

# Jumping the Hurdles of Moral Progress

Forthcoming in *Festschrift for Björn, Dan, and Toni*

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In their work on moral progress, Dan Egonsson and Toni Rønnow-Rasmussen both express a worry concerning possible problems caused by value incommensurability. I show that this worry can be alleviated. This is done by explicating the structure of the concept of moral progress and the structure of value comparatives. With a better understanding of the relevant concepts, it becomes clear that value incommensurability does not pose a dead-end for work on moral progress, but is rather a natural part of the normative domain, and consequently, it is merely one more hurdle to pass in our pursuit of moral progress.

My life as a philosopher can be defined by the valuable impact of Dan Egonsson, Björn Petersson, and Toni Rønnow-Rasmussen. My first encounter with practical philosophy was when I attended a lecture by Dan. His animated lecture not only revealed his passion for philosophy, but also sparked my passion for philosophy and the passion of the other 60 students in the lecture hall.<sup>1</sup> I met Toni later on in my studies when I was to write an essay on John Harris' Survival Lottery. It was my first longer essay in philosophy and Toni's encouragement combined with his critical questions made me realize that I too could write philosophy and be part of the world that I, until then, only had watched from the outside. When Björn a few months later introduced me to Derek Parfit's *Reasons and Persons*, it was obvious that there was no way back. The discussions we had in the classroom on transitivity, rough comparability, incommensurability, and lexical orderings laid the ground for

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<sup>1</sup> Later on in my career I had the burden of teaching the course that followed Dan's course. Needless to say, it was an impossible act to follow.

all my subsequent work in philosophy. It is clear that the three together with Wlodek Rabinowicz are fully responsible for my life in academia. Their influence continued in my doctoral studies. Toni was one of my supervisors and the value of his constant encouragement cannot be expressed in words, Björn's work as head of the department brought a sense of stability to the otherwise very unstable life of a doctoral student, and Dan's approach to life and philosophy was a valuable reminder of how to be grounded. A good example of their care for their students is how they developed a research program on moral progress. Their motivation to put in so much work in developing this was, as far as I can tell, mainly to help their doctoral students secure a job after their doctoral studies. With my background in value theory with a focus on value incommensurability, my role in the program was to write on the possible hurdles that potential incommensurabilities may cause in discussions on moral progress.

Unfortunately, the research program did not get funding, but some interesting work on the topic got published. Dan, for example, wrote an entry on "Moral Progress" for the International Encyclopedia of Ethics and Toni wrote an influential paper with the title "On Locating Value in Making Moral Progress". Both contain interesting discussions on the role of incommensurability. In this short paper, I will, as promised in the research application, provide my own thoughts on the role of incommensurability in moral progress.

## Hurdles for moral progress

The concept of moral progress may at a first glance seem straightforward and easy to grasp; moral progress is the change to a morally better state, such as the abolition of slavery, the advancement of women's rights, or an individual's development as a moral agent. However, according to Egonsson (2018), it is unlikely that we will reach a consensus on how to define the concept. The concept is closely entangled with our metaethical views and our normative and axiological stances; this makes the likelihood of reaching a consensus low. Indeed, the fact that we cannot agree on what is the correct moral theory will sometimes make it difficult to agree on whether there has been moral progress. This may, however, not be the only problem for judgements about moral progress. Egonsson (2018: 9) goes on to state that if you believe that moral values can be incomparable and incommensurable, then "you will most likely dismiss the possibility of a comprehensive judgment about progress in morality".

I take the worry to be, roughly, that a definition of moral progress must be spelled out in terms of an improvement, a later state of affairs being better than a previous state of affairs.<sup>2</sup> If two states of affairs are incomparable or incommensurable, then

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<sup>2</sup> This is a common view in the literature on the topic. See e.g., Macklin (1977).

they may not be related by an evaluative comparative relation such as “better than” and this would constitute a problem for work on moral progress.<sup>3</sup> Egonsson is not alone in finding incommensurability to be a threat to moral progress. It is, however, somewhat unclear how this threat should be understood.

