The Shape of History

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Abstract: Some philosophers believe in progress: they think that our current situation is better than that of our ancestors and that future generations will fare even better. Others believe in decline: they argue that the human condition has deteriorated and will continue to do so. What has been neglected, however, is a purely normative question of whether it is better if the history of humanity displays a pattern of improvement rather than deterioration, holding other things equal. Many people have the intuition that it is. This paper offers a theoretical rationale for this judgment which appeals to a broadly conservative view about value and explores the implications of this view for matters related to the future of humanity.

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1. Introduction[1]

Questions about the condition of humanity and its trajectory are deeply rooted in the Western intellectual tradition. In the last 2,500 years, many thinkers have expressed belief in progress. For example, Immanuel Kant asserts in "Theory and Practice" that the

> [H]uman race is continually advancing in civilization and culture as its natural purpose, so it is continually making progress for the better in relation to the moral end of its existence, and that this progress although it may be sometimes interrupted, will never be entirely broken off or stopped.[2]

Other authors believe in decline: they argue that the human condition has deteriorated and will continue to do so. Famously, the archaic poet Hesiod writes in *Works and Days* about a 'golden race' that populated the earth before us:

> [T]hey lived like gods without sorrow of heart, remote and free from toil and grief: miserable age rested not on them; but with legs and arms never failing

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[2] Similar sentiments are expressed in the writings of Lucretius, Seneca, Augustine, Newton, Boyle, Comte, Hegel, Darwin, Marx, Spencer, and many others. For helpful comparative discussions of these views, see Bury (1921), Arendt (1963), Nisbet (1980), and Lange (2011).

> they made merry with feasting beyond the reach of all evils. When they died, it was as though they were overcome with sleep, and they had all good things; for the fruitful earth unforced bare them fruit abundantly and without stint.[3]

This disagreement concerns a set of largely *descriptive* questions: whether the human condition is improving or deteriorating, as what drives this change, and where it leads.[4] What has been neglected, however, is a purely *normative* question: whether an improving history is better than a deteriorating history, and why.

To get a grip on this issue, consider two ways in which the condition of humanity (or a particular society) could change over time.

> *Progress*. Our history begins in the depths but has an upward trend: hardship in the early years, mixed fortune in the middle period, followed by flourishing at the end of our time.
>
> *Decline*. Our history begins at the heights but has a downward trend: an early period of flourishing, mixed fortune in the middle period, followed by hardship at the end of our time.

These scenarios are permutations of each other—in the sense that for every period of flourishing in one course of history, there is exactly one such period in the other, and so on—which suggests that they are equally good. However, many people have the intuition that the former course of history is better. The challenge is to provide a compelling theoretical rationale for this judgment.

This paper offers a solution to this puzzle which is rooted in a broadly conservative view about value familiar from the writings of G. A. Cohen (2012).

The discussion is structured as follows. Section 2 argues that we cannot solve the puzzle about the shape of history simply by extending one of the popular answers to a structurally analogous puzzle about the significance of a life's shape. Section 3 puts forward a novel conservative account. On this account, progress is better than decline when and because these courses of history differ in terms of whether certain valuable elements of our culture—such as important traditions, great works of art, just institutions, scientific knowledge, and relations of equality—have been adequately conserved from one generation to the next. Section 4 then defends this

[3] This point of view can also be found in the work of Tocqueville, Burckhardt, Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, and Weber.

[4] Of course, any talk of improvement must involve some evaluative standard, so these questions are not *entirely* descriptive.

account from three objections. Finally, section 5 explores a set of implications for matters related to the future of humanity.

A couple of assumptions before we begin. In the first place, let's assume that the relevant changes occur from one *generation* to the next (rather than, say, from one millennium to the next) and that we are concerned with *the history of humans* (and not animals or possible non-human descendants of ours). Let's also adopt a *pluralistic theory of value* of states of affairs which recognizes not just aggregate personal value but also impersonal values such as equality, accumulation of knowledge, existence of beautiful artworks, or ecological preservation.[5] While neither of these assumptions is essential, they will make the ensuing discussion more tractable.

2. Three candidate accounts

The puzzle about the shape of humanity's history is a structural analogue of a more well-known puzzle about the significance of a life's shape. It is therefore natural to begin our inquiry by examining whether we can solve the former puzzle by extending one of the popular answers to the latter puzzle. This section argues that we cannot, but that we can nonetheless learn something valuable from these failed attempts.

The puzzle about the significance of a life's shape goes as follows. Consider two ways in which your life might go.

> *Improving Life*. Your life begins in the depths but has an upward trend: misery in the early years, mixed fortune in the midlife, followed by flourishing in the old age.
>
> *Deteriorating Life*. Your life begins at the heights but has a downward trend: an early period of flourishing, mixed fortune in the midlife, and misery in the old age.

