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# Progress and Meliorism: Making Progress in Thinking about Progress

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## Abstract

There is no grand narrative or master plan for historical progress. Contemporary discussions of progress and enlightenment reflect an improved version of an old debate, which has progressed beyond older debates about metaphysical optimism and pessimism. Responding to recent work by John Gray, Steven Pinker, and others, this paper describes meliorism as a middle path between optimism and pessimism. Meliorism is pragmatic, humanistic, secular, and historically grounded. The epistemic modesty of meliorism develops out of understanding the long history of debates about progress and enlightenment, including the history of meliorism itself. The paper provides a historical account of the development of meliorism, while arguing that understanding this history helps us make progress in thinking about progress.

## Keywords

meliorism – progress – eschatology – pessimism – optimism – secularism – Enlightenment – American Pragmatism

Debates between optimists and pessimists recur in each generation. With each iteration, the debate can be improved by critical philosophical insight into the epistemological and metaphysical challenge of offering final conclusions about historical progress. Of course, the very notion of “improvement” is in question in such a discussion. Thus while we might assert – as I do in this paper – that we make “progress” when we are aware of the difficulty of thinking about the idea of progress, this assertion makes a number of assumptions

about what it means to make progress. If we accept that the notion of “progress” is heavily contested and historically relative, then our conclusions about making progress in thinking about progress will be modest and restrained. We make small, incremental steps in the direction of better understanding. But we should avoid grand narratives and metaphysical pronouncements. Nonetheless, we must make some assumptions about what it means to achieve better understanding: we make progress in thinking about progress when we discuss the idea of “progress” with conscious awareness of the hermeneutical and historical difficulties associated with this idea.

For example, these days it is “progressive” to recognize that discussions in the history of philosophy and the philosophy of history are often Eurocentric. We might say that we make progress when we recognize that the philosophy of history (like the history of philosophy) is overly focused on the European tradition and its Eurocentric notion of progress. But such an assertion only makes sense at this historical juncture and from a certain philosophical vantage point. The philosophers of the European Enlightenment (Kant and Hegel, for example) were not concerned that their notion of progress was limited by their own Eurocentric point of view. Currently there are those on both the left and the right who argue that the critique of Eurocentrism is misguided.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, the critique of Eurocentrism can be defended in light of the values presupposed by the modest and melioristic methodology proposed here. Those who defend Eurocentrism make bold and sweeping assumptions about the structure and meaning of history, which puts European ideas at the pinnacle. However, the critique of Eurocentrism that might be articulated by a meliorist such as myself worries that such bold and sweeping pronouncements are too metaphysical, abstract and self-assured.

The idea of “progress” is historically rooted and open to debate, as is the claim of European preeminence and the critique of Eurocentrism itself. Admitting the historically relative nature of our values and our interpretation of history can leave us with a kind of skeptical relativism. It is difficult to articulate an account of history without begging a number of important substantive and methodological questions. However, full-blown relativism leaves us unable to articulate a critical philosophical view of history. Indeed, it leaves us

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1 For example, a conservative critique of the critique of Eurocentrism has been made by Niall Ferguson in *Civilization: The West and the Rest* (London: Penguin Books, 2011), while a Leftist critique of the critique of Eurocentrism has been articulated by Slavoj Žižek, “A Leftist Plea for ‘Eurocentrism’”, *Critical Inquiry*, 24: 4 (Summer, 1998), 988–1009 or Žižek interview in *Der Spiegel* March 31, 2015: <http://www.spiegel.de/international/zeitgeist/slavoj-zizek-greatest-threat-to-europe-is-it-s-inertia-a-1023506.html>

without resources that could be used to criticize Eurocentrism, since the critique of Eurocentrism would itself be merely culturally or historically relative.

I argue here that rather than succumbing to relativism we should affirm a methodological commitment to modesty. We should be consciously aware of the challenges and limitations found in the metaphysical pronouncements of optimism and pessimism. It is not the case that this is the best of all possible worlds; nor is it true that this is the worst of all worlds, rather that. The world is complicated and our knowledge is limited. Thus, we ought not affirm either optimism or pessimism. But even to assert that appears to beg the question of a metaphysical vantage point. The solution is to ground one's assertions in a parsimonious, pluralistic, and historically grounded methodology: we make progress in thinking about progress when we root our reflection in history, when we modestly avoid the temptation to offer metaphysical pronouncements, and when we acknowledge that there are a variety of methodological possibilities when it comes to making sense of history. Parsimony, pluralism, and historicism help us make progress in thinking about history, even though these methodological principles show us that the idea of progress is itself problematic and worthy of further reflection. Nevertheless, this claim about "making progress" is limited: such a claim arises only at a certain historical moment; the claim only makes itself present in light of the historically developed values of this moment; and other appraisals and ideas of progress are possible in light of the diversity of methodologies and hermeneutical strategies.<sup>2</sup>

At the risk of begging the question, let me assert that contemporary discussions of progress and enlightenment reflect an improved version of an old debate, which has progressed beyond a simplistic contrast between the sort of metaphysical optimism associated with Leibniz and the metaphysical pessimism of a philosopher such as Schopenhauer. In the twenty-first century, we seem to know better than to postulate a metaphysical account of history. Philosophers debate the meaning and purpose of history in new and improved fashion.<sup>3</sup> And it is likely that as the twenty-first century progresses, new voices

2 A commentator during the editorial review of this paper pointed out that the notion of meliorism defended here makes a number of assumptions about the basic values embraced in thinking about history and progress. This is right. The problems of the hermeneutical circle and historicism remind us that any analysis will begin with a number of assumptions about what is valuable, and even about what counts as a fact of history and the narrative in which such a fact is articulated and valorized.

3 Such discussions occur in the work of John Gray, Chris Hedges, John Lachs, Roger Scruton, Jonathan Glover, and Steven Pinker – primary thinkers who inform the analysis that follows. See: John Lachs, "Grand Dreams of Perfect People," "Both Better and Better Off," and "Good Enough" in John Lachs (with Pat Shade), *Freedom and Limits* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014); Chris Hedges, *I Don't Believe in Atheists* (New York: Free Press, 2008); Roger

will arise that will articulate an account of the philosophy of history that is more global and less Eurocentric, less dogmatic and more open to the complexity of global experience.<sup>4</sup>

This idea of how improvement happens in the philosophy of history is closely connected to the idea of meliorism. Meliorism is the idea that incremental and local progress can be made but that it is not guaranteed. Meliorism comes from the Latin root *melior*, which means “better.” It is opposed to pessimism, which comes from the root *pessimus*, meaning “worst.” It is also opposed to optimism, which comes from the root *optimus*, meaning “best.” Metaphysical optimists hold that this is the best of all possible worlds and that there is a grand providential plan directing the whole of history. In turn, metaphysical pessimists believe that this world has no ultimate meaning or purpose and that there is really no such thing as progress. Meliorism, as I define it, rejects such grand metaphysical pronouncements. Meliorists hold that this is neither the worst world nor the best. Rather, it is better than it could be: it is better in some places than in others (and for some people than for others) but it can be made even better with human effort and ingenuity.