Fortunately, Musschenga and Meyen (2017) gives some possible suggestions as to how we can interpret the potential threat of incommensurability. I will present them all since I believe that they are good characterizations of what, at first glance, may be believed to be the threats of incommensurability for moral progress. I will provide a critical discussion on each suggestion and, after clarifying the structure of the concept moral progress, I end up with my own interpretation of the potential threat of incommensurability for judgements about moral progress.

### *Lack of a positive value relation*

One possibility Musschenga and Meyen discuss is that the state of affairs, before a change, is incomparable to a state of affairs after the change. With “incomparable” they mean that there holds no basic positive value comparative between the two states of affairs. That is, neither state is better than, worse than, equally as good as, or on a par with the other state.<sup>4</sup> More specifically, there holds no such relation between the two states of affairs with regard to the relevant dimension of the comparison. In the example they discuss, the relevant dimension of the comparison is “freedom”. The thought is that a change can bring about both improvements and losses in terms of freedom but when we are to determine the overall change in freedom these improvements and losses will make it impossible to arrive at an evaluative judgment on the all things considered change in freedom. Consequently, it will be impossible to determine whether there has been moral progress with respect to freedom.

The example given by Musschenga and Meyen is, however, not convincing. Modernization can indeed bring about improvements and losses in terms of freedom but this does not establish that the two states of affairs will be incomparable with respect to freedom. Consider a person’s development as a badminton player. First, the person starts out as a poor player, but then slowly progresses and improves as a

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<sup>3</sup> The terms “incommensurable” and “incomparable” are in the philosophical literature used in many different ways. What most uses of the terms have in common is that they refer to some problems of comparison such as the lack of a common scale on which two alternatives can be placed or even the impossibility of attributing a comparative value relation to two alternatives. In this paper, I will not commit to any definition of the terms in question, but rather consider many different problems that may arise when we are to compare states of affairs. For more on possible definitions of “incomparable” and “incommensurable” see Andersson & Herlitz (2022) and Hsieh & Andersson (2021).

<sup>4</sup> See Chang (2002) for an argument for the possibility of parity. Strictly speaking this definition of incomparability leaves room for more than these four possibilities, but it is often assumed that these four value comparatives fully exhaust the space for basic positive value comparatives. See Rabinowicz (2008) for a discussion of the possibility of more than these four comparatives.

player. However, at some stage, the person has trained too much, gets tendonitis and thus becomes a worse badminton player. When the tendonitis has healed, her skills improve again. Some gains and some losses in the person's skills will take place over some time. These gains and losses will, however, at each moment, add up to a certain level of skill and there will be no problem to determine whether the person is a better or worse badminton player as compared to the first time the person played badminton. From this analogy, we learn that a series of improvements and deteriorations will not lead to a state that is incomparable to the first state.

There is, however, a closely related possibility that is, at least *prima facie*, more worrying. It could be that "freedom" is a complex and multidimensional concept and a change may bring about an improvement in one relevant dimension of freedom, but may also constitute a loss in another relevant dimension of freedom. Furthermore, it is possible that this concept does not provide us with a function to determine the overall amount of freedom.<sup>5</sup> The new state, that has come about due to the change, may thus not be better than the former state; there is no way for us to weigh these different dimensions and reach an all considered judgement about the freedom of the new state as compared to the former state.

### *Nonsubstitutability*

The second interpretation provided is that a change may bring about an improvement in one value at the cost of a loss in another value. Furthermore, it is possible that one value does not substitute the other; they are *nonsubstitutable*. Musschenga and Meyen exemplifies:

The value of human life, for instance, is thought to have a special status so that its loss cannot be compensated for by economic gains. It is often said that modern society has brought us more individual freedom, [but] also less community and solidarity. If the loss of community and solidarity cannot be compensated by the gain in freedom, these values are incommensurable. (2017: 10)

On the nonsubstitutability interpretation, the loss of one value cannot be compensated by the gains of another value. While this may be true, I believe that the more pressing and fundamental issue is how nonsubstitutability can come about. I believe that the answer can be found in the previous interpretation. On that interpretation, there was no function that would help us determine the overall amount of freedom in a state of affairs. If there is no function that can determine

