lived autonomously is the best possible form of life (in which case liberal rejection of the failed neutrality argument mentioned above would be vindicated). The problem, that is, is not one of neutrality, but of epistemology. As contributors to, rather than all-knowing directors of, the process of civilization, claiming as much makes an unwarranted assumption about how we may come to know that the measure of the good we favor is the appropriate one, given that our knowledge of the multitude of particular circumstances that would corroborate such a view is never given to us in a way that would vindicate our judgment. From *our* vantage point, such a conception cannot be considered to be either the ethical *telos* of history, or the ideal measure of the good from which the overall results of the process of civilization may be judged. To utilize a phrase by Erik Olin Wright in his discussion of social transformation, it is impossible to write “the history of the future” from our necessarily bounded epistemic standpoint.⁴⁸ In the absence of either possibility, all that can be said is that liberalism’s commitment to liberty is justified because it permits society more readily to adapt itself to the complex circumstances that are relevant to the fulfillment of the purposes of its members, regardless of which conception of the good emerges as a result of this, or whether it happens to correlate to a conception which comprehensive liberals would endorse. Rather than its tendency to promote progress, then, and in line with its epistemic role, a more appropriate evaluative standpoint with regard to liberty’s overall results would be that of the degree to which it secures complex adaptation relative to some other decision procedure. Accepting this, however, means rejecting the notion of progress as appropriately performing this evaluative role on behalf of liberty.

V. CONCLUSION

Epistemic approaches to liberalism give us strong reasons to doubt the connection between liberty and progress. First, the knowledge problem that

⁴⁷ I am grateful to Darrel Moellendorf for this point.

⁴⁸ Erik O. Wright, *Envisioning Real Utopias* (London and New York: Verso, 2010).

lies at the heart of this approach shows how liberty is at best required for the costly and uneven realization of progress understood as an individual interest. Precisely because it leaves individuals free to make their own choices concerning both the conception of the good they wish to pursue and the means by which they pursue it, it is always possible that the exercise of liberty will be inimical to individual progress. Finally, epistemic liberalism shows how positing a conception or measure of the good in virtue of which judgments about the progressiveness of the *overall* results of liberty's exercise may be made is not just problematic, but impossible. In adopting such a conception as the standard for judgments of human progress under conditions of liberty, one erroneously assumes the possibility of full knowledge of the particular circumstances that would confirm our selection of that conception as appropriate. Rather than posit such a conception or measure of the good as the criterion upon which the results of liberty may be evaluated, and our commitment to it subsequently justified, liberty is better conceived as a necessary condition for the complex adaptation that is required by the fact of the knowledge problem. Accepting as much, however, means giving up on progress as a secure foundation for the defense of liberty.

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