These lives are permutations of each other, which suggests that they are equally good. Still, many people have the intuition that the former life is better for you.[6] The challenge is to find a compelling account of this judgment.

It should be easy to see that the puzzle about the significance of a history's shape is structurally analogous to the puzzle above. The obvious difference is that we are not asked to consider the relationship between how well any given generation fares and

[5] This view was popularized by Moore (1903). For an extensive treatment see Temkin (2012).

[6] This is intuition is recorded in the literature by Slote (1983), Bigelow et al. (1990), Velleman (1991), Kamm (1998; 2003), Portmore (2007), Temkin (2012), Kauppinen (2012), Glasgow (2013), Dorsey (2015), and Hirose (2015).

the overall value of an entire course history, but rather the relationship between how good a person's life is at any given time and how good it is for them overall.

But the analogy goes deeper than that. It is common to think about the history of humanity as if it was going through stages characteristic of a single life. For example, Toby Ord (2020, p. 21) writes:

> If we think of one million years [the average lifespan for a mammalian species] in terms of a single, eighty-year life, then today humanity would be in its adolescence—sixteen years old; just coming into our power; just old enough to get ourselves into serious trouble. (2020, p. 21)[7]

This imagery suggests that we might be able to find a unified solution to both puzzles. With this in mind, let's consider three popular accounts of the significance of a life's shape.

The first is *the Temporal Location Account* due to Michael Slote, to whom the contemporary literature on the shape of a life can be traced. He writes:

> When a personal benefit or good occurs may make a difference to how fortunate someone is (has been), quite independently of the effects of such timing in producing other good things and of the greater importance we attach to the distinctive goals and interests of certain life periods. And I believe, in particular, that what happens late in life is naturally and automatically invested with greater significance and weight in determining the goodness of lives. (1983, p. 23)

That is, any given good—an episode of pleasure, a loving relationship, an extraordinary achievement, etc.—contributes more to the personal goodness of a life if it occurs in one's adulthood or old age rather than in one's youth.

This view has a straightforward extension to the puzzle about the shape of history. Slote could assert that an improving history is better than a deteriorating history because what happens later in history likewise has greater weight in determining its overall value. In particular, he might claim that it's more important that people have good lives, that relations of equality obtain between members of the moral community, or that people act justly later in history than at its beginning.

Before we examine the plausibility of this account, let's introduce another popular view: *the Pattern Account*. Joshua Glasgow characterises its core premise as follows:

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[7] See also Kavka (1978) and, for a critical perspective, Lenman (2002).

> [W]hen I go from a high level of momentary well-being to a low level of momentary well-being, that *itself* is bad for me. Losing is not fun at all. And what goes for losses goes for gains, too. When my well-being improves, this transition is itself good for me. (2013, p. 668)[8]

This view, too, can be easily extended to the puzzle about the significance of a history's shape. Its proponents could assert that an improvement in terms of *any* value—aggregate personal value, equality, epistemic value, aesthetic value, etc.—is in itself good. And likewise for deteriorations. Indeed, the idea behind the Pattern Account can be traced to Franz Brentano, who proposes a general principle which he terms *bonum progressionis*:

> Let us think of a process which goes from good to bad or from a great good to a lesser good; then compare it with one which goes in the opposite direction. The latter shows itself as the one to be preferred. This holds even if the sum of the goods in the one process is equal to that in the other. (1973, p. 176).

An undeniable attraction of the Temporal Location Account and the Pattern Account is their simplicity. But this feature comes at the expense of extensional adequacy: in at least three contexts, these two views simply *prove too much*.

First, consider a scenario discussed by Johann Frick:

> Imagine a world in which each generation of humans dies and vanishes without trace before the next one is born (perhaps, like mayflies, each generation of humans lays eggs before its death, but disappears before their offspring hatched). Each new generation lives without knowledge of previous generations. (2017, p. 362)

Frick invokes this possibility in his discussion of our reasons to ensure the survival of humanity. He takes it to suggest that what we have a reason to do is not (or at least not merely) to ensure that the *human species* continues into the future, but rather that *humanity*—with its cultures, languages, and bodies of knowledge—does.

This case also tells us something important about the significance of a history's shape. Consider two ways in which things might go in the mayflies world. In the first variant, members of the first generation of humans have mediocre lives but each successive generation fares better than the previous one, and the last crop of humans flourishes. In the second variant, the first generation flourishes but each successive generation

[8] See also Kamm (1998; 2003), Temkin (2012), and Hirose (2015).

does less well than the preceding one, and the last crop of humans has mediocre lives. The fate of each generation, let's assume, is completely independent of the actions of the previous generations: perhaps what causes the quality of life to improve and deteriorate, respectively, are changes to the frequency of extreme weather events beyond human control.