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<sup>5</sup> Or more specifically: does not provide us with a positive account of the relation. The function may tell us that the two states are incomparable. Imagine the view that a state is better than another if and only if it is better in all dimensions, two states are equally as good if and only if they are equally as good in all dimensions, and if none of these things are the case the states are incomparable. Such a function would help us determine the relation between all possible states of affairs, but it does not always give us a positive account since "incomparable" is understood as the lack of a positive account.

how e.g., individual freedom, community and solidarity all contribute to the overall freedom it will result in nonsubstitutability.<sup>6</sup> In other words, this second interpretation seems to collapse into something similar to the interpretation I presented above.

### *No common scale*

The third, and final possibility Musschenga and Meyen mention, is that there may be no common unit of measurement. More specifically: “[t]wo values, such as pleasure and fairness, are incommensurable if there is no cardinal scale of value according to which both can be measured” (2017:10). I take this to mean that if our evaluation of moral progress involves values that cannot be placed on the same cardinal scale, it will be difficult to arrive at an all things considered judgement concerning possible moral progress from one state of affairs to another.

This worry seems, however, exaggerated; it may be that the values must be placed on a cardinal scale in order to arrive at a judgment on how *much* moral progress there has been, but in order for us to arrive at a judgment on whether there has been moral progress at all, an ordinal scale suffices. That is, we need only to know that one state is better than another, we need not to know how much better it is.

The worry that there is no ordinal scale at which both states can be placed is similar to the worry I have expressed above. I argued that there might not be a complete function to determine how different values contribute to the overall value of e.g., freedom and for that reason we cannot determine how the two states relate with respect to freedom. That is, they cannot be placed on an ordinal scale that ranks the states with respect to freedom. However, the suggestion that there is no common scale may be even more radical since it could be understood to claim that there is no ordinal scale *whatsoever* on which two states can be placed. This radical view should not be attributed to Musschenga and Meyen, but it nevertheless an interesting possibility that we will have reason to return to.

## The structure of moral progress

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<sup>6</sup> Note that on some interpretation of “substitutability” nonsubstitutability need not necessarily rule out the possibility of a function that can determine the overall value in a state of affairs. Theoretically speaking, it could be the case that e.g., community and solidarity cannot be compensated by the gain of individual freedom, but nevertheless, freedom is more valuable than community and solidarity, and thus a state of affairs with more individual freedom at the cost of community and solidarity would count as a morally progressed state of affairs. To give another example, it may be clear to me that a day with my family is more valuable than a day in solitude, but the latter does not fully substitute the former, certain valuable moments of a time in solitude will not be compensated by the values gained of spending a day with my family. This is, however, not the common interpretation in the literature on nonsubstitutability and incommensurability.

With these worries more fully fleshed out, it is possible to consider whether they cause a serious problem for research on moral progress. To address this issue we first of all need to have a better understanding of the structure of the concept. Progress is a multifaceted notion and the term is compatible with many adjectives. We have clarified what area of progress we are interested in by adding the qualifier “moral”. We have thus narrowed down the meaning somewhat, but the adjective “moral” is anything but specific; the fact that philosophers have struggled with the topic and produced ideas relating to the topic since at least 500 BCE shows its complexity and width. Fortunately, Egonsson (2018) gives us some guidance in understanding the formal features of the moral progress. He suggests that:

A statement of moral progress is about a change towards a morally better state and typically has the following structure:

$x$  has made (moral) progress regarding  $y$  in relation to  $z$ ,

Where  $x$  is the subject or maker of (moral) progress,  $y$  the matter of (moral) progress or what the progress consists in and  $z$  the dimension of comparison, that is, the relation between which the comparison is made. This dimension will concern different points in time but may also, according to some philosophers, be about different makers of progress.

