

# How Do We Know It Is Moral Progress: On the Criteria of Moral Progress

## Symposium

Tilburg University

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### Speakers

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Societies change over time. Chattel slavery and foot-binding have been abolished, democracy has become increasingly widespread, gay rights have become established in some countries, and the animal rights movement gains momentum. Do these changes count as moral progress? Is there even such a thing? If so, how should we understand it? These questions have received increasing attention from philosophers, psychologists, biologists, and political scientists in recent decades.

Some, however, still recoil at the very idea of moral progress. In several cases, this is due to the metaphysical baggage that comes with its purportedly teleological implications. The 20th century in many ways lay waste to the idea of social change as a long journey into moral perfection. Others are anxious about the concept's normative and political ramifications: whenever people start talking about moral progress, they can easily slide into comparing countries, cultures, and peoples in terms of which are more, and which are less morally developed. If these judgments of moral development are used to justify manipulation, political pressure, or perhaps even coercive intervention, then this can rightly be regarded as morally problematic. A last source of skepticism about moral progress is epistemic: to judge whether an instance of change should count as a moral improvement or not, we must rely on a set of criteria in light of which we can make such judgments. Such criteria, however, seem hard to come by, and their justification remains perennially contested.

This symposium brings together researchers who focus on the latter, third set of problems, namely the question what the *criteria* for assessing a development as moral progress are and which potential obstacles, we face in determining whether an episode of change constitutes moral progress. Central sub-concerns in this debate are firstly, the issue of how we can figure out what it means for things to *improve* morally over time. Second, there are the problems that have to do with balancing or comparing *different moral standards* for moral progress. Finally, there are the problems which arise because we need to determine *what* it is that undergoes moral change over time.