

Pragmatism and Moral Progress

Matthieu Queloz (University of Bern)

February 15, 2024, 15-16 (CET)

When philosophers acknowledge that alterations in our conceptual repertoire can themselves constitute moral progress, they often point to how enriching that repertoire with additional concepts can open up previously inaccessible forms of moral perception and knowledge. But losing concepts can be just as important to moral progress as gaining new ones. This is difficult to appreciate as long as we conceive of conceptual progress primarily in epistemological terms, as a matter of expanding our knowledge. Moreover, the peculiarity of concept loss is obscured as long as one simply models it on the way words go out of use or entire languages go extinct—concept loss is not primarily a matter of the number of concept-users dropping to zero. Making sense of concept loss requires distinguishing engaged from disengaged concept use, and understanding how engaged concept use is sustained by confidence in concepts—a confidence that comes to stand in need of reasons when confronted with alternative ways of thinking, especially when the confrontation invites reflection on the merits of our concepts more than it invites engaged concept use resulting in moral appraisal. When our confidence in a concept is eroded, it can destroy what knowledge we possessed under that concept. Yet our epistemic loss can be our ethical gain.