The Shape of History

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Abstract: Some philosophers believe in progress: they think that humanity's 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 condition of humanity has deteriorated and will continue to do so. What has been neglected, however, is a purely normative question: is it better if the history of humanity features a pattern of improvement rather than deterioration, holding other things equal? This paper argues that it is and explores the practical implications of this issue for matters related to the future of humanity.

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1. Introduction

Questions about the condition of humanity and its trajectory are deeply rooted in the Western intellectual tradition. 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. For example, Immanuel Kant asserts in "Theory and Practice" that

> [T]he human 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 … this progress although it may be sometimes interrupted, will never be entirely broken off or stopped.[1]

[1] 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).

Others believe in decline: they argue that the human condition has deteriorated and will continue to do so. Famously, the archaic poet Hesiod describes in *Works and Days* 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 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.[2]

This disagreement concerns a largely *descriptive* question: Does the history of humanity feature a pattern of improvement or deterioration?[3] What has been neglected, however, is a purely *normative* question: Is it better if the history of humanity features a pattern of improvement rather than deterioration?

To get a grip on this latter question, consider two ways in which the condition of humanity could change over time.

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

It is important to note two things about these scenarios. First, in describing these cases, I have used vague expressions like 'hardship' and 'flourishing' because the puzzle I am about to describe arises for a wide range of theories of value. For the sake of concreteness, however, I will assume a pluralistic theory on which the goodness of a state of affairs is determined by aggregate well-being and impersonal values such as equality, accumulation of knowledge, the existence of beautiful

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[2] This 'pessimistic' point of view can also be found in the work of Tocqueville, Burckhardt, Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, and Weber, among others.

[3] Any talk of improvement must involve some evaluative standard, so this question is not *entirely* descriptive.

artworks, and biodiversity, among others.[4] We should therefore think of an upward trend in *Progress* as corresponding to an improvement in one or more of these values, and conversely for *Decline*.

Second, a few words about time. My description of *Progress* and *Decline* assumes that the history of humanity has the same length in either case and divides history into three periods. The latter assumption is for simplicity only. All that matters is that humanity's history features a pattern of improvement or deterioration. These changes could be from one generation to the next or from one century to the next.

With these remarks in place, let's now compare these two scenarios. When confronted with this choice, many people have the intuition that *Progress* is better than *Decline*. On that view, for example, if a god was deciding which of these two worlds to create, they should create the first one.

But this intuitive judgment is puzzling. Notice that these two 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. In fact, we could even imagine that exactly the same people would exist in both scenarios and that they would have exactly the same levels of well-being, just at different times. This, on one kind of view, strongly suggests that *Progress* and *Decline* are equally good.

My aim in this paper is to resolve this puzzle by developing a theoretical account which vindicates the intuition that *Progress* is better than *Decline*. My discussion is structured as follows. In Section 2, I argue that we cannot solve the new puzzle about the shape of history simply by extending one of the popular answers to a related puzzle about the shape of a life. In Section 3, I develop a novel solution rooted in a broadly conservative view about value. My central claim is that the shape of history matters just in case and because it has something to do with the conservation of certain valuable elements of our culture across time. Then, in Section 4, I defend the proposed account from three objections. Finally, in Section 5, I explain the theoretical and practical significance of this account for matters related to the future of humanity.

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

2. Three candidate accounts

Although the puzzle about the shape of history has not yet been discussed in the literature, a related puzzle about the significance of a life's shape has received considerable philosophical attention.

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

These lives are permutations of each other—in the sense that for every period of flourishing in one life, there is exactly one such period in the other, and so on—which, on one kind of view, suggests that they are equally good. Still, many people believe that the former life would be better for you.[5] The challenge is to find a compelling account of this judgment.

This puzzle about the shape of a life is similar to the puzzle about the shape of history in two important ways. First, it should be easy to see that they are structurally analogous. The obvious difference is that we are not asked to consider the relationship between how well any given generation fares and the value simpliciter 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.

Second, it is common to think about the history of humanity as if it was going through stages characteristic of a single life. For example, in a recent book on existential risk and the future of humanity, Toby Ord (2020, p. 21) writes:

> If we think of one million years [that mammalian species typically survive] in terms of a single, eighty-year life, then today humanity would be in its

[5] In the literature, this is intuition is shared 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).

> adolescence—sixteen years old, just coming into our power; just old enough to get ourselves into serious trouble.[6]

Given these two similarities, it is quite natural to suppose that we can solve the new puzzle about the shape of history simply by extending our best account of the shape of a life. In this section, I argue that this approach does not work. To that end, I discuss three influential accounts of the significance of a life's shape.

The first view I want to consider is *the Temporal Location Account* due to Michael Slote, to whom the contemporary literature on the shape of a life can be traced. Slote (1983, p. 23) writes:

> When a personal benefit or good occurs may make a difference to how fortunate someone is … 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.