Meliorists hold that situations can be ameliorated but not made perfect. Meliorism is pragmatic, humanistic, and historically grounded. It is linked to secular values. Its focus is “this world” (which is one way of understanding “secular”), as opposed to a concern for metaphysical accounts of the ultimate meaning and purpose of existence. It emphasizes active engagement in the here and now, instead of speculation about eschatology and the ultimate salvation of the world. And it is connected to a kind of humility and restraint that grows out of understanding the long history of debates about progress and enlightenment – including substantive critiques of these very ideas. Indeed, the more we learn about the history of these debates the more obvious it is

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Scruton, *The Uses of Pessimism: And the Danger of False Hope* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Pinker, *Enlightenment Now* (New York: Viking, 2018) – and *The Better Angels of Our Nature* (New York: Viking, 2011); John Gray, *Straw Dogs* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2003); Jonathan Glover, *Humanity: A Moral History of the 20th Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999). I have contributed to discussions of the philosophy of history myself in Andrew Fiala, “Sacrifice, Abandonment, and Historical Nihilism: Hegel’s Middle Path” *Journal of the Philosophy of History* vol. 9 (2015), 51–70.

4 Daniel Little explains: “a historiography that takes global diversity seriously should be expected to be more agnostic about patterns of development, and more open to discovery of surprising patterns, twists, and variations in the experiences of India, China, Indochina, the Arab world, the Ottoman Empire, and Sub-Saharan Africa” (Daniel Little, “Philosophy of History,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2017 Edition), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2017/entries/history/>; accessed January 2, 2019).

that this is neither the best of all possible worlds nor the worst. Rather, we can make progress so long as we continue to reflect on the history of these ideas, their historical location and the hermeneutical and historicist problems that arise in thinking about progress.

## 1 A Melioristic Methodology for the Philosophy of History

As I stated previously, today we know better than to postulate a metaphysical account of history. It is this anti-metaphysical approach that helps us make progress in thinking about progress. As mentioned above, to claim that we are making “progress” – and that we are doing “better” today in thinking about progress – is to affirm some normative claims about what it means to make progress and about what counts as better or worse. I argue that we do better when we are more circumspect, more humble, and less simplistic in our declarations about progress. These values are not merely postulated as foundational first principles. Rather, they are derived historically: we learn to be circumspect from studying the history of the philosophy of history. The study of the history of thinking about progress shows us an ongoing and increasingly complex debate. Indeed, the complexity of this debate depends upon its historicity. The more we study the history of the debate, the deeper and more sophisticated our analysis becomes. And the more we realize that it is very difficult to make sweeping claims about the meaning and purpose of history.

We find ourselves in the midst of a difficult question involving the justification of norms and the foundations of knowledge. Optimists claim to have knowledge about the movement of history and its value. Pessimists claim to know something else. Yet meliorists attempt to avoid the metaphysical declarations stipulated by the optimists and pessimists. The difficulty, however, is that avoidance of such generalizations can still appear to be metaphysical. Any thesis about progress, improvement, and doing better will appear to beg some important questions.

A methodological avoidance strategy can help to ameliorate this problem, although I must admit that the problem cannot be fully avoided. The strategy of avoidance involves grounding claims about progress in history while attempting to avoid metaphysical pronouncements. Of course, this strategy of avoidance will appear as insufficient to both the metaphysical optimist and the metaphysical pessimist. Indeed, critics have accused meliorism of falling prey either to circularity or to an infinite regress, since the normative values presupposed here are thought to be without foundation. This critique was

already articulate one hundred years ago in a critical discussion of the meliorism of James and Dewey.<sup>5</sup>

This problem runs deep. The best response is to affirm that meliorism is not (presented as) a metaphysical doctrine. Rather it is part of a pragmatic social philosophy that is derived from the study of the history of thinking about optimism and pessimism. A pessimistic conclusion, with regard to this debate, would claim that no progress can be made because the history of the debate shows us that nothing is proven or established. An optimistic conclusion with regard to the debate would claim that the history of the debate discloses the meaning of history – say, in a kind of Hegelian self-consciousness. Nonetheless, the meliorist concludes that what we learn from studying the history of the philosophy of history is that human beings are making slow progress in thinking carefully about progress and that more study is needed. We also discover that the terms of this debate are themselves thrown into question, including the meaning of the very idea of progress. But we are better at thinking about the complexity of history because we have multiple theoretical frameworks by which we can gain a better understanding of history. The hope is that in becoming more aware of this complexity, we contribute to the gradual improvement of the world (for example, by offering a social philosophy and philosophy of history that can aid the task of decolonization and liberation – although as noted above, these ideas must be subjected to dialectical and historical analysis).

This conclusion is melioristic insofar as it is an invitation to further work: it is up to us to improve the debate – and the world – by thinking more carefully. The modest conclusion is that we make progress in thinking about progress when we realize how difficult it is to think about making progress.

This is why this paper is organized historically. It is an attempt to provide a brief account of the history of thinking about progress, which shows why further thought is needed. What this history shows is the following:

- There is a long history of thinking about progress that is primarily structured by a debate between metaphysical optimism and metaphysical pessimism.
- Meliorism develops as a response to this debate and as an outgrowth of the European Enlightenment project, which is secular, humanistic, and less metaphysical.
- Contemporary post-Enlightenment discussions are more sensitive to the complexity of this discussion due, in part, to an awareness of the historicity of the debate.

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5 Daniel Sommer Robinson, "A Critique of Meliorism" *International Journal of Ethics* vol. 34, no. 2 (1924): 175–94.

- The history of the discussion of progress includes recent critiques of Eurocentrism and the Enlightenment, including the critique of grand, metaphysical narratives.
- We can make further progress by being even more subtle and sophisticated in our understanding of critiques of modern secular, melioristic, and humanistic accounts of history.