What should we think about this pair of cases? The Temporal Location Account and the Pattern Account both imply that the first variant is better. However, it seems to me that these two courses of history are equally good. The fact that the best things happen to occur later in history and the fact that there is a pattern of improvement seem completely irrelevant when successive generations, and their fates, are completely independent from each other. Call this *the Independence Objection.*

There is a second, related objection. Consider a world very much like ours at the present time: tightly integrated and with a rich array of traditions, languages, art, and scientific projects. Suppose that these bonds and engagements remain more or less unchanged throughout the course of history. What finds alteration, however, is the hedonic aspect of people's lives. In the first variant of history, the first generation experiences a lot of pleasure, but each successive generation enjoys a bit less, and the last one only a modest amount. In the second variant, the first generation experiences a modest amount of pleasure, but each successive generation enjoys a bit more. In both cases, the total amount of pleasure experienced by the humanity is the same. Suppose further that this change is due to something trivial: perhaps the tastiness of fruit or how beautiful the sunsets are.

The Temporal Location Account and the Pattern Account both imply that the second scenario is better. This is because the more intense pleasures are experienced later in history, and so there is a discernible pattern of improvement. But, once again, this verdict does not seem right. When the only variation between an improving history and a deteriorating history concerns simple pleasures, we are indifferent between them. Call this *the Simple Pleasures Objection*.

There is a third category of scenarios that we should consider. Imagine, first, *a civilization of explorers* who pride themselves on travels to uncharted territories, ascents of the highest mountains, and crossings of the largest deserts. Since there are only so many places to explore, we can safely assume that the greatest achievements of this civilization take place early in their history and then taper off.

Compare this with *a civilization of inventors* whose primary orientation is towards technological advancement. Since there is no apparent limit on what can be created and since scientific discoveries tend to build upon each other, we can plausibly assume that their most significant accomplishments occur late in history.

According to the Temporal Location Account and the Pattern Account, the second course of history is better since it features improvement. But this seems to me to be a mistake. If we set aside possible disputes about the relative value of their pursuits, a deteriorating history of the civilization of explorers seems no worse than an improving history of a civilization of inventors. This is because, in either case, the pattern of temporal value fits with the nature of the civilization's collective projects. Call this *the Fitting Pattern Objection*.

In addition to showing that the Temporal Location and the Pattern Account won't do, the preceding discussion also carries a more general lesson. The original intuition, that progress is better than decline regardless of what happens in these two courses of history, turns out to be incorrect. The refined intuition is that an improving history is *typically* better than a deteriorating history, and this is what we must ultimately explain.[9]

Turn now to the third popular view about the significance of a life's shape: *the Narrative Account*. It holds that the shape of a life indicates the presence of certain narrative relations between discrete events in one's life which can affect the overall value of a life. David Velleman (1991), who defends this view, gives two examples of such narrative relations, one concerning learning from one's mistakes and the other concerning the importance turning past efforts into a success.

> A life in which one suffers a misfortune and then learns from it may find one equally well-off, at each moment, as a life in which one suffers a misfortune and then reads the encyclopedia. But the costs of misfortune are merely offset when the value of the latter life is computed; whereas they are somehow cancelled entirely from the accounts of the former. (p. 54)
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> [E]vents in a person's life can borrow significance from both preceding and succeeding events. A particular success can be either a windfall or well-earned reward, depending on the amount of effort that preceded it; the expenditure of a particular effort can be either a good investment or a waste depending on the degree of success that ensues. (p. 57)

[9] This is analogous to how discussions of other philosophical issues tend to proceed. For example, one might start with the intuition that death is bad for a person who suffers it and, upon closer inspection, discover that it is not always, but only typically, bad for them. The task then shifts to explaining this refined intuition. For instance, the popular deprivation account says that death is bad for a person when and because it deprives them of a valuable future.

It is in virtue of such narrative relations that an improving life is typically better than a deteriorating life, which is meant to sufficiently explain our original intuition about this comparison.[10]

Extending this position to the significance of a history's shape may not seem as straightforward as it was in the case of the previous two accounts. At first blush, humanity is not an agent in the same sense that a single person is: it does not expend effort, achieve success, or read the encyclopaedia. That said, we should recognize that we sometimes say things like 'humanity has learned from its past mistakes', or 'this generation is thwarting the efforts of our predecessors'. Insofar these ascriptions make sense—and that might require us to accept a notion of collective agency that is both synchronic and diachronic—there might be theoretical room for an analogous explanation of the significance of a history's shape. In particular, proponents of the Narrative Account could say that the shape of a history indicates the presence of certain narrative relations between discrete events in our history, and that it is in virtue of such relations that an improving history is typically better than a deteriorating history.