In other words, any given prudential good (e.g., an episode of pleasure, a loving relationship, or an extraordinary achievement)—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. That is why an improving life, in which the best things happen late in life, is better than a deteriorating life.

Proponents of this view could suggest that something similar applies to the shape of history. In particular, they could assert that *Progress* is better than *Decline* because what happens later in history (e.g., that people have happy lives, that relations of equality obtain between members of the moral community, or that people act justly) has greater weight in determining its overall value.

Before we examine the plausibility of this account, let me introduce another popular view: *the Pattern Account*. Frances Kamm (2003, p. 222) characterises it as follows:

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[6] See also Kavka (1978) and MacAskill (2022). For a critical perspective, see Lenman (2002).

> I believe that where in a life story some event occurs can be important because the pattern of one's life can be important. … So it is better to start off badly in life and head toward improvement than to start off well and head toward decline, even when we hold constant all the goods and bads that are distributed in the two different patterns.

In other words, the fact that your life features an improvement is a source of well-being (and that your life features a deterioration is a source of ill-being), quite independently of any attitudes you might have towards these trends and their impact on your well-being. This view has also been endorsed by the likes of Larry Temkin (2012), Joshua Glasgow (2013), and Iwao Hirose (2015).

When confronted with the puzzle about the shape of history, proponents of the Pattern Account could likewise say that a pattern of improvement in terms of any value (e.g., aggregate well-being, equality, epistemic value, and aesthetic value) is in itself good, and that explains why *Progress* is better than *Decline*.[7]

An undeniable attraction of the Temporal Location Account and the Pattern Account is their simplicity. But I believe that this feature comes at the expense of extensional adequacy. To show that, I will present three objections which apply to both accounts. For each objection, we will hold some aspect of the human condition constant and then compare two variants: one involving progress and another involving decline. I will suggest that the Temporal Location Account and the Pattern Account *prove too much* in these cases.

The first objection refers to a scenario discussed by Johann Frick (2017, p. 362):

> 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).

Frick invokes this possibility in his discussion of our reasons to ensure the survival of humanity. He takes it to suggest that (at least some of) our reasons are not reasons to ensure that the *human species* continues into the future, but rather reasons that

[7] Franz Brentano (1973) endorses this kind of general principle about the value of improvement and calls it 'bonum progressionis'.

humanity—with its sense of history, cultural traditions, and bodies of knowledge—does.

I believe that this case also tells us something important about the significance of history's shape. The specific feature of this 'mayflies' world that I want to focus on is that the fate of each generation is entirely independent of the actions of the previous generations. With this in mind, consider two possible histories of this world. In the first variant, members of the first generation have mediocre lives, but each successive generation fares better than the previous one. In the second variant, it's the opposite: the first generation flourishes, but each subsequent generation does less well than the preceding one. Now, assume that what's responsible for these differing fates is, for example, the frequency of extreme weather events beyond human control. In the first variant, they are initially quite common but then become less frequent, so things improve. In the second variant, it's the opposite.

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

For the second objection, consider a world much more like ours at present: socially integrated and with a rich array of traditions, languages, artworks, and scientific projects. Suppose that these bonds and engagements remain stable over time. What finds alteration, however, is the hedonic aspect of people's lives. In the first course of history, the first generation experiences only a modest amount of pleasure, but each successive generation enjoys a bit more. In the second course of history, it's the opposite. In both cases, the total amount of pleasure experienced by people is the same. Here, we could imagine that these changes are due to something trivial. Perhaps in one course of history, fruit and vegetables that make up our diet are initially quite bland but then gradually become more and more delicious, whereas in the other course of history, the opposite happens.

The Temporal Location Account and the Pattern Account both imply that *Progress* is better than *Decline* in this case. This is because, in *Progress,* the more intense pleasures are experienced later in history, and there is a discernible pattern of improvement in terms of aggregate well-being. But, once again, this verdict does not

seem right. When the only variation between *Progress* and *Decline* concerns simple pleasures, these courses of history seem equally good. I will refer to this as *the Simple Pleasures Objection*.

The third objection concerns another pair of scenarios. Imagine *a civilisation of explorers* who pride themselves on travels to uncharted territories, ascents of the highest mountains, and crossings of the largest seas. Since there are only so many places to explore, the most significant achievements of this civilisation take place early in history, and so there is a discernible pattern of decline. Compare this with *a civilisation of inventors* who strive to advance science and technology. Because these kinds of advances tend to build upon each other, the most significant accomplishments of this civilisation happen late in history, and so there is a clear pattern of improvement.

According to the Temporal Location Account and the Pattern Account, *Progress* is better than *Decline* in these circumstances. I believe this is a wrong verdict. If we set aside possible disputes about the relative value of their pursuits, these courses of history seem equally good. After all, in either case, the temporal pattern of value fits with the nature of the civilisation's projects. We can refer to this as *the Fitting Pattern Objection*.