## 2 A Brief History of the Idea of Progress

It is often thought that the idea of progress is a modern invention that arose in the context of the era known as “the Enlightenment.”<sup>6</sup> But as Nisbet has shown, the idea has deep roots.<sup>7</sup> The Greeks recognized that progress could be made in science, politics, and the like. While Heraclitus suggested at the outset of the Western tradition that time was a child at play – implying that there was no overarching narrative – Greek philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle wondered whether history was a fall from a Golden Age or a kind of circle or cycle. Christians supposed that there was a larger story of fall and redemption. But even the Christian account held that progress could be made: with the coming of the messiah, the creation of the Christian church, the development of theology, the institutionalization of Christendom, and so on. The Renaissance and Reformation brought further progress, including the idea that it was possible to make progress through the use of reason – an idea that was put into action by Leonardo, Copernicus, Galileo, and the like. And although the idea of progress is central to the Enlightenment, thinkers of that time contested the idea. As is well known, Leibniz’s *Theodicy* (published in 1710) held that ours was the best of all possible worlds, while Voltaire mocked this as the raving of Dr. Pangloss in *Candide* (1759).<sup>8</sup> Kant suggested in 1784 (in “What is Enlightenment?”) that we do not yet live in an enlightened age but rather that ‘this was an age of enlightenment’. In other words, Kant recognized that there

6 See Margaret Meek Lange, “Progress”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2011 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.) (<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2011/entries/progress/>; accessed May 1, 2018).

7 Nisbet also provides us with a working definition of progress: “The idea of progress holds that mankind has advanced in the past – from some aboriginal condition of primitiveness, barbarism, or even nullity – is now advancing, and will continue to advance through the foreseeable future” [Robert Nisbet, *History of the Idea of Progress* (New York: Basic Books 1980/Routledge reprint 2017), 2].

8 Voltaire himself was, as an Enlightenment thinker, more of a meliorist, and not a metaphysical pessimist. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for prompting clarification of this point.



was still much work to be done to complete the project of enlightenment. This discussion continued after Kant. Schopenhauer's pessimism offered one response to this idea, as did Hegel's conciliatory ideas about the "end of history." Marx responded with a call for revolution, while Nietzsche returned to the playful wisdom of Heraclitus and argued that eternal recurrence governed the whole.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, the debate about whether we are making progress toward enlightenment is an old one. The point here is not to argue that there is a repetition of patterns according to a cyclical notion of history. Contemporary debate about progress is not merely a repetition of this age-old debate. Indeed, we have made progress in thinking about progress. One important development in the history of thinking about this topic is the Darwinian theory of evolution by natural selection. Theories of progress in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries are "better" insofar as they reflect a deeper understanding of sociobiology and the mechanisms of Darwinian theory. Of course, such an assertion risks begging some important questions about what drives historical change, about whether cultural evolution can be reduced to biological processes, and so on. But I argue that our thinking about history is improved when we have a broader set of theories by which we can interpret historical change. Today we are able to think about history in Marxist, Nietzschean, and Darwinian terms, as well as Freudian, Feminist, and Foucaultian terms. The complexity of our pluralistic set of theoretical frameworks makes for better history and deeper understanding even while it makes it more difficult to offer grand metaphysical pronouncements.

The Darwinian theory can fuel pessimism. The modern scientific understanding of geological time and our place in the cosmos shows the inevitable rise and fall of species and planetary systems. We might argue that optimism of the metaphysical sort is no longer sustainable after the Darwinian turn. But a better understanding of history – including the depths of geological time – can still leave us feeling hopeful, as we learn to understand the truly remarkable facts of contemporary human development. A kind of post-Darwinian optimism can be found in the thinking of some so-called posthumanists who suggest that the time is ripe to speed up evolution and prepare for a future

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9 This historical account is obviously incomplete. A further discussion would include Bacon, Condorcet, Herder, Thomas Paine, Godwin, Wollstonecraft, and a long list of others. I should also note that this account is Eurocentric. There are significant methodological challenges in articulating a complete historical account of the philosophy of history – as Park, for example, has shown (See Peter K.J. Park, *Africa, Asia and the History of Philosophy: Racism in the Formation of the Philosophical Canon* [Albany: SUNY Press, 2013]). This challenge leaves us with another reason to avoid broad metaphysical claims and to focus on modest and melioristic approach.



that transcends humanity, links human consciousness to cybernetic enhancements, and prepares our species to leave the planet.<sup>10</sup>

Somewhere between the techno-optimism of posthumanism and the nihilism brought on by the threat of extinction, we find a moderate understanding of progress that is melioristic. The middle path seeks to avoid the extremes of pessimism and optimism, while focusing on the idea that the human beings can improve our lot through rational activity and by open-minded, theoretical pluralism. Meliorism does not promise a final utopia (nor a dystopia, for that matter). Instead, it instructs us to get to work and make incremental improvement, while avoiding hubris and recognizing human limitations.

Human beings reside within history and live on a planet that is subjected to vast natural forces. Human civilization is a late arrival. There is no guarantee that it will last; it is up to us to build the world we want. And as we build, we also recognize that everyday there are new problems that must be confronted. Indeed, some of these new problems (climate change, for example) are caused by our previous efforts at amelioration (such as by the development of the fossil fuel economy). We must continue to build, repair, and improve the world every day and with each new generation. The problem of metaphysical optimism and pessimism is that they both undermine the idea that we must be active participants in history.

The idea of meliorism is associated with the philosophy of American pragmatism. Coming at the end of the nineteenth century – and in response to the authors mentioned above, including Darwin – the pragmatists sought to respond to the debate between optimists and pessimists by emphasizing the need for practical action. In 1920 in his *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, Dewey argued that pessimism was a “paralyzing doctrine” that prevents us from making efforts to improve things.<sup>11</sup> He also claimed that metaphysical optimism was equally pernicious, suggesting that it “might be regarded as the most cynical of pessimisms” because it dismisses the obvious evil we see in the world and does not respond to the urgent need to take action to improve things. Dewey described meliorism as follows: “meliorism is the belief that the specific

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10 For posthumanism see: Francis Fukuyama, *Our Posthuman Future* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2002); Nick Bostrom, Nick (2008) “Why I Want to Be a Posthuman When I Grow Up” in Bert Gordjin and Ruth Chadwick, eds., *Medical Enhancement and Posthumanity* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2008); Nick Bostrom “In Defense of Posthuman Dignity” *Bioethics* (2005)19:3. For critique from a bio-conservative point of view see Leon Kass, “Ageless Bodies and Happy Souls” *The New Atlantis*, Spring, 2003. I discuss this in Andrew Fiala, “A Defense of Cis-Humanism: Humanism for the Anthropocene” *Essays in the Philosophy of Humanism* (Fall 2019).