This seems to be a promising start for understanding the concept. Interestingly, this specification of the concept mirrors the discussions in value theory, where scholars aim to explicate the structure of value comparisons. Indeed, most value theorists seem to accept that a statement such as “ $x$  is better than  $y$ ” is underspecified. It is believed that all value comparisons must proceed in some certain respect, call this the *Requirement for Specification*. This idea has been popularized by Ruth Chang.<sup>7</sup> She writes:

I will be assuming that all evaluative comparisons must proceed in some or other evaluative respect(s), what I call a ‘covering consideration.’ So, for example, Mozart cannot be better than Michelangelo *simpliciter* but only be better in some or other respect(s). ... Without a covering consideration in terms of which a comparison proceeds, a comparison is incomplete; saying that Mozart is better than Michelangelo *simpliciter* does not tell us whether he is better with respect to chess, spelling, or creativity. Put another way, all (binary) value relations are strictly three-place:  $X$  is better than  $Y$  with respect to  $V$ . Since explicit reference to a covering consideration in every instance is cumbersome, we omit such reference, but an appropriate covering consideration is always implied. (Chang 2002: 666)

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<sup>7</sup> Others have previously discussed ideas similar to this. For example, Peter Geach (1956) and Judith Jarvis Thomson (1997). How their ideas relate to the Requirement for Specification is, however, not fully clear. See Andersson (2016) for more on this.

After her seminal work on value relations most seemed to agree with her that there is a requirement to specify what we are to compare. However, as the requirement is characterized, it is rather unclear what sort of requirement it is. It is uncertain what strength it has and what meta-ethical commitments are entailed by it. This topic is not well explored; mostly it is just taken for granted that the comparisons must be specified. This is not the place to provide an in-depth examination of the structure of value relations but I will now briefly say what I take to be the nature of the requirement.

It seems reasonable that basic value comparatives have at least three relata. For that reason, there is a pragmatic requirement to specify what the relata are. Without the specification, we would not understand each other. Consider for example the following claim by Judith Jarvis Thomson:

[A]ll goodness is goodness in a way, and [...] if we do not know in what way a man means that a thing is good when he says of it ‘That’s good’, then we simply do not know what he is saying of it. Perhaps he means that it is good to eat, or that it is good for use in making cheesecakes, or that it is good for Alfred. If he tells us, ‘No, no, I meant that it is just plain a good thing,’ then we can at best suppose he is a philosopher making a joke. The same is true of betterness: it, too, is always betterness in a way. (Thomson 1997: 276.)<sup>8</sup>

In short: it will be difficult for us to fully understand what comparison you have in mind if you do not specify the covering consideration.<sup>9</sup> The requirement can consequently be seen as an instantiation of H. P. Grice’s cooperative principle (Grice 1989). That is, we need to be as informative as is required in the given context. Or as Grice argues you should “make your conversational contribution such as it is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged” (1989:26).

This is also true when we are to address the worries of incommensurability and moral progress. It is only by understanding the structure of value comparisons that we can understand how we can solve the possible tension caused by incommensurability. With the structure of moral progress and value comparatives clarified we can now return to the challenge posed by incommensurability.

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<sup>8</sup> As expressed in the previous footnote it is, however, not clear how Thomson’s claim relates to the Requirement for Specification. Thomson, for example, states that things can be “better for Alfred”, but the relata “for someone” does not seem to be what people have in mind when they use the term “covering consideration”. See Andersson (2016: fn 25) for more on this.

<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, some hold that it is a logical feature of “at least as good” that it is transitive. However, it is fully plausible that A is at least as good as B with respect to V, B is at least as good as C with respect to V and yet C is at least as good as A with respect to V’. If we did not specify the covering consideration the previous example would seem to show that the transitivity of “at least as good as” was violated.

## Jumping the hurdles

While Musschenga and Meyen present three interpretations of why incommensurability can be a hurdle for moral progress, I believe that these three interpretations collapse into two different possibilities. The first possibility is that when we are to consider the moral progress in terms of some specific covering consideration such as “freedom”, the changes involve certain losses in freedom, but also certain gains. Furthermore, the concept “freedom” does not provide us with a function that determinately specifies how these gains and losses should be aggregated or weighed in order to reach a conclusion on whether the change has amounted to an all things considered improvement in freedom or not. The covering consideration is underspecified in the sense that it does not provide a complete ranking of the possible state of affairs. That is, when asked whether there has been moral progress from the state of affairs A to the state of affairs B with respect to freedom, the change from A to B may involve many different dimensions of freedom, such as freedom of speech and freedom of religion, and consequently, it could be impossible to determine whether there has been an improvement.