Unlike the previous two views, the Narrative Account does not imply that an improving history is always better than a deteriorating history, and so avoids proving too much. In particular, there appears to be no difference in terms of the relevant narrative relations when successive generations are independent from each other, when the only thing that changes over time is the hedonic aspect of people's lives, or when the pattern of temporal value aligns with our projects.

However, in a range of cases, the Narrative Account *proves too little*. The following pair of cases will illustrate that.

> *Abandoned Equality*: In the early stages of history, humanity enjoys a high degree of equality between members of the moral community. Over the years, however, these relations crumble and each subsequent generation is less equal.
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> *Gained Equality*: In the early stages of history, there is a high degree of inequality but each subsequent generation greater equality.

Let's assume that these histories are otherwise similar: for example, people do not realize the world is getting less equal or this realization does not distress them. Even with these assumptions, Gained Equality seems better than Abandoned Equality. There is just something regrettable about the failure to maintain relations of equality

[10] Variants of this view have also been endorsed by McMahan (2002), Portmore (2007), Kauppinen (2012), and Dorsey (2015).

between people. However, the Narrative Account offers no apparent explanation for this. After all, these two scenarios need not differ in terms of whether later generations learned from the mistakes of the earlier ones or whether particular projects started by earlier generations were later successfully completed. We can call this *the Incompleteness Objection*.

Of course, proponents of the Narrative Account might try to fend off this objection by postulating further narrative relations. But that approach runs the risk of foregoing an important theoretical virtue of explanatory unity. Even the two narrative relations originally invoked by Velleman—learning from past mistakes and turning efforts into an eventual success—appear to lack a distinctive common feature that could help explain their evaluative significance. And the more items we add to the list of relevant narrative relations, the more difficult it will be to find common ground between them. This is important because an account of the shape of history should ideally offer a unified treatment of all relevant cases. Call this *the Lack of Unity Objection.*

Overall, although each of the three discussed accounts has a *coherent* extension to the puzzle about the shape of history, none of these extensions is *compelling*.

3. The Conservative Account

The discussion of the previous section was not in vain, however. At the minimum, the five problems identified there serve as a set of desiderata which a fully satisfactory account of the shape of history must be able to satisfy. But they also tell us where to start looking for such an account.

To see that, recall Frick's suggestion that what we have a reason to ensure is not that the *human species* survives, but rather that *humanity* does. The preceding discussion supplies us with a complementary insight: the shape of history appears to have evaluative significance when it has something to do with the transmission and sustenance of various valuable elements of our culture from one generation to the next, be it traditions, collaborative projects, art, or relations of equality.

These aspects of the human condition have something important in common. They call for loyalty or commitment. This feature suggests that we may be able to explain the significance of a history's shape by appealing to a broadly conservative view about value espoused, in different contexts, by the likes of Samuel Scheffler (2007; 2013; 2018), G. A. Cohen (2012), Jacob Nebel (2015; 2022), and Johann Frick (2017). It holds that we have a distinctive reason to conserve certain non-instrumentally valuable things, such as traditions and architectural wonders. At the minimum, this means that we should not destroy them even when they could be replaced by similar things of equal, or even greater, value. By contrast, we have no reason to preserve

things which are merely instrumentally valuable, such as a generic $10 bill when it could be replaced by another $10 bill. Call this view *Conservatism about Value*.

The remainder of this section explains the details of this view and argues that it provides the most compelling solution to our puzzle. Roughly, the key claim is that the shape of a history indicates whether certain non-instrumentally valuable things have been conserved or neglected, and that it is in virtue of such differences that an improving history is better than a deteriorating history.

Conservatism about Value has a number of features which are worth highlighting in the present context. First, conservative reasons can be grounded in a more fundamental normative truth. Things which are non-instrumentally valuable seem to command certain kinds of responses from members of the moral community. Depending on the nature of the valuable thing, this may involve holding specific attitudes or taking particular actions, such as respecting, protecting, conserving, or savouring the valuable thing. Thus, conservative reasons appear to be *fitting response-based*: we have a reason to conserve valuable things when and because this is a fitting response to their value.[11]

Second, conservative reasons are *defeasible*. Although there is a *pro tanto* reason to conserve valuable things, we do not always have an *overall* reason to do so. If a new tradition or work of art would be vastly more valuable (and not just slightly so), then creating it at the expense of an existing one would plausibly be what you ought to do. After all, the prospective value of the potential replacement also confers a reason on us, which might prove to be stronger.

