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SOCIAL PROGRESS*

By Philip Kitcher

Abstract: *The concept of social progress I hope to rehabilitate will be local, far from locally complete, and permit only modest extensions; it will be pragmatic rather than teleological. In this way, it will hope to avoid treating the multiplicity of goods as if there were always the possibility of comparing them on a single scale, to abandon the idea of a final state toward which history is tending or should tend, and to substitute piecemeal accomplishments for utopian ends. Its emphasis on local comparisons will allow it to forgo sweeping historical comparisons, those juxtaposing the "enlightened" with "lesser breeds without the law," or the "ancients" with the "moderns." A restrained pragmatic concept of social progress honors the insights of critics of the notion of social progress, seeing them as questioning alleged presuppositions that can be given up.*

KEY WORDS: Dewey, pragmatism, scientific progress, Enlightenment, teleology, autonomy, community

I. Introduction

To talk of social progress is to invite derision. For understandable reasons, critics of different stripes regard such talk as naïve (at best) or disingenuous (at worst). Emphasizing the progressive emergence of "civilization" is easily taken for a conservative exercise in self-congratulation, one that encourages the self-styled "civilized" to reform the lives of the "barbarians." Prophesying an inevitable direction for history, or campaigning for progress to realize large ideals, appears as foolish utopianism, blind to the lessons of the past. Perhaps most fundamentally, critics point to the many respects in which societies are good or bad. Social change is seen as invariably offering gains and losses, so that projects of comparison always involve arbitrary choices. Asking whether twenty-first century New York has made progress over fifth-century Athens is simply fatuous.

Each of these concerns embodies a genuine insight. Yet, like the classical pragmatists, John Dewey in particular, I believe that the notion of social progress is indispensable. My aim in this essay is to disentangle it

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from the objectionable features critics associate with it. I want to rehabilitate an endangered concept.

II. The Logic of Progress Concepts

Many concerns about the concept result from foisting on to it commitments that a notion of social progress is not required to have. Understanding some logical features of progress concepts clears away several important objections.

To make a judgment of progress is to compare two temporal states of a system, and to assert that the replacement of the earlier with the later constitutes an advance. Often, progress concepts presuppose a division of some time period into discrete stages.[1] Progress talk applies to many different types of system: the Catholic Church, the theory of the chemical bond, an aspiring musician. Sometimes progress is assessed by introducing mathematical measures: numerical values are assigned to the states under comparison, and either increase or decrease is taken to indicate progress.[2] Or mathematics enters in a different way: we note the musician's progress by seeing that the skills she had acquired last year are a proper subset of those she now enjoys. Mathematizing progress is not always necessary, however, and sometimes it should be resisted.[3]

I'll say that a concept of progress is *global* if it compares each pair of temporal states of the system with which it is concerned, during the pertinent time period. Consider a post-operative patient, for whom the relevant dimension of health is measured by the level of a particular chemical substance. The patient's progress may be defined in terms of the decrease (say) of the substance, and it is possible to make progress judgments with respect to all pairs of states during the period of recovery. But concepts of progress do not have to be global. They can offer some comparisons while making no judgment on others. Those paleontologists who talk of evolutionary progress are typically concerned with successive adaptations within a lineage during a particular time period — they chart changes in the position of the foramen magnum (and thus progress toward bipedalism) during hominin evolution. Conceiving progress in this way carries no implications for the vast majority of comparisons across evolutionary

[1] This need not be the case. Sometimes one can focus on a continuous temporal process and examine the relations obtaining at any two instants.

[2] For example, economic progress is partly assessed by increase in GDP, and partly by decrease in unemployment.

[3] One source of skepticism about social progress is the assumption that a concept of progress must be mathematical. That assumption combines with the recognition of the diversity of social goods to suggest the impossibility of a linear scale, and thus of a concept of social progress. Skepticism of this sort is often motivated by the insight that social progress cannot be collapsed into some measurable form of economic progress.

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time; it does not, for example, pronounce on whether human beings are an evolutionary advance on ants (or even archebacteria).[4]

One alternative to global concepts focuses on a specific type of comparison. A *local* concept of progress starts by offering a way to compare some pairs of temporally adjacent states. An *extended local* concept adds to the basic specification of the temporally adjacent comparisons some means of generating judgments about non-adjacent states. A *locally complete* concept provides a judgment with respect to every pair of temporally adjacent states. It is easy to assume that if the concept is locally complete, it must also be global. That need not be so. If the concept is not mathematized, then knowing that our system has made progress between t_1 and t_2 and that it has regressed between t_2 and t_3 may imply nothing with respect to its progress between t_1 and t_3.[5] Moreover, if the concept doesn't allow the transitivity of progress in any specified range of instances, a locally complete concept need not even be an extended local concept.[6]

The distinctions just drawn are useful for disentangling progress-talk from supposed necessary conditions that often provoke suspicion about its legitimacy. Even more crucial, however, is to recognize that not all progress is directed toward a goal. *Teleological* concepts of progress do posit a goal, and take progress to consist in diminishing distance from the goal. Travel to an intended destination provides an obvious example of a teleological notion of progress. In other domains, progress lies in overcoming the difficulties or limitations of the current state — we make progress *from* rather than progress *to*. Once the possibility has been appreciated, examples are not hard to find. Consider contemporary electronic devices. Technological progress with respect to smartphones (for instance) is achieved in all sorts of ways — by providing greater storage space or more functions, or improving the efficiency with which current functions are discharged. Progress in medical research consists in finding ways to cure, treat, or palliate the diseases that now afflict people. The aspiring pianist overcomes the technical deficiencies that currently limit her performances and grows musically through developing greater sensitivity in interpreting a wider repertoire. There is no Platonic smartphone, no final ideal of human health, no perfect pianist who combines all the skills and the virtues of all the great performers. In each of these instances, progress can be

[4] Many paleontologists and evolutionary theorists reject all talk of progress in evolution. Others want to find a place for progress within the framework of an adapting lineage. Recognizing that concepts of progress need not be global may not completely resolve the debate, but it does eliminate some confusions.