The other and more radical possibility is that there is no aspect whatsoever to compare A to B with, i.e., there might not always be a specification such as “freedom” available. Or more generally, there is no ordinal scale at which both A and B can be placed. This could pose a problem for discussions on moral progress. The framework presented previously, however, gives us the tools to address these worries.

### *No complete ranking*

Concerning the first worry, we can always follow Grice’s suggestion: Since the context does not provide us with the relevant covering consideration, we must specify further in order to find a concept that gives us a function that determines whether there has been moral progress. There is always the possibility to consider a more precise concept in order to reach a judgement on whether there has been moral progress with respect to this more precise concept. That is, if we cannot determinately tell whether there has been moral progress with respect to freedom, we can specify the concept further and perhaps determine whether there has been moral progress with respect to e.g., personal freedom. To this, it could be objected that we are not interested in whether there has been moral progress with respect to personal freedom, but in whether there has been moral progress with respect to freedom simpliciter.<sup>10</sup> This wish is understandable, but incommensurability does not pose a threat in these cases. If it is the case that A and B are incommensurable with respect to freedom, i.e., if it is not the case that A or B is determinately better than

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<sup>10</sup> An insightful comment from Jakob Werkmäster prompts me to remind the reader that, following Egonsson’s definition, moral progress does not consist in a random change from one state to another, but that there must be an intentional maker of this change for it to count as moral progress.



the other with respect to freedom, nor the case that they are determinately equal in this respect, then there clearly has not been moral progress from A to B. Or at least it is indeterminate whether there has been moral progress. As Egonsson (2018) has pointed out, moral progress involves a change to something better. When there is incommensurability, we cannot determinately judge that a betterness relation obtains between two states, and consequently we cannot determinately say there has been moral progress.

In this context, incommensurability poses no problem. Compare this to discussions on incommensurability in axiology. In those discussions, the possible threat incommensurability poses to rational choice is often highlighted. Roughly, if rational choice is grounded on positive value comparatives such as “at least as good as”, then how can rational choice be possible in the face of incommensurability?<sup>11</sup> The same problem does not occur in discussions on moral progress. The fact that there is incommensurability could even act as a motivator; if we have not clearly morally progressed, then this should motivate us to reach a state of affairs that is determinately better than a previous state of affairs. That is, incommensurability can encourage us to progress as individuals and as a collective.<sup>12</sup>

### *No common scale*

More, however, needs to be said about the second worry. First, it is surprising that no covering consideration whatsoever is applicable. It should be possible to compare two states of affairs in some evaluative respect. That there is *no* common scale that allows a comparison seems to be a radical claim. This possibility seems especially unlikely in discussions on moral progress. Consider, for instance, the moral progress of a society. How can it not be possible to compare state A with state B with respect to e.g., the emancipation of women, labor rights, or non-discrimination against children? It seems likely that we can always make some comparison of states A and B, and thus it seems radical to argue that no covering consideration whatsoever is applicable.

This possibility is, however, considered in detail by Toni Rønnow-Rasmussen when he discusses the possibility that there might not be a “basic value perspective” that can be used when choosing between two alternatives.

For instance, consider the following scenario: If you spend all of your salary on an expensive hobby of yours, it will be good for you. Call this option A. But you might instead send some of your money to charity; this would be a good thing to do, although not necessarily good for you. Call this B. Now, suppose you are not sure what to do, and you cannot do both. So you would like to be able to not merely

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<sup>11</sup> See Chang (2016) for more on this view.