Third, a few words about the content of conservative reasons. Conservatism about Value tells us that we have a reason to conserve things like valuable traditions and great works of art. At the minimum, this means that we have a reason to preserve these things in the face of replacement. But the view is more nuanced than that.

For one thing, we rarely have a reason to preserve a valuable object 'as is'. Note that any valuable object is composed of many features which have different valence. Plausibly, we only have a reason to preserve the features which are *value-conferring*. For example, we have no reason to preserve a layer of dust that has gathered on the surface of Picasso's *Les Demoiselles D'Avignon*. Moreover, even with respect to those features which are value-conferring, it can sometimes be appropriate to allow them

[11] See Cohen (2012) and Frick (2017) for this view. In a recent paper, Nebel discusses two other ways of grounding conservative reasons: in our valuing attitudes, as proposed by Scheffler (2007; 2013; 2018), and in the concern for the good of a valuable thing, as suggested by Nebel himself. Each of these views could in principle support the account developed here, but it will be convenient to refer to a specific one.

to change. For instance, cultures and languages naturally evolve over time and to stop this process would be to threaten their very survival.[12]

For another, conservative reasons can go beyond merely ensuring that valuable things continue to exist. First, when someone lets a very valuable thing deteriorate so much that it survives in a barely good state, their behaviour clearly falls short of being a fitting response. This suggests that it is important to preserve valuable things *in a flourishing state*. Second, it is essential to *cultivate* things like traditions and projects. For example, a society which has not run any malaria research programmes in years can hardly call itself committed to fighting that disease.

So much for the gist of Conservatism about Value. To answer the puzzle about the significance of a life's shape, we also need a principle that bridges the gap between what we have reasons to do and what makes a state of affairs valuable. This is because Conservatism about Value is cashed out in deontic rather than axiological terms: it says that we have a *reason* to conserve a valuable thing, but not that it would be *better* to do so. Indeed, one might think that conservative reasons stand in opposition to considerations of value: for example, we should preserve an impressive artwork even though replacing it with a different one would make things better.

However, all we need to do to reconcile conservative reasons and considerations of value is to adopt a less restrictive view about what makes a state of affairs valuable. As Derek Parfit (2016, Ch. 57) suggests

> It would often be intrinsically bad to treat people in certain ways, such as deceiving or coercing them, or breaking promises that we have made to them. These acts are intrinsically bad … in the sense that they are in one way bad even when they have no bad effects.

Of course, Parfit's discussion focuses on the moral significance of treating *people* in certain ways. But this seems to be just one instance of a broader issue: the moral significance of responding appropriately to non-instrumentally valuable things. Just as we fail to respect people when we deceive them, we fail to respond in a fitting way to valuable things like traditions and cultural artefacts—and it makes a state of affairs worse—when we destroy or neglect them. Let's call this *the Bad Acts Thesis*.

With this connection in place, we can take the second step and explain the original intuition that Progress is better than Decline.

Let's start with the contrast between Abandoned Equality and Gained Equality. It seems that the former course of history (which features deterioration) is worse than

[12] For an insightful discussion of cultural change, see Scheffler (2007).

the latter (which features improvement). A natural explanation of this judgment draws on Conservatism about Value. In Abandoned Equality, new generations fail to maintain something that is non-instrumentally valuable—the relations of equality between members of the moral community—which is bad in itself. This is not the case in Gained Equality. There, such relations come to obtain only later in history and the improvement we witness speaks to the fact that they are cultivated. Thus, even if these two courses of history feature equivalently long periods of equality and inequality, Abandoned Equality is worse than Gained Equality. Thus, the proposed account avoids the Incompleteness Objection.

It also avoids the Lack of Unity Objection because the conservative explanation offered with respect to the two cases above is theoretically unified. In a nutshell, this account proceeds as follows. The shape of history indicates the presence of a further feature that affects its value: whether certain valuable elements of our culture have been conserved. It is in virtue of the differences in this respect that an improving history is *typically* better than a deteriorating history. We can call this *the Conservative Account*.

This view has a similar structure to the Narrative Account proposed by Velleman: both views tells us that the pattern of value indicates (but does not guarantee) the presence of some further features that affect the overall value of history. However, they differ in terms of the substance: the Conservative Account offers a more compelling story about what these further features are and it is rooted in an independently motivated view about value.

What about the triad of objections levelled against the Temporal Location Account and the Pattern Account? To begin with, the Conservative Account does not imply that an improving history is better when successive generations are completely disconnected from each other. In the 'mayflies' world, no valuable elements of any given generation's culture are transmitted to the next generation anyway.