I draw two lessons from these three objections. The first is simply that we should reject the Temporal Location Account and the Pattern Account, at least as they apply to the shape of history. But I think that there is also a more general lesson here. The original intuition—that *Progress* is better than *Decline* regardless of what happens in these two courses of history—turns out to be incorrect. Our refined intuition is that *Progress* is *typically* better than *Decline*, and this is what we must ultimately explain.

At the methodological level, this is similar to how an inquiry into the badness of death might proceed. We might start with the intuition that death is always bad for the person who dies. But then we examine a range of cases and realise that death is only typically bad. In some cases, it can be neutral or even good for the person who dies, for example, if they stand to experience a lot of pain in the future. The task then shifts to explaining why death is bad when it is.

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 proposes this view, gives two examples of such narrative relations. The first concerns situations in which a person learns

from their past mistakes, and the second situations in which a person turns their struggles into a success rather than letting them go to waste. He writes:

> 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).

Variants of this view have also been endorsed by Jeff McMahan (2002), Douglas Portmore (2007), Antti Kauppinen (2015), and Dale Dorsey (2015).

Extending this position to the significance of a history's shape may not seem as straightforward as in the previous two accounts. At least 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 recognise that we sometimes use expressions such as 'humanity has learned from its past mistakes' or 'our generation is thwarting the efforts of our predecessors'. Insofar as these statements make sense—and that might require us to accept a notion of collective agency that applies to large groups of people both at a time and across time—there might be room for an analogous explanation of the significance of a history's shape. In particular, proponents of the Narrative Account could say that *Progress* is better than *Decline* when and because these histories differ in terms of whether certain narrative relations connect different generations.

It is important to emphasise that the Narrative Account does not imply that *Progress* is always better than *Decline*, and thus avoids proving too much in the three cases discussed above. In particular, there appears to be no difference in terms of learning from past mistakes or turning past struggles into a success when the fates of successive generations are independent of each other, when the only thing that

changes over time is the hedonic aspect of people's lives, or when the patterns of temporal value fit the nature of humanity's projects.

However, I believe that the Narrative Account faces two other problems. The first problem is that, in a range of cases, the Narrative Account *proves too little*. The following pair of cases will illustrate this.

> *Lost 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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> *Found Equality*: In the early stages of history, there is a high degree of inequality, but each subsequent generation enjoys greater equality.

Let's assume that these histories are otherwise similar: for example, people do not realise the world is getting less or more equal, or perhaps they do, but this realisation does not affect them. Even with these assumptions, Found Equality seems better than Lost Equality. There is just something regrettable about the failure to maintain relations of equality between people. The Narrative Account, however, offers no apparent explanation for this. These two scenarios do not—or at least need not—differ in terms of whether later generations learned from the mistakes of the earlier ones or whether the struggles of earlier generations were later turned into a success. We can call this *the Incompleteness Objection*.

This brings us to the second problem for the Narrative Account. Proponents of this view might try to fend off the Incompleteness Objection by postulating some further narrative relation that can explain why Found Equality is better than Lost Equality. But I think that this approach runs the risk of foregoing an important theoretical virtue of explanatory unity. Notice that even the two narrative relations invoked by Velleman appear to lack a normatively significant common ground. To be sure, learning from past mistakes and turning struggles into a success do have something in common: for example, they are aggregates of discrete events in a person's life or a course of history. But not all such aggregates of events have evaluative significance. For example, the badness of the pain I experienced when I stubbed my toe yesterday is not cancelled by the fact that I had a delicious kale salad for lunch today. So there must be some further, more specific feature that makes learning from past mistakes and turning struggles into a success

evaluatively significant. But it is at least unclear from Velleman's discussion what this feature is. And the more items we add to the list of narrative relations, the more difficult it will be to identify it. Or, to put it more harshly, the more *ad hoc* the Narrative Account will look. We can call this *the Explanatory Unity Objection*.

Antti Kauppinen (2015), who is attracted to the Narrative Account but acknowledges that Velleman offers "no systematic theory of what makes a life story prudentially good" (p. 201), anticipates this charge. On Kauppinen's preferred version of this view, narrative significance has to do with pursuing one's goals: "events that comprise the agent's life gain in intrinsic value for the agent when they contribute to merited success in pursuit of valuable goals" (p. 218).

This account might be sufficient to dispel the Explanatory Unity Objection. After all, learning from past mistakes and overcoming struggles will often play an important role in goal-directed pursuits, whereas stubbing one's toe before lunch will not. However, I believe that the Incompleteness Objection remains unanswered. Found Equality seems better than Lost Equality, even if the improvement witnessed in the former case is not a product of humanity's pursuit of egalitarian ideals, but rather (say) a serendipitous by-product of a widespread increase in prosperity. Indeed, what strikes me as salient about this pair of cases is not so much that equality was *found* in one course of history, but rather that it was *lost* in the other. I will return to this insight in the next section when I compare the Narrative Account with my positive proposal.