<sup>12</sup> At least incomparability between a previous state and the present state does not hinder further moral progress. See Kitcher (2011: 242-245) for more on this.

haphazardly have to decide between A and B; you would like to settle this issue in an unbiased way by comparing them to each other. By “unbiased”, I mean that you don’t want to settle in advance which of the two options (A or B) should be ruled out. (2016:143)

With this, Rønnow-Rasmussen does not argue for what I claim to be the radical claim that no covering consideration whatsoever is applicable. His claim is more balanced as he believes we in fact can compare A with B.

[W]e can for instance say that B is better than A with respect to your making moral progress. But, then again, A is better than B with respect to your enjoyment. The first comparison seems to be one with respect to something that is good, period, namely making moral progress, while the latter is done in terms of giving you pleasure, i.e., something that is good-for you. But if you want to compare these options in an unbiased way precisely because you cannot make up your mind about whether to realize what is good or what is good-for you, it is not clear how you should proceed. (2016:143)

The problem is not that there is no covering consideration available, but that it is not clear to you which covering consideration you should apply.

Whatever covering value you introduce here will exemplify either one of three possible values: either it will be a good, period or something that is good-for you or it will be a complex consisting of something that is both good, period and good for you. As to the two former possibilities, they seem not to be consistent with an unbiased comparison. So although A and B certainly in one sense are comparable, given the premises I am discussing here, it is not quite clear that A and B are in fact comparable in all cases; the comparison will in some cases be biased and so in those cases, it cannot be represented in an unbiased way. And if that is the case, we are not in the position to make the kind of comparison that we set out to do. This suggests that, just as we might want to say that x and y are incommensurable in the sense that we cannot represent these values by a cardinal unit of measure, there is another sense of incommensurable in which we cannot represent these values by an unbiased covering value (i.e., a value that does not bias the comparison).”(2016:144).

Rønnow-Rasmussen’s example involves certain value concepts that are normatively irreducible in the sense that they cannot be understood in terms of each other. Furthermore, there is no more fundamental normative concept that both are reducible to. This means that these concepts cannot even be placed on the same ordinal scale.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> This is of a much-discussed idea. While Rønnow-Rasmussen places the discussion in the realm of moral progress, similar examples have been presented by others, most notable perhaps by Henry Sidgwick in his discussion about the Dualism of Practical Reason. Roughly, Sidgwick (1874:507-509) argued that what is morally right can sometimes conflict with what is prudential right. Our duty

The reasoning developed above is, however, also applicable to the worry expressed by Rønnow-Rasmussen. That is, we must determine whether we are interested in moral progress, period, or moral progress for a specific person, only with such a specification can we arrive at an answer on whether there has been moral progress. However, Rønnow-Rasmussen might want to dig his heels in and argue that he wants to know whether there has been moral progress in an unbiased way. To this, it is more challenging to produce an answer.<sup>14</sup>

Remember, we want to know how two states of affairs relate to each other and it is possible that one state of affairs is better with respect to “good for” and the other with respect to “good, period”. Let us also assume that we do not wish to compare these states of affairs in terms of “good for” or “good, period”. If these are irreducible to a common denominator there will be no answer as to how they relate. At least they are not reducible to a common denominator that is of relevance for the purpose of determining whether there has been moral progress.<sup>15</sup> Where does this leave us? Above I argued that if there had been moral progress, we would be able to tell if a betterness relation holds between the two states under consideration, and if no such relation holds, then there has not been any moral progress. This line of argument does, however, not seem satisfactory as a response to Rønnow-Rasmussen. His worry is that there is no way to determine whether there has been moral progress in an unbiased understanding of “better than” and “moral progress”. There is no unbiased value comparative to plug into our definition of “moral progress” and consequently, we cannot provide an unbiased definition of moral

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and our self-interest are derived from different basic principles and are thus normatively irreducible. This gives rise to a dualism of practical reason that can in some occasions give rise to conflicting requirements. Another good exposition of this can be found in Nagel (2012:133) ”This great division between personal and impersonal, or between agent-centered and outcome-centered, or subjective and objective reasons, is so basic that it renders implausible any reductive unification of ethics –let alone of practical reasoning in general. The formal differences among these types of reasons correspond to deep differences in their sources. We appreciate the force of impersonal reasons when we detach from our personal situation and our special relations to others [...] The two motives come from two different points of view, both important, but fundamentally irreducible to a common basis.”