11 John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), 178.

conditions which exist at one moment, be they comparatively bad or comparatively good, in any event may be bettered.”<sup>12</sup>

American pragmatism builds upon British utilitarianism. Indeed, Dewey makes this link explicit in his discussion of meliorism in *Reconstruction in Philosophy*. Utilitarians such as John Stuart Mill emphasized the need to use reason to improve society. Mill was a proponent of growth, which he associated with commercial economies and “civilization.”<sup>13</sup> In his treatise *Principles of Political Economy* (from 1885), Mill stated, “All the nations which we are accustomed to call civilized increase gradually in production and in population: and there is no reason to doubt that not only these nations will for some time continue so to increase, but that most of the other nations of the world, including some not yet founded, will successively enter upon the same career.”<sup>14</sup> We will consider the problem of Eurocentrism, which we see in Mill’s work, below. But let’s continue with this historical account by noting that William James dedicated his essay *Pragmatism* (from 1907) to the memory of John Stuart Mill. Like Mill, James and his colleagues were empirically oriented. They saw the positive results of capitalist production, scientific discovery, and technological development. And as pragmatically oriented naturalists, they rejected the larger metaphysical debate about pessimism and optimism, while emphasizing that progress is a practical affair, governed by the ongoing task of gradual amelioration.

Optimists think we are making rapid progress toward enlightenment. Pessimists worry that we are regressing toward a less enlightened era. Often in such discussions, each side accuses the other of delusion, dogmatism, and fanaticism. And often in the debate about whether we are making progress, short-term changes and immediate crises inspire prophetic prognostication. With each election, disaster, or massacre, the alarmists ring the bell of doom. With each invention, discovery, or development, the visionaries toast the dawning of a better age. Our assessment of history is often colored by a kind of historical myopia. Some historical pessimists are nostalgic for a lost golden age, while viewing each negative story from the present as a sign of ongoing decline. Other, more metaphysical pessimists flatly deny that any progress can be made in a world that is without purpose. For the metaphysical pessimist, even

12 John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, 178. For a discussion of meliorism in Dewey (and G.H. Mead) see James Campbell, “Optimism, Meliorism, Faith” *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 4: 1 (1987), 93–113.

13 See Don Habibi, *John Stuart Mill and the Ethic of Human Growth* (Dordrecht, NL: Kluwer Academic, 2001).

14 John Stuart Mill, *Principles of Political Economy* (New York: D. Appleton, 1885 – ebook at: <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/30107/30107-pdf.pdf>; accessed June 15, 2018), 547–48.

the good news is tinged with the inevitable possibility of death and suffering. Historical optimists, on the other hand, see each new development as a sign of the dawning of a new era, while suggesting that remaining negativities will be smoothed out by the inevitability of the positive growth curve. This outlook then becomes metaphysical optimism when one claims that this is simply the best of all possible worlds.

The debate between optimists and pessimists – between Panglossians and Eeyores – has a long history, which we have only briefly sketched.<sup>15</sup> This brief sketch shows that progress has been made in thinking about progress – and that more work needs to be done.

### 3 The Eschatological Fallacy

An important common thread in the debate between optimists and pessimists is what I call “the eschatological fallacy.” This is the fallacious idea that we can postulate a meaning or purpose for history.<sup>16</sup> Of course religious people do not

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15 A fuller story would include a much more detailed discussion of the ancient Greek account of a the lost Golden Age, Christian accounts of the fall from Eden and hoped for return, Hobbes’s view of the state of nature, Leibnizian theodicy, Voltaire’s critique of Leibniz, Kant’s hope for perpetual peace, Schopenhauer’s pessimism, Hegel’s metaphor of the Owl of Minerva, Marx’s call for revolution, Nietzsche’s critique of nihilism, Spencer’s social Darwinism, Spengler’s organic declinism, Heidegger’s critique of metaphysics and technology, the work of the Frankfurt school, and so on. We would also need to discuss in detail more recent discussions of history and progress in the work of authors like Lachs, Hedges, Scruton, Glover, and others (see note 1 above). In this list of authors, the clearest defender of meliorism is Lachs. I discuss Lachs in Andrew Fiala, “Lachs, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness” in Krzysztof Piotr Skowronski, ed., *John Lachs’s Practical Philosophy* (Leiden, NL: Brill, 2018).

16 We might also note – in accord with the historical methodology discussed at the outset – that there is a long history of discussions of the critique of religion and eschatology. We could trace this back, for example, to Kant’s critique of religion. A more recent source is Eric Voegelin, who – along with Karl Löwith, Hans Blumenberg, and others – connected religious eschatology with secular eschatology around the basic drive for certainty: eschatology results from a desire to know the meaning and purpose of history. Voegelin’s purpose is to offer a critique of totalitarianism, which is a secular political structure that “immanent-izes the eschaton.” We will discuss this further below. But the point to be made here is that eschatological thinking is fallacious in all of its forms – whether religious or secular, whether transcendent or immanent. See Eric Voegelin, *New Science of Politics* (University of Chicago Press, 1952/1987), Chapter 4. Also see Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History: The Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949); Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1966/1983).

think that eschatology is fallacious. So this paper takes a side in the debate about eschatology and religion, claiming that eschatology – whether optimistic or pessimistic – is a kind of wishful thinking grounded in metaphysical claims that goes beyond the bounds of what limited human beings can claim to know. Disputes between optimists and pessimists often fall into the fallacy of eschatological thinking. Each side in the pessimist–optimist debate accuses the other in one way or another of committing the eschatological fallacy.

Let's consider how this occurs by considering, as an example, recent work by Steven Pinker and John Gray. Pinker coined the term “progressophobia” in his 2018 book, *Enlightenment Now*, to describe a pessimistic ideology that is constitutionally averse to the idea that we are making progress.<sup>17</sup> Critics have accused Pinker of a sort of Panglossian optimism that is deluded by its own ideological blinders. John Gray said that Pinker's apologia for the Enlightenment amounted to an “intellectual anodyne” and a “rationalist sermon.”<sup>18</sup> Gray is well known as a critic of this kind of enlightenment, at least since he argued in *Straw Dogs* (2002) that the ideology of progress is a kind of humanistic solipsism which forgets that human life and history is a very small part of a much larger cosmic play in which all species go extinct and human life is bound to be effaced.

Pinker accuses the progressophobes of a version of the eschatological fallacy. He follows Arthur Herman, for example, in accusing Nietzsche and a variety of other thinkers – from Heidegger to Cornel West – of being “prophets of doom.”<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, John Gray accuses optimistic humanists of affirming “one of Christianity's most dubious promises – that salvation is open to all. The humanist belief in progress is only a secular version of this Christian faith.”<sup>20</sup> In rejecting eschatological thinking, Gray appears to assert its opposite: if eschatological optimism is false, then the truth must be pessimism that denies any meaning and purpose to history.