In sum, I believe that although the Temporal Location Account, the Pattern Account, and the Narrative Account all have *coherent* extensions to the shape of history, none of these extensions is *plausible*. The first two accounts prove too much, whereas the third proves too little and potentially misidentifies what matters in the comparison between *Progress* and *Decline*.

3. The Conservative Account

The cases discussed in the previous section lead me to the following conjecture. The shape of history matters just in case and because it has something to do with the transmission and sustenance of certain elements of our culture, such as important traditions, collective endeavours, beautiful works of art, or relations of equality. Therefore, we should be able to explain its significance by appealing to a view that emphasises preserving those things.

The view that strikes me as especially promising in this regard is *Conservatism about Value*, which holds that we have a distinctive moral reason to conserve certain non-instrumentally valuable things even when a superior replacement is available. For example, we seem to have a moral reason to preserve the marvellous Golden Gate Bridge, even if we could build a more impressive structure in its place. By contrast, we have no moral reason to preserve an ordinary $10 bill when it could be replaced with another $10 bill. In the literature, this view has been discussed in contexts such as immigration and cultural change (Scheffler 2007); creation and preservation of art and traditions (Cohen 2012); cognitive enhancement (Nebel 2015); and the possibility of human extinction (Frick 2017; Scheffler 2018). But its relevance for matters related to the shape of history is yet to be appreciated.

Conservatism about Value has several features which are worth explaining at the outset. First, what kinds of things do we have a moral reason to conserve? In my view, there are many non-instrumentally valuable things like that: not only beautiful works of architecture but also unique languages, important traditions, collective endeavours, or relations of equality. That said, not all non-instrumentally valuable things make the list. For example, some works of art (such as a firework display or graffiti) have an ephemeral character, and we should not try to preserve them indefinitely. More generally, to determine whether we have a reason to conserve any particular thing, we must examine whether conserving it is a fitting response to its value and nature.[8]

Second, conservative reasons are *pro tanto* reasons. If a new work of art, tradition, or endeavour would be vastly more valuable (and not just slightly so), then we might have overall reason to create or pursue it at the expense of the old one. After all, the prospective value of the potential replacement also confers a reason on us, which might prove stronger.

Third, conservative reasons are moral reasons and not, for example, prudential reasons. It's not just me who appreciates the beauty of the Golden Gate Bridge that has a reason to prevent its destruction, but everyone—even people who have never seen it and have no interest in doing so.

[8] This view is close to Cohen's (2012) and Frick's (2017). Somewhat different takes on the scope and ground of conservative reasons are offered by Scheffler (2018), who grounds conservative reasons in our valuing attitudes, and Nebel (2022), who grounds them in the concern for the good of the valuable thing itself. Each of these views could, in principle, support the account of the shape of history developed here.

Fourth, we rarely have a reason to preserve a valuable object 'as is'. Any valuable object is composed of many features which have different valence. Plausibly, we only have a reason to preserve the value-conferring features. 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 value-conferring features, it can sometimes be appropriate to allow them to change to some degree. For instance, cultures and languages naturally evolve over time, and stopping this process would threaten their very survival.[9]

So much for the gist of Conservatism about Value. This is the first element of my solution to the puzzle about the shape of history.

The second element is a principle that bridges the gap between what we have moral reasons to do and what makes a state of affairs valuable. This principle is needed 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, we only need a less restrictive view about what makes a state of affairs valuable. As Derek Parfit (2016, Ch. 57) points out, certain acts seem to be intrinsically bad, in the sense that they are in one way bad even when they have no further effects on what is good or bad. For example, it seems to make a state of affairs in one respect bad when people deceive each other, act unjustly, or break promises.[10] I find this view plausible. But I also want to go one step further than Parfit. To my mind, what he describes is just one instance of a broader issue. Just as it is intrinsically bad when we deceive and coerce people, it is also intrinsically bad when we fail to treat certain non-instrumentally valuable things, such as important cultural artefacts, in a fitting way, for example, by destroying or neglecting them when we could instead preserve them. Thus, on my view, it's not just that we have a moral reason not to destroy the Golden Gate Bridge; it is also intrinsically bad to do so.[11] I will refer to this as *the Bad Acts Thesis*.

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

[10] See also Temkin (2012, p. 205) and Nebel (2015).

[11] How bad is it, though? More generally, how can we assess the badness of a failure to conserve in any particular case? The following principle strikes me as plausible: the badness

There is, of course, more to say about each of these views, Conservatism about Value and the Bad Acts Thesis. However, my aim in this paper is not to defend them in isolation but rather to demonstrate the explanatory power they have when combined. In particular, I want to show that they provide the best explanation of when and why the shape of history matters.