[5] I had originally supposed that, even for a mathematized notion of progress, transitivity might fail. But the examples on which I based this judgment are fallacious. In discussion David Owen showed me that I was confused on this point. The correct relative of my flawed thesis is presented below. See text to n. 7.

[6] Imagine a system whose sequence of states shows alternating progress and regress, where the progress concept is not mathematized.

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made in many different ways, and which of them is chosen will affect the future modes of making progress. Progress will thus be path-dependent.

Pragmatic progress (as I shall call it) lies in solving problems. Yet my suggested contrast may appear superficial. Doesn't any progressive transition presuppose an end, to wit relief from the problem? So, it might seem, teleology is inevitable after all. The objection rests on a subtle conflation of types of goal. To be sure, people who seek progress through solving a problem have an immediate, *local*, end. Nevertheless, there need be no *final* end, no ideal state to which they would move closer by overcoming the difficulty now pressing. We are often faced with the possibility of replacing a present unsatisfactory state with many successors, each of which would emphasize different goods. If those goods are not comparable, there need be no harmonizing total vision. The pianist has plenty of ways of going forward, but the technical skills she needs will depend on the pieces she hopes to perform and on her manner of interpreting them — there is no ideal synthesis of Rubinstein and Schnabel, Brendel and Richter, who could deliver optimal performances of all keyboard works from Tallis and Gabrieli (and before) to Boulez, Ligeti, Stockhausen (and beyond.)

With respect to social progress, the concept I hope to rehabilitate will be local, far from locally complete, and permit only modest extensions; it will be pragmatic rather than teleological. In this way, it will hope to avoid treating the multiplicity of goods as if there were always the possibility of comparing them on a single scale, to abandon the idea of a final state toward which history is tending or should tend, and to substitute piecemeal accomplishments for utopian ends. Its emphasis on local comparisons will allow it to forgo sweeping historical comparisons, those juxtaposing the "enlightened" with "lesser breeds without the law," or the "ancients" with the "moderns." A restrained pragmatic concept of social progress honors the critics' insights, seeing them as questioning alleged presuppositions that can be given up.

Yet, it may be thought, retreat comes at a price: the restrained concept is deprived of any interest. In response to that challenge, we should ask — in the spirit of pragmatism — what work we want the concept of social progress to do for us. Abandoning many (most? all?) comparisons across widely separated parts of history would deprive us of the comforts of reflecting complacently on the distance we have come. Patting ourselves on the back is, however, a habit we can (and should) foreswear. As Dewey emphasized, concepts are tools for action — they look to the future. The primary purpose of a concept of social progress is to alert us to transitions that would lead us forward.

I endorse a Deweyan vision of the past and a Deweyan hope. To the extent that we can make sense of progress in our history, most of it has been blind, erratic, and incomplete. A clearer grasp of the concept of social progress — even a local, pragmatic concept — would help us to do better,

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to apply "intelligence" to collective human action. It would enable us to proceed with greater discernment, more systematically, and more completely. We would make progress with respect to progress.

Yet it is important to attach a caveat. When social decisions are guided by a local concept of progress, each decision changes the problem background. As older problems are partially solved, new ones emerge. It is possible for a society to recognize a major problem, and to take a series of steps that accumulate partial solutions to it, only to find, at the end of the sequence, that some equally severe (or even more severe) difficulty has emerged. This does not mean that a sequence of progressive steps has given rise to a final state that is not progressive with respect to the starting point. Rather, the fixation on the original problem and the continued efforts to solve it involve, from some stage on, transitions that are only *apparently* progressive. To use an evolutionary analogy, the society's efforts lead it into a changed fitness landscape in which carrying on in the same direction reduces adaptation.[7] I shall return to this possibility later.

III. Social Embedding

Skepticism probably still lingers. I'll try to dispel it further by suggesting that progress in some domains — where progress-talk is harder to resist — gives rise to a type of social progress. In short, without a notion of social progress, it is hard to make sense of *any* type of progress, even the most obvious ones. This occurs as a consequence of a condition I'll call *social embedding*.

The natural sciences probably constitute the area in which judgments of progress are least controversial. It is hard to dispute the claim that genetics has made spectacular progress since 1900 (the year in which three biologists independently rediscovered Mendel's analysis of hereditary phenomena.) Geneticists have recognized many patterns of inheritance beyond the horizons of the early days, they have offered molecular accounts of the gene and of the processes of gene replication and immediate gene action, they have found ways of identifying the details of the genetic make-up of individual organisms belonging to many species, they have used genetics to probe evolutionary history, and have raised and partially answered many other questions that the pioneers could not have posed.

The judgment about progress in genetics focuses on the *content* of the science, in a broad sense that includes experimental procedures, research tools, and methods of analysis.[8] When similar judgments are made about

[7] This paragraph corrects the faulty views about breakdowns of transitivity to which I was once inclined. As David Owen pointed out to me, the kinds of examples I have in mind are similar to the scenarios yielding Derek Parfit's "Repugnant Conclusion" (Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1984], part IV).