There is no perfect structural similarity between the affirmation of eschatology and its denial. Eschatology is usually connected to forms of metaphysical optimism, as a theory about the ultimate salvation of the world. The pessimist's denial of eschatology rejects that account of salvation – and so could be understood as entirely un-eschatological. However, there is a parallel insofar as

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17 Steven Pinker, *Enlightenment Now*, Chapter 4.

18 John Gray, “Unenlightened thinking: Steven Pinker's embarrassing new book is a feeble sermon for rattled liberals” *New Statesman*, February 22, 2018 (<https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/books/2018/02/unenlightened-thinking-steven-pinker-s-embarrassing-new-book-feeble-sermon>; accessed May 31, 2018).

19 Pinker, *Enlightenment Now*, 39–40. Pinker follows Arthur Herman, *The idea of Decline in Western History* (New York: Free Press, 1997).

20 John Gray, *Straw Dogs*, 4.

the claim that “there is no salvation” stakes a claim about metaphysical theories of salvation.<sup>21</sup>

The meliorist attempts to sidestep this sort of debate by asking how we could ever really know the answer to the question of the meaning and purpose of history. For the meliorist, this question of the ultimate meaning of history is itself the problem. The eschatological fallacy results from asking such a question. We avoid this fallacy by humbly refusing to ask the metaphysical question.

The need for such a deflationary resolution becomes apparent when we recognize that the accusation of fallacious eschatological reasoning is employed in tit-for-tat arguments between optimists and pessimists. The optimist accuses the pessimist of a false eschatology and vice versa. The problem is, of course, that in making such an accusation it is often assumed that it is possible for us to know the truth of eschatology. For debates between metaphysical optimists and pessimists – say in an imagined conversation between Leibniz and Schopenhauer – this is fairly obvious: Leibniz holds that this is the best of all possible worlds, while Schopenhauer claims it is the worst. The less metaphysical debate between optimists like Pinker and pessimists like Gray is not articulated in such extreme fashion. However, Pinker and Gray do end up using the accusation of false eschatology to critique the opposing side. Here the debate is not about whose eschatological view is true or false. Rather, the debate is often understood as being between a factual/historical account (that is purportedly not metaphysical) and what the critic claims is an unfounded metaphysical account. Thus, for example, Pinker offers lists of data that show that we are improving (as a supposedly fact-based, empirical account of progress), while accusing the progressophobes of being ideologically committed to pessimism. On the other hand, Gray will cite real-world atrocities (as a supposedly fact-based, historical account of human depravity), while accusing the optimists of an ideological commitment that causes them to misinterpret these same data. In other words, in this debate, each side claims its view is reasonable and grounded in historical fact, while accusing the other of a false metaphysical/eschatological ideology.

What is interesting here is the way that data and facts are determined and interpreted in light of a theoretical and interpretive framework. My analysis

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21 This issue is similar to what we find in debates between theists and atheists. Theists assert that there is a God, while atheists deny this. But theists will claim that atheists have a “God-shaped hole” in their lives while atheists will claim that theists are guided by a God-shaped delusion. Each side accuses the other of begging the question and shifting the burden of proof. I discuss this in Andrew Fiala, “Militant Atheism, Pragmatism, and the God-Shaped Hole” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 65:3 (June 2009), 139–151.

here assumes that there are “facts” of the world – but we should also recognize that the “facts” that we discuss in our analysis of history are structured by our theoretical lens and hermeneutical framework. Human beings are killed in atrocities (as Gray might point out) but life-expectancy is improving (as Pinker might point out). There is a fundamental factual reality beneath such claims. But that factual reality is interpreted and organized from within a philosophy of history and theoretical framework. The facts are not “constructed” (as an anti-realist might suggest), nor are they simply there (as a realist might suggest). Rather, philosophical pragmatism attempts to avoid the stark contrast between realism and anti-realism by focusing our attention on the use to which facts are put – the theory within which they are significant.<sup>22</sup> Facts are subject to interpretation, but our interpretations are historically grounded and formed in light of the plurality of theoretical frameworks. To draw any conclusion about “the facts” of history, we must be aware of the complexity of this hermeneutical process. A “better” understanding of history – i.e., progress in history – results from understanding the complexity of the hermeneutical process including the way that facts are identified and evaluated.<sup>23</sup>

But let’s return to the problem of eschatology. We should note that the sorts of claims made in contemporary debates (with Pinker and Gray as exemplars) are often restrained and seemingly aware of the problem of eschatology. Neither Pinker or Gray is offering a strictly metaphysical account, even though they accuse their opponents of waxing metaphysical. In this regard, we should note that contemporary debates have improved, and that, as stated at the outset, we have made progress in thinking about progress. Gray’s pessimism and Pinker’s optimism are both grounded in scientific and philosophical methodologies that have developed over the course of the past centuries. They recognize the complexity of their own data and they attempt to avoid wild and simplistic metaphysical speculation. And again – here this paper picks sides – asserting that the pragmatic and scientific turn of modern philosophy has allowed us to make progress in the debate as currently represented by Gray and Pinker. Thus, we make progress in the philosophy of history when we realize how careful we must be in philosophizing about history.

The solution to the eschatological fallacy is intellectual humility: to recognize our finitude and admit that human beings cannot know the meaning and purpose of history. This solution is not, however, pessimistic in the metaphysical sense – even though religious believers and optimists may be

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22 See for example David Hildebrand, *Beyond Realism and Antirealism: John Dewey and the Neopragmatists* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2003).

23 Thanks to the editor for asking me to elaborate on this point here.

unhappy to see their dogmatic faith in ultimate progress rejected. While the optimist claims to know that history is progressing, the pessimist claims to know that progress is impossible. Thus, the pessimist's claim is as dogmatic as the optimist's: it is simply a denial of the optimist's eschatological claim. To avoid optimism and pessimism, a third idea is required, which is pragmatic meliorism. Meliorism is epistemologically restrained. Its modesty develops out of self-conscious awareness of the history of debates between optimists and pessimists. To avoid the problem of falling back into a metaphysical dispute, we must reiterate that this is a historical result. Pragmatic meliorism is a late development that is a response to the debates about progress from previous centuries. In other words, the more progress we make, the more difficult it is to discuss "progress" in eschatological terms and the more we find that we turn our attention to the historical, the local, the small, the concrete, and the pragmatic.<sup>24</sup> The pragmatic and melioristic turn is "progressive" but only when "progress" is reinterpreted in non-eschatological terms.