Further, the Conservative Account does not imply that an improving history is better when the only change concerns the hedonic aspect of people's lives. The Conservative Account gets this case right because it recognizes that what we have a reason to do depends on the nature of the valuable thing. While our traditions, languages, and collective projects are things that warrant conservation, simple pleasures are merely to be savoured while they last, so it does not matter whether people experience more of them at the beginning or at the end of the history, as long as their overall amount is the same.

Finally, the Conservative Account does not imply that an improving history is better when these patterns of temporal value aligns with the nature of humanity's projects and values. Given that there are only so many 'firsts' possible, the civilization of

explorers which has their grandest achievements early in history does not necessarily fail to cultivate their projects and the traditions surrounding them. Thus, as long as their accomplishments are on a par, the explorers fare no worse than the inventors whose greatest successes come late in history.

Thus, the Conservative Account satisfies all five desiderata identified earlier: it neither proves too much nor too little and it offers a theoretically unified explanation of the evaluative significance of the shape of history.

4. The desirability of progress and the tragedy of decline

Despite these virtues, some people may find the Conservative Account wanting on the grounds that it fails to do justice to the desirability of progress and the tragedy of decline. There are three objections here.

The first objection latches on to the fact that the Conservative Account solves the puzzle about the shape of history in an asymmetric way. As we have seen, it holds that an improving history is better than a deteriorating history when and because some of our valuable projects, practices, and ideals are neglected in the latter scenario. This means that progress is better than decline because there is something bad about decline and not because something is good about progress.

This asymmetry may seem flawed. Intuitively, the objection goes, progress is desirable in its own right. To make that vivid, the objector might contrast Progress with *Plateau:* the early period of history features mixed fortune and stays at a plateau for the remainder of our time. Progress seems better than Plateau even if the sum of the values of each period is the same in both courses of history. A satisfactory account should be able to explain that, whereas the Conservative Account is silent. Call this *the Plateau Objection*.

This objection rests on a mistake about the content of conservative reasons. Recall that they often go beyond merely ensuring that valuable things continue to exist. For example, it is essential to *cultivate* things like projects and traditions. A society which sets out to fight malaria must pursue research programmes into novel forms of treatment, strive to increase the adoption of prevention measures such as bed nets, and work to improve access to healthcare facilities. These efforts are likely to prove at least moderately successful and lead to progress. That is, when appropriately cultivated, the project of fighting malaria will typically reduce the incidence or the harm caused by this disease, or at least lay foundations for future breakthroughs in this domain. Conversely, if no real progress is made, this indicates that a project has not been adequately cultivated.

This shows that the Conservative Account can explain why Progress is better than Plateau in the same way it explains why Progress is better than Decline. In particular, the fact that the human condition fails to improve over time suggests that certain valuable things—in this case, collective projects—have not been adequately conserved. It is in virtue of this feature that Progress is typically better than Plateau. In a slogan, it's not that progress is good, but rather that its absence is bad.

This response can be strengthened by the following, more speculative thought. Many of the thinkers who believe that the human condition is getting better view progress not as a series of happy accidents but rather as a natural and virtually inevitable aspect of human activity. In the same spirit, we might think that some valuable elements of our culture improve with time as long as they continue to be instantiated. Certain traditions and institutions seem to have this profile. If that's right, this gives us another reason to think that the absence of improvement to the human condition indicates that certain valuable things have not been adequately conserved or that we have somehow impeded their progress.

The second objection alleges that, in another respect, the Conservative Account proves too much. When we reflect on the most striking instances of progress in the last few centuries, it is difficult to resist the thought that Conservatism about Value would oppose them. After all, radical progress does not seem to involve just improvements to the existing valuable things. Instead, it is achieved through—or at least occasioned by—a radical overhaul of many valuable elements of our culture.

The Industrial Revolution, for example, did not just lead to the significant alleviation of poverty in the general population. It transformed virtually every aspect of our society and daily life, ranging from political and economic arrangements to the nature of work and our pastime pursuits. Since Conservatism about Value speaks in favour of preserving existing things of value, it might seem to stand in opposition to the Industrial Revolution, and to radical progress more generally. This implication may strike some people as unacceptable. We can call this *the Radical Progress Objection*.

This challenge does not carry the day either. To begin with, it is important to reiterate that Conservatism about Value does not speak in favour of preserving all of humanity's projects, practices, and ideals or preserving them in their entirety. While some elements of our society and daily life in the pre-industrial times certainly were non-instrumentally valuable, others—such as widespread illiteracy, malnutrition, and feudalism—lacked this status. And those which were in fact non-instrumentally valuable often had some objectionable, value-detracting features. That is to say that Conservatism about Value opposes only some of the many aspects of the transformation brought about by the Industrial Revolution: for example, the erosion of children's and women's rights in the early industrial years, linguistic standardisation, and the destruction of the natural environment. This clarification

should already make the opposition to radical, world-altering progress much more palatable than it may have originally seemed to be.

