# Comments on Olof Leffler's
## "Contingency, Sociality, and Moral Progress"

## I. Leffler's New 'Contingentist Dilemma' for Moral Realism (pp. 2-3)

(1) Our moral beliefs are to a significant extent shaped by contingent influences.
(2) Either there is a relation between these contingent influences on our moral attitudes and non-naturalist moral truths, or there is not.
(3) If there is no relation, the contingent influences are extremely likely to have put our moral attitudes off track from the non-naturalist moral truths.
(4) If there is a relation, these contingent influences are inclined to make us know the non-naturalist moral truths, but this is unlikely to be the case on any good explanation of moral progress.
--------------
(C1) Either way, it turns out that we cannot know the non-naturalist moral truths.
(6) If we do not know the non-naturalist moral truths, moral non-naturalism is false.
--------------
(C2) Moral non-naturalism is false.

The argument is intended to be parallel in structure to Street's (2006) Darwinian Dilemma. It replaces her references to "evolutionary influences" with references to "contingent" influences more generally, and explicitly invokes **moral progress** in P4.[1] Leffler hopes his argument will be stronger dialectically, in part because it provides a direct reply to Huemer's (2016) argument that the historical trend of moral progress is best explained by appeal to the truth of moral realism.

Leffler focuses on defending P1 and especially P4. His argument revolves crucially around the claim that the moral realist can't give a satisfying explanation of moral progress, given the wealth of contingent influences upon our moral attitudes. Note that "contingent influences" is a very broad category for Leffler, including evolutionary influences, socio-cultural influences, and psychological factors, including biases, emotions, associations, and (at least aspects of) rational reflection (p. 4).

I'm highly sympathetic to forms of normative antirealism as well as to epistemological and evolutionary arguments against moral realism. I also agree with Leffler that Huemer's argument that moral realism can *better* explain moral progress over time is unconvincing. What I wonder is whether Leffler has said enough here to convince us that considerations regarding moral progress provide a unique and decisive new argument for the rejection of moral realism. So, as fodder for discussion…

## II. Three Questions for Leffler

> 1. What exactly is "**moral progress**?" What is the datum we're trying to explain?

Leffler writes that he agrees with Huemer that moral progress has occurred, but doesn't offer an explicit definition of moral progress in the paper. I'd love to see one! I suspect Leffler would agree that in order to formulate a dialectically effective argument against moral realism, we need to start with a conception of moral progress that both the realist and antirealist can accept.

---

[1] For what it's worth, I wonder if the wording of Leffler's C1, 6, and C2 is a bit too strong, especially if the argument form is intended to be parallel to Street's, although this won't be the focus of my comments.

Does "moral progress" imply that more of our (key) moral beliefs are true now than was the case for our ancestors a thousand years ago? And is that because *all* of the moral facts have remained unchanged, while we've gotten better at discovering some of them? Or have some of the facts changed, too? (Various antirealist views will differ here on what they can accommodate. This bring me to… )

➢ 2. Why exactly do forms of normative antirealism provide a better explanation of the datum of moral progress than the realist can offer?

Leffler's strategy is to focus on directly criticizing the realist's explanation; he doesn't compare different antirealist explanations. My own worry is that when we compare moral realism side by side with the most plausible forms of antirealism (on which there are non-obvious mind-dependent normative facts that we've gotten better at discovering over time), the explanations that each side can offer for how moral progress is possible may actually look *pretty similar*! For example…

o For the **error theorist**, there simply are no moral facts for us to get better at knowing.

o And for what I'll call the "**naïve**" **relativist** (for whom the moral facts are determined in a very simplistic way by current attitudes and practices), shifts in moral attitudes over time, simplistically entailing shifting moral facts, would not indicate we're getting better at discovering stable moral facts. This presumably isn't "progress" in any sense Huemer would recognize.

o But for someone who thinks there are normative facts, which are **mind-dependent, and non-obvious**, (e.g. various forms of constructivism) the explanation of moral *progress* might sound a lot like Huemer's, at least if we grant to both the realist and antirealist that *some* initial recognition of the normative facts was possible. (That is, some smart and/or influential people made new discoveries, reasoning played some role, and especially where those discoveries embraced increasingly liberal values, those views became increasingly popular over time.)
If Leffler's claim were that it's implausible to suppose we ever grasped any mind-independent necessary moral truths, then this wouldn't be a new argument about moral progress specifically.

➢ 3. Is there enough of a difference in the comparative plausibility of the explanations of moral progress offered by the moral realist vs. antirealist for these considerations to count strongly in favor of meta-ethical antirealism? In other words, how much force does this particular argument have in the overall debate between moral realists and antirealists?

For all we've said today, perhaps a slight advantage for the antirealist when it comes to explaining moral progress is still heavily outweighed by some other theoretical advantage of moral realism.

**Takeaway:** I think Leffler has taken an important step to continue the dialogue opened by Huemer about whether a focus on moral progress can help us to move forward in ongoing meta-ethical debates about evolutionary debunking and moral epistemology. In order to settle whether the antirealist can win this round, we'll need to continue to fill out our comparison of how realism, and diverse forms of antirealism, approach the topic of moral progress.

I look forward to continuing the discussion!