[8] Progress of this sort involves a relation between practices, in roughly the sense of Philip Kitcher, *The Advancement of Science* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

the natural sciences as a whole, there is frequently an implicit commitment to teleology. Champions of Science,[9] eminent physicists prominent among them, talk of a "final theory" or a "theory of everything," measuring the progress of Science by its proximity to the complete truth.[10] This cannot be correct. The truths about nature are so many that nothing we could recognize as a theory could deliver all of them.[11] Not only is it unlikely that all sciences can be subsumed under some "fundamental theory" (presumably delivered by physics), but the individual sciences are also inevitably selective. Genetics does not aspire to tell the "whole truth" about genes or about inheritance, but to address an evolving set of questions concerning gene structure and gene function.

Scientific progress consists in successively addressing the problems that arise in particular situations.[12] But for whom do these problems arise? Who decides that inquiry should address this puzzle rather than that? What makes questions significant enough to figure on the research agenda? One answer is to locate the selection in the professional scientific community: the set of significant questions comprises just those the experts pick out for attention. In many contexts, relativizing to the choices of the professional group grounds our everyday judgments about scientific progress — as in the uncontroversial claim that genetics has made spectacular progress since 1900.

Reflection on the history of the sciences in general, and of genetics in particular, suggests that the approach so far outlined is not adequate. Had we considered instead the progress of genetics between 1900 and 1925, it would not be so easy to assume that the significant questions are exactly those picked out by the scientific community: the investigation of mechanisms of inheritance was entangled with the lines of inquiry pursued by the Eugenics Record Office.[13] To be sure, the geneticists of 1925 knew about the locations of genes on chromosomes, and had developed techniques of gene mapping that were beyond the horizons of 1900. But they also made

[9] I capitalize to bring out the fact that the natural sciences are often seen as a single composite entity. For cogent defense of the view that the sciences are many, see John Dupré, *The Disorder of Things* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993) and Nancy Cartwright, *The Dappled World* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

[10] A very clear statement of the position is Steven Weinberg, *Dreams of a Final Theory* (New York: Random House, 1992).

[11] See Philip Kitcher, *Science, Truth, and Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001) for defense of this point.

[12] This important point began to emerge in the final section of Kuhn's groundbreaking monograph (Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962]). In later writings, Kuhn developed the evolutionary model of progress — progress as adaptation — further; see some of the essays included in his posthumous collection (Kuhn, The Road Since Structure [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000]). Larry Laudan has also emphasized the idea of scientific progress as problem solving (Laudan, *Progress and its Problems* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977]).

[13] See Daniel Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics* (New York: Knopf, 1985) for a classic discussion of genetics and eugenics in this period.

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comical claims about genes for "thalassophila" — a trait expressed in adolescent males, leading them to run away to sea — as well as darker judgments about the genetic basis of feeble-mindedness and its differential expression among various "races." Would-be immigrants were refused sanctuary and women were sterilized as a result of those judgments. By 1925, genetics had joined other sciences in contributing to individual decisions and social policies.

Judgments of progress require appraisal of the problems hailed as significant. It is legitimate to ask: Are the scientists addressing the right questions? When some of those questions — indeed, some of those seen as most urgent — are as misguided and socially harmful as those embedded in the eugenics of the period, it's reasonable to withdraw the judgment of a clear instance of progress. We can't simply say "These are the questions selected by the pertinent scientific community, and some of them are answered" and conclude that progress has been made.

So we move from a focus on content, relativized to unscrutinized criteria of significance, to a *socially embedded* concept of progress. The first stage of social embedding revises the standard for significance. Scientific inquiries are justified when they promote the general good. They do so when they pursue questions delivered by a democratic judgment: one that would result from negotiations among representatives of all human perspectives, well-informed both about what has already been achieved and about prospects for future research along all available lines, and concerned to reach an agenda that all parties will accept as satisfactory (although not necessarily optimal.)[14] The second stage supposes that genuine progress requires not only answers to the questions marked out as significant, but also the *availability* of the answers to those parties to whose needs they are relevant. A science is *well-ordered* if it pursues the problems that would be ratified by collective decision, and transmits the answers it gives to those for whom the problems are salient.[15] Sciences make progress in the socially embedded sense, when they solve problems in accordance with the conditions of well-ordered science.[16]

Socially embedded progress can be viewed from either of two perspectives. Focusing on the special domain, as I have done, it characterizes progress in a particular species of inquiry or of practice — in one of the sciences, say. Because of the emphasis on social effects, it identifies the contribution work in the pertinent domain makes to the improvement of society. Socially embedded progress is a mode of social progress.

[14] I originally offered this proposal in Kitcher, *Science, Truth, and Democracy*.

[15] I present and defend this conception of well-ordered science in Philip Kitcher, *Science in a Democratic Society* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2011).

[16] My formulation allows for the possibility of progress, even though a science is not well-ordered throughout, provided that it solves problems that satisfy the democratic criterion of significance and the solutions become available to those who need them.

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If we can't speak of improvements in society as resulting from answering scientific questions, we lose the standard for picking out the right questions. And without that standard we have no satisfactory way to distinguish genuine scientific progress from cases in which researchers find answers to whatever kinds of questions — whimsical or socially damaging though they may be — that happen to interest them.

IV. A General Concept of Social Progress

The claims just made rest on a general concept of social progress. Stated in its baldest form, societies make progress when they change in ways that improve the lives of their members. When the sciences make socially embedded progress, they provide benefits for everyone in the circumambient society (sometimes as large as the whole of humanity.) Hence, there is a mode of social progress.