According to *the Conservative Account* I propose, *Progress* is better than *Decline* just in case and because these courses of history differ in terms of whether certain valuable elements of our culture—such as important traditions, collective endeavours, relations of equality, or beautiful artworks—have been conserved across generations. In cases of *Decline*, the extent of the failure to conserve these valuable elements of our culture is typically greater than in cases of *Progress*, and such failures are intrinsically bad. So, *Progress* is typically better than *Decline*. This is the refined intuition for which we wanted to provide a theoretical rationale.

I believe this Conservative Account offers a better explanation of the significance of a history's shape than the Temporal Location Account, the Pattern Account, and the Narrative Account. To see that, consider how it handles the five objections discussed in the previous section and how it differs from those three accounts.

First, take the Independence Objection. In the 'mayflies' world, in which each generation disappears without a trace before the next one is born, no valuable elements of humanity's culture are transmitted to the next generation anyway. So, there is no conservative difference between *Progress* and *Decline,* and this aligns with the intuitive judgment that neither of these courses of history is better than the other.

Second, consider the Simple Pleasures Objection. There, we looked at a pair of cases in which only the hedonic aspect of people's lives changed over time. Because simple pleasures are not the kinds of things that we have conservative reasons (or even means) to preserve, the Conservative Account avoids the implication that *Progress* is better than *Decline* in this case.

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of a failure to conserve some non-instrumentally valuable thing X is proportional to the value of X. Thus, to figure out how bad it is to fail to conserve the Golden Gate Bridge, century-long relations of equality, or one of humanity's prized collective projects, we need first to determine how valuable each of these things is. I cannot hope to do that in this paper but see, for example, Temkin (1993) for a discussion of the value of equality and Bradford (2015) for an account of the value of achievement.

Third, turn to the Fitting Pattern Objection. This objection referred to a comparison between a civilisation of explorers whose most significant achievements were early in history, and a civilisation of inventors whose most significant accomplishments occurred later in history. Although collective projects and traditions are among the kinds of things that we do have reasons to conserve, neither the civilisation of explorers nor the civilisation of inventors fails to do that. The timing of their successes and the resulting pattern of value align with the nature of their projects. So, once again, there is no conservative difference between *Progress* and *Decline*.

We can thus see that—unlike the Temporal Location Account and the Pattern Account— the Conservative Account avoids proving too much in the relevant cases.

Let me now turn to the challenges levelled against the Narrative Account. The Incompleteness Objection referred to the contrast between Lost Equality and Found Equality. The Conservative Account provides a natural explanation for why the former is worse. In Lost Equality, later generations fail to maintain the non-instrumentally valuable relations of equality that obtain between members of the moral community. This is intrinsically bad for them regardless of whether they in fact have egalitarian goals and ideals. Found Equality is different. There, such relations come to obtain only later in history, and the egalitarian improvement we witnessed speaks to the fact they have been maintained to a large extent. Thus, even if these two courses of history feature equivalently long periods of equality and inequality, the Conservative Account correctly implies that Lost Equality is worse than Found Equality. So, the Conservative Account avoids proving too little.

What about the Explanatory Unity Objection? The Conservative Account identifies a single evaluatively significant feature in all relevant comparisons. In particular, *Progress* is better than *Decline* just in case and because certain non-instrumentally valuable elements of our culture have been conserved to a greater extent in the former course of history than in the latter. To be sure, the relevant elements of our culture include things as diverse as beautiful artworks and relations of equality, but what they have in common is that they are all among the things which are worth preserving even in the face of replacement. So, the Conservative Account is explanatorily unified.

It is worth taking a moment to reflect on the similarities and differences between my Conservative Account and the Narrative Account. The main similarity concerns the structure of these views. They both recognise that the temporal

location and order of events in a course of history matters, but not in the kind of simple way that the likes of Michael Slote and Joshua Glasgow suggest. Instead, these views point to some specific feature that typically, but not always, renders *Progress* better than *Decline*.

But these two views differ in other important respects. First, they recognise different features as evaluatively significant. In the case of the Narrative Account, at least according to Kauppinen's characterisation, that feature is the causal contribution that certain events make to the merited success in pursuit of valuable goals. On the Conservative Account, it's the extent to which certain non-instrumentally valuable elements of our culture have been conserved across time.

Second, as we have just seen, these two accounts differ in terms of their explanatory power. The Narrative Account fails to explain our intuitions about certain cases in which the improvement or deterioration of humanity's condition is unrelated to things like learning from past mistakes and overcoming struggles. The contrast between Lost and Found Equality was one example. Still, others are easy to come by: we just need to substitute equality for some other non-instrumentally valuable cultural artefact that is worth preserving irrespectively of any particular person's goals and interests.