#### 4 A Brief History of Meliorism

Meliorism is the idea that progress can be made – but that it is not guaranteed. This definition is one we might find in the work of American pragmatists such as William James. James explained in *Pragmatism*, "Meliorism treats salvation as neither inevitable nor impossible. It treats it as a possibility."<sup>25</sup> While the word "salvation" implies some kind of final account or reconciliation, it is clear that James does not mean "salvation" in a metaphysical or religious sense. Pragmatism does not allow for universal "salvation" of this sort. It is pluralistic and piecemeal. Moreover, whatever "progress" we make is also plural and piecemeal, local and limited. An important feature of this approach is that it requires us to work for our own "salvation" while denying that we can ever rest on our laurels and be done with the work of making the world a better place. James's approach is to encourage active engagement with the world in an effort to improve life. In another essay, "Is Life Worth Living?" James explained, "believe that life is worth living and your belief will help create the fact."<sup>26</sup>

24 I discuss these themes Andrew Fiala, "Political Skepticism and Anarchist Themes in the American Tradition" *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy* vol. 2, (December 2013).

25 William James, *Pragmatism* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1981), Lecture VIII, 128.

26 William James, *Is Life Worth Living?* (Philadelphia: S. Burns Weston, 1896), 63.



As mentioned above, meliorism is the result of historical insight into the debate between optimists and pessimists. Thus, the concept of meliorism has a historical development. The term “meliorism” is a fairly recent invention. Its coinage is often attributed to novelist George Eliot in the 1870s.<sup>27</sup> But a more important source is Herbert Spencer, the great philosopher of the nineteenth century, to whom we attribute the phrase “survival of the fittest” as an explanation of evolutionary theory. Spencer interpreted Darwin as suggesting that there was “progress” of sorts in evolutionary processes, as species (and “races”) evolved: the more fit species (or individual members of a species or race) left more offspring and so came to predominate.<sup>28</sup> Spencer is notoriously associated with the idea that became known as “social Darwinism,” which is a reminder of the problems that we confront in dealing with the question of meliorism and progress. We need to be attentive to our tendency to inscribe our biases and cultural perspective in our theories of history. Furthermore, when we remain enthralled to an eschatological picture of the world, we may end up justifying atrocity in the name of bringing about the dreamed-of progressive end of history.

At any rate, Spencer employed the term “meliorist” in *Man Versus the State* (from 1884) and connected it with liberal political philosophy. Spencer explained, “if we adopt either the optimist view or the meliorist view – if we say that life on the whole yields more pleasure than pain; or that it is on the way to become such that it will yield more pleasure than pain – then these actions by which life is maintained are justified, and there results a warrant for the freedom to perform them.”<sup>29</sup> The political idea here is that if we believe that human life can improve itself, then we do not need a strong centralized state to control things. In other words, as a liberal and utilitarian, Spencer maintained that life would improve if human beings were left alone to develop their own capacities. He maintained that there was an evolutionary process unfolding in social and political organizations, which led to the development of liberal/secular systems. However, his account of this in essays such as “Progress: Its Laws and Causes” (from 1857) contains speculation that is blatantly racist and hierarchical – and Spencer’s understanding of evolution was

27 See Jeremy Carrette, *William James’s Hidden Religious Imagination* (New York: Routledge, 2013),

28 See Herbert Spencer, *The Principles of Biology*, volume 1 (New York: D. Appleton, 1898 – originally published in 1866), 457 and 469.

29 Herbert Spencer, *The Man versus the State, with Six Essays on Government, Society and Freedom*, ed. Eric Mack, introduction by Albert Jay Nock (Indianapolis: LibertyClassics, 1981), 149–50 (At: <http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/330> accessed May 29, 2018)

more Lamarckian than Darwinian.<sup>30</sup> Thus, Spencer's account must be taken with a grain of salt. But Spencer's effort is important insofar as he rejects the idea that there is some pre-ordained divine providential plan. Rather, Spencer maintained that there is a natural movement from homogeneity to heterogeneity – from simplicity to complexity. It is this natural process that leads to the development of liberal and secular values. Spencer interprets history as a melioristic movement in the direction of liberty, individuality, non-conformity, and plurality – all of which result from natural processes.

Another important source in the history of meliorism is Paul Carus, who understood meliorism as a metaphysical principle related to the process of evolution and to his own unique reading of Kantian morality and Spencerian biological and political thinking. Carus accused Spencer of not offering a fully "ethical" theory, since Spencer (and Darwin) left moral structure out of the process of natural evolution. Carus supposed that evolutionary struggle had a moral component. The present resulted from the struggles of the past – for which we should be grateful; and we have a moral obligation to continue struggling to improve things. Carus suggested that moral struggles and moral imperatives changed with the situation and the location in history. But he thought that there was a "law of nature" that impelled us toward amelioration. He explained:

The idea [of amelioration] is no mere fiction, it is a power of reality, pervading the universe as a law of nature; and with regard to humanity it points out to man the path of progress. Progress, if it is guided by the ideal, will produce new and better eras for humankind. And if a moral tendency were not the fundamental law of nature, there could not be any advancement, development, or evolution.<sup>31</sup>

It should be obvious that Carus's view is incompletely Darwinian. Perhaps it is not surprising that he does not fully understand the nuances of Darwinian theory of natural selection – writing as he is in 1885 just a few decades after Darwin published *On the Origin of Species* (in 1859) and under the influence of Spencer's Lamarckian interpretation of evolutionary theory.

However – and here is the crucial point – Carus opens the door to pragmatism in his account of meliorism. Like Spencer, Carus was an influential force

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30 In Herbert Spencer, *Seven Essays* (London: Watts & Co., 1907). On Spencer's Lamarckian view see Peter J. Bowler, *Evolution: The History of An Idea* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), chapter 9.

31 Paul Carus, *Monism and Meliorism* (New York: F.W. Christern, 1885), 77.

in intellectual life at the end of the nineteenth century. He was editor of *The Monist* and of the Open Court publishing company and corresponded with C.S. Peirce, John Dewey, and others. At any rate, Carus is similar to James and the pragmatists insofar as he maintains that meliorism is an activist theory. He explains, “the ethical ideal of meliorism is work. The purpose of life and the duty of man is activity and labor in the service of amelioration.”<sup>32</sup>

This historical excursus shows us how meliorism is connected to post-Darwinian evolutionary thinking, to engaged philosophy and science, to liberal-secular systems of politics, as well as to the American pragmatist tradition. Let’s pause to further emphasize that meliorism is typically secular and liberal. One could argue that meliorism ought to be understood as an essential feature of those forms of secularism that do not commit the eschatological fallacy or that do not simply “immanentize the eschaton”, as Eric Voeglin put it (see note above). In other words, to avoid the eschatological fallacy, we ought to affirm meliorism and avoid utopian schemes that are grounded in fallacious eschatological hope. Illiberal states tend to be perfectionist (and risk becoming totalitarian) when they insist on a preformed conception of the good, the right, and the true. Liberal/secular systems focus more on fair procedures and liberty, while keeping the door open to diversity and further improvement.