Seeing social progress in terms of the betterment of individual lives invites a familiar complaint. Can the improvement of society be reduced to properties of individuals? Although I am no strict methodological individualist, I share the suspicion of countenancing some extra, larger entity — "society" — whose improvement is constitutive of progress. Legitimate worries about focusing on individuals should be assuaged by recognizing that the social relations among people are important to human flourishing. Rousseau, Hegel, Dewey and the Frankfurt School rightly emphasize the need for community, if the lives of individual members are to go well. As I'll propose below, worthwhile lives require connections to the lives of others. Hence, by including social relations among the properties of individual lives, I hope to avoid both the crude atomistic reductions of society, often offered by strict individualists, and the disturbing idea of a larger entity — the Nation or *Das Volk*? — to whose advancement the lives of individuals might be sacrificed.

Besides raising concerns about individualism, my proposal to see progress in terms of the quality of lives may invite charges of irremediable vagueness. Much contemporary discussion of human progress introduces precise measures. Champions of capitalism often point to the rise in Gross Domestic Product or Mean Real Income during the past two centuries to support their claims that *laissez-faire* economic policies have been the engines of progress. I've resisted these attempts to "operationalize" the concept of social progress for familiar reasons. First, the economic measures are insensitive to the distribution of economic goods: rising GDP or Mean Real Income is consistent with the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few and increasing deprivation among a vast majority of poor people. Second, and more fundamentally, how the economic changes affect human lives depends on background social arrangements: GDP might rise sharply and real income increase for all, but if that were purchased at the cost of withdrawing important public goods, the

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lives of most people would be diminished; conversely, a fall in the economic measures coupled with a commitment to systems of public support can promote social progress.[17]

Faced with the choice between a precise account of the wrong concept and an initially vague proposal that seems to capture features the "operational" specification misses, I opt for the latter, and attempt to remedy the vagueness. If the keys aren't under the lamppost, it's better to search for them by trying to bring light to the places where they might be found. Of course, forms of economic progress can contribute to social progress, since material resources are needed for people to achieve their goals. We should not, however, confuse what may often be a *means* to social progress with social progress itself.

How, then, can the concept of the improvement of individual lives be made more precise? Rejecting hedonism, the ancients offered lists of features found in lives that go well. The compendium of the *Nicomachean Ethics* can serve as paradigm: human flourishing is constituted by successful activity, participation in public life, acquiring and practicing virtue, friendship, and the contemplation of truth. Aristotle's treatment is clearly elitist — he focuses on the good life for the male aristocrat. Under the aegis of Christianity, medieval philosophy offered a more democratic picture of the good (mundane) life. To live well is to prepare oneself for eternal union with God, and Christ's sacrifice promises to all people the opportunity of salvation.

My approach to the good life (and hence to the improvement of human lives) rejects both the elitism of the ancient versions and the religious entanglement of the medieval Christian conception. Central to Enlightenment rethinking of the worthwhile life is a conception of autonomy, articulated by Kant and by Wilhelm von Humboldt. John Stuart Mill provides a classic, concise, formulation:

> The only freedom which deserves the name, is that of pursuing our own good in our own way, so long as we do not attempt to deprive others of theirs, or impede their efforts to obtain it. . . . Mankind are greater gainers by suffering each other to live as seems good to themselves, than by compelling each to live as seems good to the rest.

Mill is easily read as dividing human lives in two. First comes a period of choice and then a period of pursuit. People undergo some adolescent or young adult epiphany in which they decide what they want to be and do, and then spend the rest of their lives on the course they have chosen.

[17] This point has been made repeatedly and lucidly by Amartya Sen. He has pointed to the Indian state of Kerala as one in which economic indices give a misleading picture (underrating the quality of the lives of the citizens). See Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

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I follow Dewey[18] both in thinking of choice and pursuit as co-evolving throughout the period of our existence, and rejecting any suggestion that the "life plan" selected must aim at something extraordinarily ambitious. Life plans, or themes, can focus on activities available to almost all of us, on nurturing a family or contributing to a community, for example.

Nevertheless, self-fashioning has preconditions. You can't choose your own good if the structure of your life is thrust upon you, fixed by your class or caste or race. Nor can you be autonomous unless you are acquainted with a range of genuine options, given some opportunities to understand what those options would be like, allowed the chance to develop your own individual talents and to become aware of what you can and cannot do. The Enlightenment ideal of autonomy requires a demanding form of education, one that is wide-ranging in its exploration of human possibilities and one whose pace allows time for the unfolding of talent and for reflection on the directions in which the embryonic talents point. In the history of our species, probably only a tiny number of people have enjoyed anything like that kind of education. Among its drawbacks is economic inefficiency. It is ill-suited to yield a productive workforce — especially one that is competitive under conditions of global capitalism.[19]

Enlightenment autonomy comes in degrees, ranging from the complete lack of autonomy experienced by people who are confined to a single course of life (often by sex or caste) to the wide spectrum of options available to the most privileged. Indeed, the proliferation of "experiments of living" might proceed indefinitely, in tandem with educational opportunities to survey them all and to take careful stock of one's own talents and proclivities.[20] Hence, one obvious dimension of social progress involves increasing the autonomy of people's choices of life plan.

Mill places no further constraints on the good life. *On Liberty* campaigns for the proliferation of as many styles of life as possible (subject of course to the avoidance of interference with others). Thousands of flowers are encouraged to bloom. The commitment to individualism and autonomy *über alles* inspires an obvious objection. Just as the Aristotelian conception of the good life offered the view from the elite segment of the *polis* and its medieval counterpart reflected the perspective of the Church, doesn't Mill's account embody a cluster of liberal, western, values, at the cost of neglecting goods that other societies would deem crucial? In particular, should rampant individualism ignore the importance of community and

[18] See in particular John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* [1916], reprinted as *John Dewey: The Middle Works*, Volume 9 (Carbondale, IL: University of Southern Illinois Press, 1980).