Third, these two accounts differ in terms of *where* they locate the relevant evaluatively significant feature. The Narrative Account claims that *Progress* is better than *Decline* when and because there is something good about *Progress*: namely, that certain events in history play a causal role in humanity's merited success in the pursuit of valuable goals. By contrast, the Conservative Account claims that *Progress* is better than *Decline* when and because there is something bad about *Decline*: it involves a failure to conserve certain non-instrumentally valuable elements of our culture.

These three differences, I believe, show that the Conservative Account is significantly different from, and superior to, the Narrative Account.

4. The allure of progress and the tragedy of decline

Having made a positive case for the Conservative Account, I now want to discuss three challenges to this view. While neither challenge ultimately succeeds, this discussion will enhance our understanding of the proposed account and its implications.

The first challenge latches on to the fact that the Conservative Account solves the puzzle about the shape of history in an asymmetric way. As we have just seen, this view holds that *Progress* is better than *Decline* when and because there is something bad about *Decline*. But one might think that there must also be something good about *Progress*. To make this vivid, we might contrast *Progress* with a new scenario. In *Plateau*, humanity's fortune is mixed at the beginning of history and stays roughly at the same level for the remainder of our time. Now, the objection goes, *Progress* seems better than *Plateau*, whereas the Conservative Account fails to explain that. Call this *the Plateau Challenge*.

This objection rests on a mistake about the content of conservative reasons. In some cases, Conservatism about Value gives us a reason to merely *preserve* the valuable thing in question. For example, in the Grand Canyon case, all we have to do is try not to turn it into a landfill or a motocross park. In other contexts, however, a more active stance might be required. For instance, conserving the Golden Gate Bridge involves performing various maintenance works regularly. Moreover, when it comes to specific collective projects that humanity might undertake, I think we have a conservative reason to *cultivate* them. Take the example of the fight against malaria, a disease that kills over half a million people yearly. A society which sets out to fight malaria has a reason to pursue research programmes into novel forms of treatment, improve access to healthcare facilities in the affected areas, and educate people about available prevention measures, among other things.

Now, I find it plausible that whenever such efforts are undertaken, they will typically improve the human condition. For example, we should expect the fight against malaria to reduce the incidence or the burden of that disease or at least lay the foundations for future breakthroughs in that domain. Conversely, if we witness no improvement to the human condition over many generations, this suggests that certain valuable elements of our culture—in this case, humanity's collective endeavours—have not been adequately conserved. In other words, *Progress* is typically better than *Plateau* not because there is something good about progress, but rather because there is often something bad about its absence.[12]

This response can be strengthened by the following, more speculative thought. Many of the aforementioned thinkers who believe that the condition of humanity is getting better view progress not as a series of happy accidents but rather

[12] Isn't *Progress* always better than *Plateau* though? I think it isn't, for roughly the same reasons that *Progress* is not always better than *Decline*.

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. For example, democratic institutions might be thought to have this profile. If that's right, this gives us another reason to believe that the absence of improvement to the condition of humanity indicates that certain valuable things have not been adequately conserved.

The second issue that I want to discuss concerns radical progress. There were several moments in history when humanity truly made a leap forward: the Agricultural Revolution around 12,000 years ago, the Industrial Revolution of the 18th and 19th centuries, and the Information Revolution that started in the 1990s. When we reflect on these events, it is clear they were occasioned by the destruction or overhaul of many valuable elements of our culture. The Industrial Revolution, for example, transformed virtually every aspect of our society and daily life, ranging from political and economic arrangements to the nature of work and pastime. In virtue of this, it looks like Conservatism about Value which underlies the Conservative Account must regard the Industrial Revolution as something that we should regret. But, to many people, it seems to be a highly welcome episode in the history of humanity. We can refer to this as *the Radical Progress Challenge*.

My response to this objection has three components. First, I want to emphasise that many elements of the pre-industrial world were not non-instrumentally valuable: for example, widespread illiteracy, pervasive malnutrition, and feudalism. From the conservative point of view, there is no reason to regret the disappearance of these things. So, Conservatism about Value opposes only some of the many aspects of the transformation brought about by the Industrial Revolution: such as the erosion of children's and women's rights in the early industrial years, linguistic standardisation, or the destruction of the natural environment.

Second, we must remember that conservative reasons are pro tanto reasons. This means that proponents of Conservatism about Value can judge radical progress as bad in one respect but good overall when the new ways of life are significantly better than the old ones. Indeed, in virtue of alleviating poverty alone, the Industrial Revolution appears to have brought about improvements to the human condition so profound as to trump the destruction of some valuable modes of existence.[13] So,

[13] In 1820, an estimated 83.9% of the world population lived in extreme poverty (Bourguignon and Morrison 2002). Nowadays, it's less than 10% (World Bank 2020).

the conservative critique of the Industrial Revolution does not amount to its rejection.