Let’s conclude this history of meliorism by noting that it is also found in so-called “secular humanism.” Secular humanists follow in the historical lineage outlined here, building upon the work of utilitarian and pragmatist philosophy. The “Secular Humanist Declaration” of 1980 (by Paul Kurtz and others) makes the link between secularism and meliorism explicit. The document states:

The secular humanistic outlook is basically melioristic, looking forward with hope rather than backward with despair. We are committed to extending the ideals of reason, freedom, individual and collective opportunity, and democracy throughout the world community. The problems that humankind will face in the future, as in the past, will no doubt be complex and difficult. However, if it is to prevail, it can only do so by enlisting resourcefulness and courage. Secular humanism places trust in human intelligence rather than in divine guidance.<sup>33</sup>

The last sentence explains the non-metaphysical commitment of secular meliorism, which is that human intelligence can be employed to solve problems.

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32 Carus, *Monism and Meliorism*, 82.

33 A Secular Humanist Declaration (of 1980) at: <https://secularhumanism.org/index.php/11> (accessed May 29, 2018).

This idea is pragmatic and limited in scope. The Secular Humanist Declaration affirms that there are no panaceas offering salvation.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, the problem to be solved is the view that looks for panaceas. That is the root of the eschatological fallacy: to believe that there is some pre-ordained end of history which ought to guide our action and which provides a source of redemptive power. Meliorism rejects that idea (as well as the pessimistic idea that there is no purpose or possibility of improvement).

## 5 The Critique of Secularism and the Enlightenment

Not everyone agrees with the point of view offered above. A critic may complain that pragmatism, meliorism, and secularism are intolerant and fundamentally misguided. Some accuse secularists and humanists of being as fervent and fanatical in their assertion of atheism as the religious fundamentalists they argue against. One example of this complaint is found in Chris Hedges' book *I Don't Believe in Atheists*. Hedges accuses religious fundamentalists and the "new atheists" – both of them alike – of offering a dogmatic and simplistic utopianism.<sup>35</sup> His work explicitly repudiates the work of Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, and Richard Dawkins, arguing that their atheism is as dogmatic as the thinking of religious fundamentalists. Others have argued against "atheist fundamentalism" in a similar fashion.<sup>36</sup> One worry in all the critiques of radical atheism is the fear that atheism will turn against religion

34 The Secular Humanist Declaration continues:

Secular humanism places trust in human intelligence rather than in divine guidance. Skeptical of theories of redemption, damnation, and reincarnation, secular humanists attempt to approach the human situation in realistic terms: human beings are responsible for their own destinies. We believe that it is possible to bring about a more humane world, one based upon the methods of reason and the principles of tolerance, compromise, and the negotiations of difference. We recognize the need for intellectual modesty and the willingness to revise beliefs in the light of criticism. Thus consensus is sometimes attainable. While emotions are important, we need not resort to the panaceas of salvation, to escape through illusion, or to some desperate leap toward passion and violence. We deplore the growth of intolerant sectarian creeds that foster hatred. In a world engulfed by obscurantism and irrationalism it is vital that the ideals of the secular city not be lost.

Secular Humanist Declaration (of 1980) at: <https://secularhumanism.org/index.php/11> (accessed May 29, 2018).

35 Chris Hedges, *I Don't Believe in Atheists* (New York: Free Press, 2008).

36 Alister McGrath and Joanna Collicutt McGrath, *The Dawkins Delusion?: Atheist Fundamentalism and the Denial of the Divine* (Downer's Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2007); Ian S. Markham, *Against Atheism: Why Dawkins, Hitchens, and Harris Are Fundamentally Wrong* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

and use violence and coercion to eradicate religion. While this concern is often hyperbolic, there are historical examples of anti-religious violence in the official atheism of Marxist-Leninist-Maoist political systems. The solution is a less vehement and more restrained and moderate secularism, which permits atheists and religionists to coexist in all of their diversity. Furthermore, another antidote to both dogmatic secularism and theocratic fundamentalism is a moderate commitment to incremental progress. In other words, secularism needs to be modest about making progress: it must be melioristic and avoid the kind of utopian eschatology associated with the Leninist-Maoist tradition.

A related critique has been leveled against the values of “the Enlightenment.” A number of scholars have taken aim at the Enlightenment in various ways. Horkheimer and Adorno claimed in the middle of the last century that enlightenment is an ideological construct.<sup>37</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre claimed that the modern project of discovering abstract justifications for morality and politics is conceptually doomed as a Quixotic endeavor that is destined to fail.<sup>38</sup> Others accuse Enlightenment authors of being racist, bigoted, ethnocentric, and the like.<sup>39</sup> Enlightenment values are rejected as being Eurocentric and grounded on hegemonic colonialism.<sup>40</sup> The Enlightenment is blamed for being anti-religious and materialistic. It is rejected as utopian dogmatism. It is linked to Social Darwinism, eugenic fantasies, totalitarian attempts to re-educate and enlighten by force, and so on. In much of this critique, there is a claim about the failure and hypocrisy of the Enlightenment. A significant worry is that the Enlightenment has failed to live up to its own ideal standards. If Kant is a racist or Mill is a Eurocentrist, to cite two prominent examples, then all of their grand moralizing about universal ethics and progressive development seems to fall back to earth. If scientific discoveries led to the eugenic programs of the Social Darwinists, to cite another example, then so much the worse for science.

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37 See: Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, “The Concept of Enlightenment” in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Continuum, 1997).

38 Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, third edition (Notre Dame University Press, 2007), 55.

39 See Peter K.J. Park, *Africa, Asia and the History of Philosophy: Racism in the Formation of the Philosophical Canon* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2013); Robert Bernasconi, “Who Invented the Concept of Race? Kant’s Role in the Enlightenment Construction of Race,” in Robert Bernasconi, ed., *Race* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001): 11–36.