[19] For an exposition of the difficulties, see my "Education, Democracy and Capitalism" (chapter 15 in Philip Kitcher, *Preludes to Pragmatism* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2012]).

[20] Even if there is a point beyond which further options become superfluous, or even burdensome, I suspect that it would always be possible to refine a system of education and social support so as to increase the autonomy of the decision.

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tradition? Does the obsession with autonomy celebrate the deracinated individual, bereft of any social home?

Dewey, by contrast, takes the immersion of an individual within a group to be essential to a flourishing human life.[21] He emphasizes the need for community with others: "What one is as a person is what one is as associated with others, in a free give and take of intercourse."[22] Now "community" is a polyvalent term (and I'll explore some of its possible meanings below). In adopting Dewey's constraint on flourishing lives, I'll start from one quite specific thought: A life plan for a life that goes well must endorse some project (or projects) intended to make a positive difference to the lives of others. The envisaged contributions can be of the straightforward sorts that are widely accessible — the nurturing of people with whom one is in direct contact. Or they can be part of a life that is essentially solitary and deprived of close personal relations — as with the reclusive artists or scientists who intend that the work they do will improve the lives of people they will never know. What is debarred is the pursuit of some venture of interest solely to oneself, epitomized by the hermit whose daily pursuits consist in counting the leaves on the trees surrounding his refuge.

Intent is, of course, one thing, accomplishment another. If a life is to go well, the projects central to the life plan must bear fruit sufficiently frequently. So, at the core of the conception of human flourishing I propose are three conditions:

1. The life plan is chosen autonomously.
2. The life plan issues in central projects intended to foster the well-being of others.
3. The projects, including the other-directed ones, meet with some measure of success.

As with autonomy, connectedness with the lives of others and successful achievement are matters of degree. A first approximation to my account

[21] He so takes this for granted that John Dewey, *The Public and its Problems* [1927] (reprinted in *John Dewey: The Later Works*, Volume 2 [Carbondale, IL: University of Southern Illinois Press, 1984], 237–372) transposes Mill's conception of liberty into the framework of interacting groups, without Dewey's giving any explicit account of his assumptions.

[22] John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* [1916], reprinted as *John Dewey: The Middle Works*, Volume 9 (Carbondale, IL: University of Southern Illinois Press, 1980), 129.

For a variety of statements about the importance of community to "growth" (Dewey's favored term for discussing the quality of human lives) in *Democracy and Education* alone, see Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 7–9, 18–19, 24, 28, 35, 64, 84–85, 87–88, 91, 93, 95, 104–105, 107, 200, 304, 333. In some of these passages the emphasis is on exchange of ideas on equal terms. Others stress the role of "conjoint activities" (a preoccupation that is continued in *The Public and its Problems* (John Dewey, *The Public and its Problems* [1916], reprinted in *John Dewey: The Later Works*, Volume 2 (Carbondale, IL: University of Southern Illinois Press [1984], 237–372.)

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of social progress is to identify as socially progressive those changes that increase the autonomy, connectedness, and achievement of individual lives.

The importance of community, in the sense of contribution to the lives of others, emerges very clearly, I believe, in considering the challenge posed by human finitude. Many sophisticated religious thinkers, William James and Paul Tillich prominent among them, have identified the importance of religion in its answering the human need to achieve meaning by contributing to or being a part of something permanent. Secular humanism cannot satisfy the demand. Not only are individual lives finite, but the career of the human species will also come to an end. One day, perhaps far sooner than it need have happened, our planet will no longer be able to sustain human existence.

The religious requirement for eternal impact asks for too much. Lives of limited duration are lent significance through their positive effects on the lives of others. They contribute to something larger than themselves, something that endures beyond their own span, even if the effects do not last forever. Some human achievements resonate through millennia (think of Homer), while others are relatively short-lived — the influence of parents and teachers diminishes after a generation or two. Whether the impact is short or long, the value it confers on a life suffices to overcome the challenge of finitude.[23]

The need for community, in the specific form I have suggested (contribution to the lives of others), grows out of our evolved psychology and the complex cultural history that has generated our sense of what is valuable.[24] It is an important, and deep, fact about our species that worthwhile lives meet the community constraint.[25] The obvious tension between that constraint and the demand for autonomy must, however, be acknowledged. History and anthropology supply ample evidence for seeing autonomy and community as antithetical — where one thrives, the other is confined. Hence, it may be objected, my account of the valuable life (and derivatively of social progress) is flawed through its attempt to combine irreconcilable goods.

[23] For further articulation of the approach adopted here, see chapter 3 of Philip Kitcher, *Deaths in Venice: The Cases of Gustav von Aschenbach* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013) and chapter 4 of Kitcher, *Life After Faith: The Case for Secular Humanism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014). The importance to us of connection to a human future is brilliantly presented by Samuel Scheffler in *Death and the Afterlife* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013). I see his perspective on these issues as complementing my own.

[24] Here, I rely on the genealogical account of ethics I have offered in Kitcher, *The Ethical Project* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

[25] It is not something that flows from the operation of "reason." My route to an emphasis on community is very different from that charted by Hegel (G. W. F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* [Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991]).

For valuable discussions of the relations between Hegel's approach and my Deweyan pragmatism, I am indebted to Robert Stern.

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An unsatisfactory response to the objection would fasten on the specific form of the community constraint. Demanding that valuable life plans endorse other-directed projects does not strictly entail that those life plans must conform to the lore and traditions of the surrounding community: hence, there is no inconsistency in conjoining this particular demand for community with the requirement of autonomy. Consistency should be only minimally reassuring, however. The polyvalence of our concept of community is not accidental. The ability to engage in joint endeavors with others is often dependent not simply on agreement on some common goal, but on sharing a far wider set of values and perspectives. To attempt to isolate a specific form of community and to declare it independent of any threat to autonomy is thus superficial.