<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, the challenge is similar to the challenge posed by some intertemporal comparisons (see Andersson “Intertemporal Hard Comparisons”). An example of an intertemporal comparison could be if we are to compare an object that yet does not exist with something that exists now, or to compare the existing object with an object that used to exist but is now destroyed. What could make comparisons such as this problematic is that it is not clear what perspective the agent ought to adopt. The agent exists here and now. Does that mean that the agent is to decide, given the current circumstances, the evaluative norms of present society, the epistemic situation of the time, and so on, on what to be the best? Taking such a perspective is to be biased towards the present. Sometimes this might be the correct approach but in other circumstances the comparison might be such that she ought to be impartial. Rønnow-Rasmussen’s worry is not an intertemporal problem per se but it shows a structural similarity: what perspective ought we to take?

<sup>15</sup> This would in fact constitute an example of ”non-comparability” see Andersson “The possibility of Incomparability” for more on these examples.

progress. To respond to this worry by stating that there has been no moral progress in the unbiased understanding of the term, is to misconstrue the worry.

With this it is clear that none of the above suggested strategies for dealing with incommensurability in the domain of moral progress will amount to a satisfactory answer to Rønnow-Rasmussen's worry. The question of relevance now is whether his worry actually constitutes a problem for philosophical work on the concept of moral progress. The answer is that it does not. What it at most shows, is that moral progress mirrors structures found on more fundamental levels. If "good, period" and "good for" lack a common denominator then, naturally, moral progress with respect to good, period and moral progress with respect to good for, also lack a common denominator; that is, they are two irreducible normative concepts. All discussions of moral progress must thus be either in terms of "good for" or in terms of "good, period". And if one holds that there is only one true basic normative concept, "good, period" or "good for" and it is unclear how one is reduced to the other, then this is not a problem for discussions on moral progress per se, but a much more troubling problem for normative theory in general.

It should also be noted that the idea that there is a single criterion of moral progress, as utilitarians may argue, can be questioned. Adherents of other normative theories should not find the view that several criteria are of importance when evaluating moral progress to be surprising.<sup>16</sup> For example, those who agree with Martha Nussbaum (2011) that there are ten central capabilities that ought to be reached for a person to live a good life, would find this to be a natural claim. These capabilities are understood to be irreducible and thus it is implicitly assumed that there is no overall concept of moral progress, but moral progress can only be measured with reference to one of these capabilities.<sup>17</sup>

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have presented alleged problems incommensurability causes for moral progress. By providing an explication of the concepts involved it was shown why these prima facie problems are no real challenges for a discourse on moral progress. In some cases, the instantiation of value incommensurability shows that there has been no moral progress and in other cases, a specification of what dimension of moral progress we have in mind must be given. Furthermore, this discussion shows that the dimensions of moral progress mirror the distinctions that

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<sup>16</sup> See Sauer et al (2021) for a good overview of the merits of a multicriteria approach to moral progress and Kitcher (2021) for a recent discussion on "the many modes of moral progress".

<sup>17</sup> Of course, this does not rule out the possibility that these sometime may overlap. There could sometimes be a "happy coincidence" such that according to all central values or capabilities there has been moral progress. I am grateful to Anders Herlitz for pointing out this possibility to me.

can be made in value theory between different kinds of value such as “good, period” and “good for”. Features that belong to the evaluative landscape are not to be treated as dead ends when developing a coherent understanding of moral progress, rather they are natural hurdles that need to be passed. Just as Björn, Dan and Toni showed me how to tackle the hurdles of academia and progress as a philosopher, I have now shown how we can deal with conceptual hurdles of moral progress.<sup>18</sup>

## References

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<sup>18</sup> I wish to thank Mattias Gunnemyr, Anders Herlitz, Wlodek Rabinowicz and Jakob Werkmäster for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this chapter. My work on this chapter was funded by the Swedish Research Council grant number 2018-06698.

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