Moreover, we need to keep in mind that conservative reasons are defeasible. Thus, conservatists can judge radical progress to be bad in one respect but good overall. This is so when the new ways of life are significantly better than those that have been replaced. And, indeed, the Industrial Revolution appears to have brought about improvements to the human condition which are so profound as to trump the destruction of the valuable pre-industrial modes of existence. So, the conservative *critique* of the Industrial Revolution does not amount to its *rejection*.

Finally, that Conservatism about Value opposes at least some aspects of progress is in fact a highly desirable aspect of this view. On deeper reflection, we rarely support progress categorically, even in its grandest instances. Instead, our ordinary and pre-theoretic outlook is divided. We regret the destruction of some ways of life and welcome the appearance of others, and we do so even if the new ways of life are significantly more valuable than the old ones. This ambivalence is difficult to explain unless we accept a view which places an emphasis on conserving existing valuable things, and this is precisely what Conservatism about Value does.

Turn now to a third objection. One may worry that the Conservative Account is unable to account for the tragedy of many famous instances of civilizational collapse. For example, it may be that the Easter Island civilisation was always doomed to collapse because of the limited resources available on the island and its extreme isolation (the two nearest lands are Chile 2,300 miles to the east and the Pitcairn Islands 1,300 miles to the west). Or take the bubonic plague pandemic of the 13th Century which killed as much as 50% of the European population and created widespread social and economic upheaval. These societies do not appear to have neglected their non-instrumentally valuable practices, projects, and ideals. Instead, their decline seems attributable to factors beyond human control. And one might suggest that many or most cases of decline are like that. Call this *the Brute Bad Luck Objection*.

These challenge does not succeed, for two reasons. First and foremost, it rests on an overly simplistic understanding of civilizational collapse. The societies in question were rarely, if ever, entirely faultless for their decline. While Easter Islanders had no control over how much timber was available on their land and the pace of reforestation, they were certainly responsible for the demand side of the equation. In particular, some scholars believe that what pushed Easter Islanders beyond the levels of sustainability was the construction of the famous stone statues (*moai*), which was driven by the competition for status between local tribes. Close to 1,000 statues weighing up to 75 tons each were discovered on the island, and erecting each required great amounts of timber for sleds and levers, and many days of labour. Likewise,

although Europeans were not in a position to completely prevent the bubonic plague pandemic, its ramifications would not have been so disastrous if not for the overpopulation and widespread famines in the preceding decades that ruined people's health. In general, closer inspection reveals that historical cases of civilizational collapse were generally at least as much a product of negligence, internal struggle, and lack of foresight, as they were of external shocks.[13] Thus, they involved a failure to conserve certain valuable things and the Conservative Account can explain their tragedy.

Second, suppose that there are in fact cases in which a collapse is attributable *exclusively* to brute bad luck: for example, a volcanic eruption that no one could have predicted or mitigated. That is not a major strike against the Conservative Account either. This view would still provide a sufficient condition—a deteriorating history is worse than an improving history if it is marked by a failure to take adequate measures to conserve our valuable projects, practices, and ideals—which would explain the overwhelming majority of cases. While we would ideally want a position which accounts for *all* relevant cases, it is fine if we have to reach for alternative resources to explain our intuitions about the remaining few, if any. In this regard, the Conservative Account has a major advantage over the Narrative Account considered earlier.

5. The future of humanity

In addition to helping us solve the puzzle about the shape of history, Conservatism about Value has three interesting implications for matters related to the future of humanity.

The first concerns our reasons to ensure the survival of humanity. As other philosophers have observed, Conservatism about Value can account for at least some of our reasons to do that. For example, Scheffler writes that

> All of the many things we value that consist in or depend on forms of human activity will be lost when human beings become extinct. No more beautiful singing or graceful dancing or intimate friendship or warm family celebrations or hilarious jokes or gestures of kindness or displays of solidarity. (2018, pp. 69-70)

Scheffler goes on to argue that we have a reason to perpetuate the human race because that is a precondition for the continued existence of many non-instrumentally valuable things which we have a conservative reason to preserve.

[13] For an extensive discussion of this issue, see Jared Diamond's tellingly titled book: *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* (2011).

What's perhaps more interesting—and yet to be appreciated in the literature—is that we could also have a conservative reason *against* extending humanity's lifespan, and that this might be so even if our descendants would have lives worth living.