A better response derives from Mill's emphasis on fostering a variety of lives. Distinguish *dogmatic* communities from *tolerant* communities. The former regard their lifeways as fixed, and demand conformity to them as a condition of participation; the latter recognize the possibility of progressive improvements to their lore and traditions, and consequently allow — even encourage — their members to engage in further "experiments of living." Tolerant communities also take pains to create opportunities for people whose overall perspectives may diverge in significant ways to find common ground and to undertake joint activities, directed at shared goals. They recognize a tension between autonomy and community, aiming to strike a balance between two desiderata. A world full of tolerant communities might even realize higher-level tolerance — a condition in which different communities see one another as conducting experiments on just how that balance should be struck. None would claim to know in advance exactly how much autonomy should be sacrificed to preserve community, but they would see a large human enterprise of exploring the contours of the valuable life.

This response points in a helpful direction. It is tempting to think of social progress as measured by its distance from an ideal state, one in which all members of the society live valuable lives. Conceiving social progress in this way requires a consistent picture of the valuable life. So, for someone sympathetic to the demands of autonomy and community, it poses the question, "What is the correct balance between the two?" My earlier (perhaps pedantic) survey of the logic of progress concepts was intended to liberate us from this line of inquiry. The values of autonomy and community are *not* readily combined into a single ideal.[26] There are various *possibilities* for synthesizing

[26] Given our current evidential perspective, we're entitled to claim that there's no ideal that combines them. Making that claim is compatible with supposing that future evidence, probably resulting from further "experiments of living," might lead to revision of this judgment, and to formulating an ideal. I regard the status of the claim as roughly equivalent to many of the theoretical generalizations confidently made in the mature sciences. Thanks to the referee for pressing me on this point.

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them by limiting the demands of each. We should be extremely dubious about whether there's any "optimal" compromise or even whether the idea of an "optimum" makes sense. And we might also wonder whether the framework in which this (post-Enlightenment) approach to the good life is currently couched needs to be transcended. But we can abandon the teleology, recognizing that social progress is identified in terms of promoting worthwhile human lives and that the post-Enlightenment concept of the worthwhile human life, while well-grounded in reflections on human experience, is — like everything else — subject to revision.

V. Social Progress as Pragmatic Progress

The human societies with which we are acquainted, as well as those we can realistically envisage for the near future, are all imperfect in their promotion of valuable lives for all their members. People have only limited opportunities to choose their life plans. The communities to which people belong are often eroded.[27] Many are deprived of the material resources and social support required for successful pursuit of their goals. I'll sum up the enormous variety of ways in which human existence falls short of the three conditions proposed in the previous section, by saying that all these lives are *confined*.

My concept of social progress is *not* the teleological notion of proximity to an ideal state in which the three conditions are perfectly satisfied. It seems impossible to articulate those conditions in a way that resolves the tensions among them. Instead I offer a simple pragmatic concept.

> Social progress consists in removing, or diminishing, the factors that confine.

This concept allows the possibility of social progress — indeed, it is generous in doing so. Confinement is likely to be a persistent feature of the human condition. So, in principle, social progress could continue indefinitely. There is no "perfect end." Moreover, as we proceed, it is unlikely that the standards by which we identify deficiencies and solutions will remain fixed. The concept of confinement will probably be refined, possibly even replaced. For the moment, however, relief from confinement, understood in terms of the three conditions I have suggested, serves as a well-grounded immediate goal.

The concept is not only pragmatic but local. It is intended to evaluate potential transitions from the current state. When some successor state is achieved, the concept — or, perhaps, some reconsidered refinement

[27] For telling sociological analysis of the decline of community in the United States, see Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000); and Putnam, *Our Kids* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015).

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of it — will scrutinize potential transitions from that successor state. So the process will continue. Social policy has no need of a global concept, or even an extended local concept. An evolving local pragmatic concept does the work required.

Thinking about social progress in this way generalizes the important theoretical (and practical) work of Amartya Sen.[28] Sen identifies social advance with the enhancement of citizens' *capabilities*. His list of capabilities — access to clean water, adequate nutrition, shelter, ability to preserve health, opportunities for education, and so forth — tends to concentrate on the basic material resources required for any kind of life to go on (a reasonable focus, given his concern for the plight of the developing world.) From my perspective, Sen identifies a partial list of the causes of confinement. The general concept of social progress should cast the net more widely, including the many subtle ways in which autonomy and community are deficient.

Because the conditions required for success, autonomy, and community so frequently lapse, my approach to the concept is generous in allowing opportunities for social progress. Generosity may well be seen as indefiniteness, or even evasion. There are apparently so many directions in which social progress from the present could go, and I have offered no instruments for rating them. No doubt, progressive policies should attend to the most severe forms of confinement. But how does anyone decide which those are? Actual policy decisions must consider a multidimensional field: there are numerous deprived individuals within any sizeable society, and, for each of them, there are particular, more or less intense, forms of confinement. Should societal resources be expended on relieving a common type of confinement, afflicting many, at the cost of neglecting the much more stringent confinement of an unfortunate few?

These are important questions. Before I address them directly, it's worth reiterating an earlier point. Issues about the *legitimacy* of a concept should be distinguished from questions about the *practical application* of that concept. Settling for some operational measure of social progress (one of the standard economic indices, for example) avoids hard questions about application at the risk of leaving the problematic features of our situation untouched. Nor is it particularly useful to try to resurrect some teleological concept of progress that will strike the "correct" balance among conflicting desiderata. For to fashion the ideal end involves addressing the same issues implicated in applying my pragmatic concept — and, as extra burdens, involves the task of working out the best route to the utopian future, committing us to that end, without considering how much we might learn along the way.