Finally, I think that on deeper reflection, we rarely support radical progress categorically, even in its grandest instances. Instead, our outlook on events such as the Industrial Revolution is inherently divided. We regret the destruction of some ways of life and welcome the appearance of others, even when the new ways of life are significantly better. A major virtue of Conservatism about Value is that it seems to be uniquely equipped to explain this kind of evaluative ambivalence due to its emphasis on preserving valuable objects even in the face of replacement.

The third challenge concerns the tragedy of decline. In particular historical cases, it might seem that the civilisational collapse was attributable entirely to factors beyond human control. For example, it could 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 was responsible for a widespread social and economic upheaval. These instances of *Decline* seem tragic, and they seem to be worse than the corresponding instances of *Progress*. But, the objection goes, the Conservative Account cannot explain that because no failure of conservation was involved, just bad luck. We can call this the *Bad Luck Challenge*.

My issue with this challenge is that it rests on an overly simplistic understanding of civilisational collapse. The societies in question were not entirely faultless with respect to their decline. For example, while Easter Islanders had no control over how much timber was available on their land and the pace of reforestation, they were undoubtedly responsible for the demand side of the equation. In particular, some historians believe that what pushed their civilisation 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 have been discovered on the island, and erecting each required great amounts of timber for sledges and levers, among other natural resources. Likewise, although Europeans were presumably unable 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 increased people's vulnerability to pathogens. In general, I believe that closer inspection reveals that historical cases of civilisational collapse

were at least as much a product of negligence, internal struggle, lack of foresight, and other failures of conservation, as they were of external shocks.[14] If that's right, then the Conservative Account does explain why these scenarios strike us as tragic.

5. Conclusions

In closing, let me take stock of the discussion so far, consider some of its implications for matters related to the future of humanity, and then return briefly to the puzzle about the shape of a life.

We started with the following question: is it better if the history of humanity features a pattern of improvement rather than deterioration? My aim in this essay has been to persuade you that the answer 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 certain valuable elements of our culture have been conserved across generations. In cases of *Decline*, the extent of the failure to conserve these things is typically greater than in cases of *Progress*, and such failures are intrinsically bad. Therefore, *Progress* is typically better than *Decline*.

But there are exceptions. In some rare cases, the extent of conservation in *Progress* and *Decline* is the same, so these histories are equally good. We saw this when we discussed the Independence Objection, the Simple Pleasures Objection, and the Fitting Pattern Objection. In other rare cases, the extent of conservation in *Progress* is lower than in *Decline*, so the former course of history is worse. For example, we could imagine that *Progress* is a story of extreme negligence and serendipitous hedonic improvement which outweighs the badness of that negligence. In contrast, Decline is a scenario in which a civilisation is exceptionally diligent about conservation but unfortunately experiences a major hedonic deterioration over time.

This account of the shape of history carries a number of important lessons for matters of public policy and individual conduct concerning the future of humanity. Let me mention two.

The first lesson concerns the importance of sustainable development. To bring this out, consider the following case.

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

> *Compound X*. Suppose that we discover an extraordinary resource, Compound X. It can be used to greatly improve the standards of life worldwide and advance our civilisation in many respects. But it will eventually start to run out, and we will not be able to replace it. And when that happens, the condition of humanity will deteriorate.

How should we exploit Compound X and distribute it among different generations? In particular, should we use a lot of it now, reach the heights of our civilisation quickly, and then witness it gradually stagnate as we run out of this resource? Or should we save most of it for future generations, gradually phase it in, and aim for a steady improvement until the end of our time?

If the shape of history did not matter, then either option would be appropriate, other things being equal. The Conservative Account, however, suggests that we should do the latter, and I believe that it is correct in this regard.

This case strikes me as a helpful metaphor for humanity's current predicament. While no single resource might be quite as powerful and decisive with respect to humanity's fate as Compound X, the totality of the resources that we are currently exploiting—fossil fuels, freshwater stores, fertile soils, biodiverse ecosystems, and even things like clean air, relatively low sea levels, and largely moderate climate—might prove to be. In these circumstances, sustainable development is of paramount importance.

There are two aspects of sustainable development that I want to emphasise here. For one thing, when deciding how to allocate our resources among different generations, we should take care to leave enough for our distant descendants. Crucially, 'enough' here does not mean just 'enough to survive' or 'enough to have lives worth living'. Instead, it means 'enough to sustain and cultivate the valuable elements of our culture'. That is a significantly higher standard.

For another, when choosing how to exploit these resources, we should be mindful not to develop our civilisation and culture too quickly. This is not, as the Temporal Pattern Account has it, because it's better if the best things happen later in our history. Instead, it's because there is something distinctively bad about a situation in which a society—not unlike the Roman Empire or the Easter Island Civilization—creates an extraordinary amount of cultural artefacts and develops other aspects of their civilisation to a point such that the next generations will foreseeably struggle to maintain and cultivate them.