40 See for example: Enrique Dussel, *Ethics of Liberation in the Age of Globalization and Exclusion* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012); Enrique Dussel, *Politics of Liberation. A Critical World History* (London: SCM Press, 2011); Anibal Quijano, “Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America” *Nepantla: Views from the South*, 1: 3 (2000), 533–80; Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

This critique takes aim at what conservative critics of the Enlightenment's faith in scientific progress might call "the original sin of the Enlightenment."<sup>41</sup> Again, a historical perspective can help frame discussions of the sorts of "sins" found in the Enlightenment "faith."<sup>42</sup> For example, the conservative religious critique of the Enlightenment connects back to critiques of the ancient heresy of Pelagianism. Pelagianism held that human beings were not tainted by original sin and so were able to make progress without divine assistance or the need for atonement, grace, and the rest of the Christian eschatological program. This reminds us, of course, that the so-called original sin of the Enlightenment is not so original. At any rate, the conservative critique emphasizes sin, failure, and fallenness. Conservative Christians, for example, assert that it is hubris (or sinful pride) to declare that we have made progress and that we will continue to make progress on our own without the need for salvation.

On the other hand, for radical philosophers (usually on the Left and often influenced by postmodern critical theory), the problem is that the ideology of improvement is offered by self-proclaimed saviors who want to impose their idea of an improved human nature on the rest of the world. Thus, what we might call "the radical critique" of the Enlightenment worries that self-righteous human beings who set out to improve the world end up creating a world of domination and exclusion. Again, this is an old problem. It is a familiar claim of contemporary post-colonial and decolonizing critique. But this was a problem even in the ancient world, familiar from the struggle of Second Temple Judaism and Early Christians against the Roman Empire: for Jews and Christians, the Pax Romana was oppressive, destructive, and certainly not liberatory or enlightened. In both the ancient and contemporary contexts, the problem is how to establish a non-ideological and secular system that is not viewed as domineering and exclusionary by those who are subject to it. In other words, what a dominant power views as progress will often appear as an ideological imposition from the vantage point of the colonized.

In response to these objections, we need a better understanding of "the Enlightenment." Two features will be emphasized here. First, there is no such thing as "the Enlightenment" as a uniform set of ideas, policies, values, and

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41 See Eric Cohen, "The Ends of Science" in *First Things*, November 2006.

42 I put these terms in scare-quotes here to indicate that this critique is connected to a religious worldview that this paper does not accept. For a critical discussion of "the Enlightenment faith" as a kind of optimistic "pipe-dream" that is a secularized version of Christian faith see John Kekes, *A Case for Conservatism* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1998), 211. I discuss this in Andrew Fiala, *Practical Pacifism* (New York: Algora Publishing), chapter 8.

structures. To claim that there is a unified movement that can be called “the Enlightenment” is historically false, as Anthony Padgen and J.G.A. Pocock have shown: we would do better to speak of “Enlightenments” in the plural.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, the idea that there is some unified monolith called “the Enlightenment” ends up essentializing a process that is complex and evolving. Thus, there is some irony in the fact that critics of “the Enlightenment” who offer their critique from a standpoint that resists essentializing often end up essentializing the thing they critique. The second point is that one of the guiding principles of the process of enlightenment (as opposed to “the Enlightenment” in scare quotes to indicate that it is not simply one thing) is the idea of continual improvement. The process of enlightenment is not a simplistic assertion of optimism and progress. Rather, it outlines a task, a discipline, or a practice aimed at making incremental, melioristic improvement. This incremental and melioristic practice must be open-minded and it must take into account the point of view of those who are on the losing side of political power. To do this it emphasizes liberal, secular systems that are open-ended and inclusive – and amenable to further improvement.

Thus, one important feature of this open-minded and dialogically sensitive approach is the idea that pluralism and secularism are of value. We make “progress” when we allow for multiple perspectives, when religious liberty is respected, when indigenous and local cultures are protected, and when political power resists becoming oppressive. And thus, we should acknowledge that the radical critique of enlightenment is progressive. We are making progress in thinking about progress when we recognize that the ideology of progress can be hypocritical and oppressive.

We also make progress when we take heed of the warnings of the conservative critique of enlightenment. Recall that this critique warns that it is hubris (or a “sin” to use religious language) to attempt to take salvation into our own hands. Perhaps the posthumanists mentioned above fall prey to this sort of hubris. Yet again, we make progress when we acknowledge the temptation of hubris. Posthumanism may go too far. But this does not mean that we should give up efforts to ameliorate things or revert to a conservative Christian faith. Rather, amelioration works better – it is improved – when we are cautious, self-reflective, and humble.

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43 Anthony Padgen, *The Enlightenment and Why it Still Matters* (New York: Random House, 2013); J.G.A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion, Volume 1: The Enlightenments of Edward Gibbon* (Cambridge University Press, 2004).



## 6 Conclusion

By understanding the history of the debate about progress, including the history of meliorism, we become more reflective and aware of the pitfalls and promises of the ideas of “progress” and “enlightenment.” This paper has argued that we make progress in thinking about progress when we are parsimonious and pluralistic; when we recognize the difficulties created by the hermeneutical circle and the challenge of historicism; and when we are modest in our conclusions. But one recurrent risk in such discussions is that when we celebrate our successes, we end up claiming too much.<sup>44</sup>

Meliorism should be historically self-conscious. Meliorists must be aware of the risk of eschatological thinking. They must be aware of previous failures of enlightenment (including residual racist and Eurocentric bias). And they must admit that there is no unified or coherent plan of development. Development is dialectical and Darwinian. We step forward in one direction, while moving backward somewhere else. We often move in circles or as a pendulum. The process is guided by our responses to the reality of the natural world. Ideally such response should be “enlightened” – intelligent, rational, modest, and historically grounded. An enlightened view of progress recognizes that change does not happen as “progress” toward some unified end. Rather, meliorism is about local and incremental change that is guided by intelligent effort focused here and now. There are no guarantees that progress will continue. But one tool that can be used is greater awareness of the critique of progress. We must, in short, become enlightened about the project of enlightenment in order to make progress in thinking about progress.

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44 This problem haunts Pinker’s work in *Enlightenment Now*. Pinker explains in detail how we have made progress. But the language he employs is about “optimism” instead of meliorism. He opposes optimistic belief in progress to what he calls “progressophobia” and declinism. Thus, he brings in a kind of dichotomy that seems to echo eschatological thinking. Pinker opposes “prophets of doom” to the advocates of progress. But what is often lost in the discussion is the fact that it takes hard work and effort to make progress. Pinker acknowledges this. But his enthusiasm can overshadow the melioristic point. As we’ve seen, critics such as Gray – or the radicals and conservatives mentioned above – then quickly pounce.