[28] See, in particular, Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Sen, *The Idea of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009). Sen, *The Idea of Justice* implicitly presents a pragmatic concept of progress.

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Instead, I suggest thinking of the constituent values as *diagnostic tools*, to be used in obtaining the clearest available view of our predicament. Surveying the current situation within a society, we observe lapses of autonomy, community, and success, sometimes found most intensely in particular subgroups, sometimes besetting almost everybody. The pragmatic solution to the problem of application starts from an attempt to construct an overall picture of these lapses, their sites (the sectors of the society most affected by them), and their severity. Ideally, that picture would form the basis for collective decision-making among representatives of all the actual varieties of confinement. Decision-makers would confront a set of concrete options for trying to remove particular factors that confine, they would be given the best current information about the consequences of pursuing those options, and they would endeavor to arrive at a course of action with which all parties could live. The pragmatic concept of social progress is applied by choosing to focus on those problems that a fully representative, well-informed, and mutually engaged set of deliberators would select as most crucial.[29] It seems plausible to suppose that applying the pragmatic concept in this way offers the best chances of achieving social progress as rapidly as possible.

In practice, of course, policy discussions can, at best, approximate the ideal. Often, the set of potentially affected parties — the "stakeholders" — is too large to make a representative conversation manageable. It will sometimes be possible, however, to begin from a reduction of the participants that all parties would reflectively accept. Some failures to achieve the conditions for a worthwhile life may be so dramatic that all members of the society, including those who suffer from lesser lapses, agree to limit the policy choices — and the parties represented — to a manageable set. Or the discussion may proceed in two (or more) stages, with an initial concentration on removing some current constraint that forces a hard choice — as, for example, when a society with a vast military budget debates the possibility of slashing the funds lavished on expensive weapons so that more resources are available to promote the quality of the citizens' lives. Once again, how to fashion approximations to the ideal conversation is a matter for experimentation. As with the natural sciences, we should expect not only to learn what makes for social progress, but also to learn how to learn about making social progress.[30]

Discussions, whether ideal or actual, would have to engage with contested concepts, working to understand the demands of autonomy,

[29] Mutual engagement is understood as a commitment to finding a solution that all parties can tolerate. See Philip Kitcher, *The Ethical Project* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), chap. 9, for more details.

[30] I have learned from (and been inspired by) some actual experiments in democratic decision-making. See, for example, Bruce Ackerman and James Fishkin, *Deliberation Day* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004); and James Fishkin, *When the People Speak* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

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equality, and community. The ambiguities of some of these concepts are well known.[31] Tacit commitment to a teleological view of progress fosters attempts to develop general principles connecting ideals to conditions for their realization. So, for example, it is sometimes suggested that genuine equality of opportunity requires social mobility, and that social mobility is only possible when inequalities with respect to material resources are not very large.[32] The pragmatic approach to social progress doesn't need such large generalizations. It recommends examining the connections as they might be present — or absent — in the situations of particular people whose lives are confined in specific ways.

I'll illustrate the point by focusing on the value of community, where the polyvalence of the concept appears less well appreciated.[33] At least the following strands can be distinguished. (1) Members are committed to making positive contributions to the lives of others; (2) Members share a set of values and priorities; (3) Members engage in a set of joint projects, aimed at shared goals; (4) Members share a set of cultural items; (5) Members stand in relations of mutual acknowledgment; (6) Members participate in the reproduction of the community (sustaining and passing on its institutions, values, and culture); (7) Members share a commitment to the progressive development of the community. Now there are obvious potential links among these strands. The previous section worried about a tension between community and autonomy, achieved by connecting (1) to (3) and (3) to (2), (under the denial of a particular version of (7)). Another suggestive linkage would connect (3) and (4).[34] Rather than attempting to demonstrate the rigidity of connections across abstract conceptual space, the pragmatic approach to social progress proposes to recognize the possibilities, and to explore them as they occur in particular social situations. Conceptions of community may vary across different social groups, with different strands occurring and being bound together in alternative ways. When members of a group use the value of community as a diagnostic tool to identify the forms of confinement that affect them, they rightly emphasize the features and functions of community that matter to their lives. Applications of general values — autonomy, equality, community — to their predicaments are appropriately articulated in local terms.

[31] See, for example, Amartya Sen's seminal discussion of equality (Amartya Sen, "Equality . . . of What?" *Tanner Lectures on Human Values* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1979).

[32] A general argument of this type can be found in John Dewey, "The Need of an Industrial Education in an Industrial Democracy" [1916], reprinted in *John Dewey: The Middle Works*, Volume 10 (Carbondale, IL: University of Southern Illinois Press, 1980), 137–43). 9. In my view, the attempt to generalize is at odds with Dewey's deeper commitment to pragmatism.

[33] In thinking about different features and functions of community, I have been much aided by the focus on the difficulties of achieving community in Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1983) and by the analysis of levels and varieties of community in (Andrew Mason, *Community, Solidarity and Belonging* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

[34] See, for example, Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition* (London: Polity Press, 1995).

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The pragmatic concept of social progress encourages opportunistic policy-making. Its opportunism brings obvious dangers in its train. Taking advantage of the chance to relieve confinement in one way may, at later stages, prevent other important modes of relief. Or it may generate new styles of confinement. The evolutionary analogy, useful in illustrating how a sequence of apparently progressive changes can lead to no overall progress[35] — even to regress — can make the concern concrete. Through the choices made to overcome present problems, the adaptations to current difficulties, societies, like organisms, become locked in. They eventually find themselves in a region of the adaptive landscape in which progressive possibilities are inaccessible.