To see that, consider a twist on the widely discussed scenario from P. D. James's novel, *The Children of Men*. Suppose that we discover that all human beings have become infertile. While no one will die prematurely, it appears that there will be no next generation and that the human species will go extinct within a century. The brightest minds are recruited to help address this issue and after a decade of intense research the conclusion is finally reached. Although our extinction is unavoidable, it can be postponed. We have developed a treatment that will allow roughly 1 in 1,000,000 people to have a child, but these children would themselves be infertile—this time unavoidably. Still, let's assume, their lives would be overall worth living.

In this case, we would plausibly have a conservative reason against administering the treatment. To prolong humanity's tenure in this way would be to forsake the most valuable aspects of our culture. After all, the drastic reduction in the number of people would quickly lead to the destruction of most of our valuable traditions, institutions, languages, and collective endeavours.

Of course, if we choose not to administer the treatment, these valuable aspects of our culture will also come to an end. But, and this is a crucial point, the manner in which that would happen is different. It is one thing to let an important text or a religious emblem tatter and find its way to a landfill, and another to bury or burn it in a ceremonial way. Likewise, it seems more fitting to allow the valuable elements of our culture to come to an end when they are still thriving than to have them survive in a scarred and diminished state for one more generation.

The second implication concerns what we would have a reason to do when confronted with the prospect of imminent extinction. If the events of P. D. James's novel are any guide to human psychology, those unfortunate enough to belong to one of the last generations would, in addition to experiencing grief and distress, find themselves reluctant to open new lines of scientific inquiry, start new political movements, or set foundations for new traditions.

It might be tempting to think of this quiescence as blameless—given the dire circumstances—but nonetheless imprudent. After all, participation in such endeavours greatly enriches our lives, and the people depicted in James's novel seem to needlessly deprive their already impoverished lives of such opportunities. However, Conservatism about Value offers a way to vindicate this attitude. Intuitively, in addition to the reason to conserve the currently existing valuable elements of our culture, we also have a reason not to engage in new collective

endeavours when we expect that neither we nor our descendants will be able complete or maintain them in a flourishing state.

The reason in question seems to be an instance of what Frick (2020) calls *standard-regarding reasons*, which he thinks govern our reproductive choices:

> I claim that any outcome in which I create a new person S is subject to a moral standard (that of S's well-being), which is grounded in the existence of S, a being with moral status. This moral standard is satisfied if S has a life that is worth living, and failed if she has a life that is not worth living. … If I am unable to give S a life that is worth living, I have a standard-regarding reason not to create S. (p. 73)

It is plausible that our projects, practices, and values are also subject to a similar moral standard. This moral standard is satisfied when the valuable elements of our culture are maintained in a flourishing state or completed, and it is not satisfied when they are neglected or abandoned. Thus, like bringing a child onto this world while knowing that you will not be able to provide for it, starting a new collective endeavour or setting foundations for a new tradition with the awareness that they will not be cultivated is something that we have a moral reason not to do.

The third implication concerns the importance of the choices made by the present generation. As should be clear by now, Conservatism about Value tells us that the values we choose and the projects we start at any particular point in history carry great significance into the future. For example, if a particular generation sets out to eradicate polio or erects a multitude of architectural wonders, their descendants will find themselves under considerable normative pressure to contribute to these endeavours rather than initiate new ones.

However, choices made by the present generation are arguably especially important in the following ways. For one thing, humanity is still relatively young and choices made earlier in history are naturally endowed with greater normative significance because they have the potential to affect what one has a reason to do in larger swaths of time and for greater numbers of people.

For another, the potential for exerting causal influence on the future has never been greater. Our own actions may, for the first time in history, bring about or avert an existential catastrophe that would wipe out the entire human race and, with it, our civilization. Moreover, we finally have the means to preserve many of the valuable things created by our ancestors, be it works of art or traditions, and thereby pass the proverbial torch to the future generations. And the unprecedented levels of knowledge and opportunities for cooperation across space and time make it possible for us to initiate collective projects grander than ever before, such as reversing climate

change or developing artificial intelligence. All of this means that, assuming that our descendants will abide by their conservative reasons, the choices made by the present generation could largely determine the direction in which our civilisation develops.

6. Concluding remarks

Is it better for the history of humanity to display a pattern of improvement than deterioration? This paper has argued that the answer to this question is not a simple 'yes' or 'no', but rather 'typically'. According to the Conservative Account, progress is better than decline when and because these courses of history differ in terms of whether valuable elements of our culture—such as important traditions, great works of art, just institutions, scientific knowledge, and relations of equality—have been conserved from one generation to another. This account delivers intuitively correct verdicts about a range of relevant cases, is theoretically unified, and carries a number of important implications for matters related to the future of humanity.

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