It is worth noting that, in the case of developing at an unsustainable pace, moral failure seems to lie primarily in the actions of the earlier generations rather than the later ones. In other words, what's bad is not that the later generations have failed to preserve the cultural artefacts created by the earlier ones, but rather that the earlier generations brought about circumstances in which appropriate conservation was difficult or impossible. I believe this is because our conduct in these matters is constrained by what some philosophers call *standard-regarding reasons*. For example, in his discussion of the procreation asymmetry in population ethics, Frick (2020) argues that if one cannot give a person a life worth living, then they have a standard-regarding reason not to create that person. I find it plausible that decisions regarding creating non-instrumentally valuable cultural artefacts are subject to similar moral standards. These moral standards are satisfied when such things are adequately conserved, and they are not satisfied when these things are instead neglected or destroyed. Thus, like bringing a child into this world while knowing that you will not be able to provide for it, creating certain cultural artefacts with the awareness that they will not be adequately conserved in the future is something that we have a moral reason not to do.

This brings us to the second lesson of my account for matters of public policy and individual conduct. In my discussion up to this point, I have considered different trajectories that the condition of humanity might take during its tenure. But, almost inevitably, this tenure will someday come to an end. It is, therefore, worth asking: what should we do if the prospect of our extinction becomes imminent? Should we go about our lives pretending nothing has changed, or perhaps dramatically alter our ways of life?

To illustrate this issue, consider the famous scenario from P. D. James's novel, *The Children of Men*. Suppose that we discover that all human beings have become infertile. Although no one will die prematurely, there will be no next generation, and our species will go extinct within a century. If the events of the novel are any guide to human psychology, those unfortunate enough to belong to this last generation would, in addition to experiencing grief and distress, find themselves unwilling to open new lines of scientific inquiry, start political movements, build new marvels of architecture, or set foundations for new traditions.

It might be initially tempting to think of this quiescence as blameless—given the extraordinary circumstances—but nonetheless imprudent. After all, the kinds of endeavours described just above greatly enrich our lives, and the people depicted in James's novel would seem to deprive their already impoverished lives of such

opportunities needlessly. However, if I'm right about the importance of conservation and the existence of standard-regarding reasons, then this behaviour is precisely what morality calls for. While we should continue to preserve the valuable things that already exist, we should not create cultural artefacts and initiate collective endeavours if there will be no one to carry the torch further into the future.

In closing, let me briefly comment on two further issues. The first is the relationship between the Conservative Account and *longtermism*, the increasingly popular view that a key moral feature of our actions today is their impact on the far future.[15] The main similarity between these two views is that they endow the long-term consequences of our actions with special importance. But there are significant differences. In the first place, many longtermists believe that the long-term consequences of our actions are *overwhelmingly* important—in the sense that, for practical purposes, we can often ignore the short-term consequences of our actions.[16] The Conservative Account is less radical. It merely says that the long-term consequences are, *in one respect,* more important because they determine whether the history of humanity is that of negligence or conservation. Another difference concerns the premises from which the conclusion about the special importance of the long-term consequences is derived. Though there are variations, the standard case for longtermism relies on several controversial assumptions: for example, that the expected number of people is as high as 10^{24}, that creating happy lives is just as important as improving the lives of existing people, or that we should be trying to maximise expected total welfare (Greaves and MacAskill 2021). By contrast, the Conservative Account does not utilise these or other similar assumptions and, in virtue of that, should be more appealing to consequentialists and non-consequentialists alike.

The second issue that I want to address is the shape of a life. One may wonder whether we can also appeal to the Conservative Account to explain why an improving life seems better than a deteriorating life. I believe that we can, but that explanation would require three novel claims. The first concerns the scope of conservative reasons. While discussions of Conservatism about Value have focused on things which are valuable simpliciter (such as cultural artefacts), I think that we also have a distinctive moral reason to conserve certain prudential goods (such as

[15] For a key statement and defence of longtermism, see Greaves and MacAskill (2021).

[16] This view is known as 'strong longtermism'.

loving relationships and important personal projects). The second claim is about the determinants of the goodness of a life. To explain the significance of a life's shape, we would have to show that failing to conserve certain non-instrumentally valuable things does not just make a state of affairs worse, but that it also makes one's life worse. The third claim concerns our intuitions. I suspect that an improving life is not always better than a deteriorating life, but rather better just in case these patterns of value have to do with the conservation (or neglect) of loving relationships and important personal projects. *If* these three claims are true, we can explain the significance of a life's shape as follows. An improving life is better than a deteriorating life just in case these lives differ in terms of whether certain prudential goods, such as loving relationships and important personal projects, have been conserved over time. The extent of the failure to conserve these things is typically greater in a deteriorating life than in an improving life, and such failures are bad for a person. Thus, an improving life is typically better than a deteriorating life.

Are these three claims true, though? I find each of them plausible, but the task of defending them and exploring their broader implications for how to direct our lives is best left for another occasion.

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