Intelligent policy-making should be aware of this possibility, attuned to the danger that present choices can block later opportunities. The policy decisions of self-consciously progressive societies should thus find room for an important social role, that of critics who probe the path to the present, seeking to discover the moments at which immediately adaptive choices limited future options. The progressive society should encourage historical excavations, whether conceived as archeology or genealogy, aimed at revisiting the formation of institutions and roles, with an eye to recasting them in order to expand opportunities for further social progress. Philosophy, in the style of Marx, or Nietzsche, or Foucault, is an important component of — or complement to? — the pragmatic approach.

VI. Residual Questions

Many of the points sketched in the previous section require much fuller elaboration than I can offer here. It would be folly to suppose that I have provided a complete response to the central questions about the pragmatic concept and its application. I shall close, however, by dealing briefly with three smaller issues, each of which may legitimately provoke concerns.

Exploitation. Communities exist at many levels, and frequently one community is nested within broader communities.[36] Hence it is possible for confinement to be reduced within one group, while it is intensified within a more inclusive group. Under these circumstances, should we speak of social progress within the smaller community? Here, I suggest, we should distinguish cases and recognize different grades of social progress. Plainly, there are many instances of *exploitation*, in which a smaller community improves the lives of its members by means of actions known to have adverse effects on outsiders, people who belong to a more inclusive

[35] See the text to n. 7.

[36] The complexities of this for political life are a central theme of Mason, *Community, Solidarity and Belonging*.

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community, and in which the affected members of the broader community, if included within an ideal discussion, would not consent to the actions. When this occurs, the wrongness of the actions compromises the attribution of progress to the smaller community. If a fully representative discussion of the policy were to accept it, however, then, despite the adverse effects, there would be progress at both levels. If the adverse effects are accidental or unforeseen, there is *compromised* progress for the smaller community, and regress for the inclusive community: assuming that the fully representative discussion were to reject the damaging consequences, we should expect the smaller community to amend its actions once the causal structure of the situation and the predicaments of those affected became clear. The ideal form of social progress is one in which progress at any level is reflected in progress at all higher (more inclusive) levels. So I propose that social progress should seek to embody the *Cosmopolitan Stance*: no progress for some, without progress for all.[37] That stance might initially seem too demanding, even unnecessarily pious. I urge it to avoid bloody-minded efforts to obtain progress for the few without regard for the many, and to commend vigilance in attending to the consequences for more inclusive populations.

Accidents. My concept of social progress allows for societies to make progress even though the progressive change is unrelated to any policy they pursue. A small, poor, country is the only source for some substance; technological change generates a world-wide demand for the substance; the citizens become much richer, and their capabilities are considerably enhanced. Or an entrepreneur, intending only to make a profit, undertakes a venture with similar effects.[38] Should we allow progress to be a matter of accident? I claim that we should. The pragmatic point of clarifying social progress is to enable future social change to proceed more "intelligently" (in Dewey's idiom). But that is compatible with — perhaps even dependent on recognizing that the bulk of past progress has been achieved blindly or accidentally.

Myopia. My discussions, particularly in the previous section, have emphasized the benefits of seeking solutions to concrete problems that arise for particular societies, rather than aiming at general principles of

[37] As my distinction of cases suggests, this does *not* mean that relief of confinement for some cannot progressively be achieved at greater confinement for others. No Pareto condition is built into my concept of social progress. Rather the *costs* in terms of increased confinement must be accepted, under circumstances of ideal discussion, by those who represent the people who suffer them. Effectively, they must see the greater confinement of their own lives as a reasonable sacrifice for bringing relief to others. Typically, this will be because they recognize their own current predicament as considerably better than that of the people who enjoy the relief, so that the change in social conditions moves in the direction of equalizing life chances.

[38] This scenario is, of course, the context for Adam Smith's famous use of the "invisible hand" in Adam Smith, *Wealth of Nations* (New York: Modern Library, 2000 [1776]). The entrepreneur promotes the good of society, even though "it was no part of his intention."

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progressive change. Will this result in a form of myopia?[39] As attempts to realize the pragmatic concept of social progress proceed piecemeal, will they overlook the systematic causes of confinement? To protect against this genuine danger, I suggest that policy decisions should attend to the evolution of institutions and of the relations among them. The roles and institutions societies take for granted typically emerged as adaptations for overcoming the problems arising in particular contexts; they evolve under the pressures of different environments, and, as they do so, some of their functions can easily be compromised; further, institutions come into conflict with one another. The clash of institutions is easily visible in our times — in the pressures the imperative of economic growth exerts on systems of education and on the conditions of work, for two examples; in the decline of religion and, consequently, of opportunities for community, under the growth of knowledge, for a third. Institutional scrutiny and critique should be a central feature of efforts to relieve confinement.

My brief replies, in this section and its predecessor, are only the first words on important questions about social progress. This essay is a fragment of a much larger project, aimed at elaborating Deweyan themes for a twenty-first century context. I shall give Dewey the last word:

> It [the problem of progress: PK] is a problem of discovering the needs and capacities of collective human nature as we find it aggregated in racial and national groups on the surface of the globe, and of inventing the social machinery which will set available powers operating for the satisfaction of those needs.[40]

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[39] As David Schmidtz reminded me, one can lose sight of problems not only by taking too narrow a view, but also by retreating to a distant perspective, from which the difficulties become invisible. Serious efforts at social progress need to combine the distant vision with perception of the details.

[40] John Dewey, "Progress" [1916], reprinted in *John Dewey: The Middle Works*, Volume 9 (Carbondale, IL: University of Southern Illinois Press, 1980), 234–43, at 240.

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