



**UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY**  
FACULTY OF ARTS  
Department of Philosophy

**PHIL 653-01**  
**Topics in Social and Political Philosophy**  
**Social Justice and Change**

**COURSE OUTLINE**

**Instructor Name:** Dr. Agnes Tam

**Email:** agnes.tam@ucalgary.ca (Please expect a response in 24-48 hours. Please do not expect responses outside of regular business hours and on weekends. Emails will not be answered if the answer to your question can be found on the syllabus.)

**Office Hours:** Tu 14:00-16:00

**COURSE INFORMATION**

The idea of progress once occupied a center stage of liberal political philosophy. In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, progress was widely considered historically inevitable and morally imperative. What happened then? Humanity (Europe) entered the so-called period of Enlightenment. Vaccines and steam-engines were invented. Copernicus discovered that the earth moves, rather than standing still. The French Revolution overturned feudalism and monarchical absolutism. What made such technological, scientific and moral progress possible? For many Enlightenment thinkers, the answer was “reason”. Gone was the blind conformity to traditional authorities and customs. Humanity finally matured itself by developing the capacity for independent and critical reasoning. But the Enlightenment project of progress was short-lived. The political circumstances in the 20<sup>th</sup> century prompted skepticism over the values of progress, and its very possibility. Colonial conquests and environmental degradation were justified in the name of progress. The rise of totalitarianism and extremism eroded confidence in reason. The world wars destroyed peace as well as the belief that history propels humanity forward and upward.

While the idea of progress largely disappeared in the philosophical discourse in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it is experiencing a revival. There are two reasons for this: political and methodological. Politically, we’re living in a time of change. On the one hand, the moral circle seems to have expanded to include women, racialized people, members of the LGBTQ2+ community, and even animals to a certain extent. On the other, political tribalism and the resurgence of populism and authoritarianism are destabilizing norms of peace and human rights. Are these changes progressive or regressive? The need to make sense of these changes prompts new conceptions of progress that are less teleological and less linear than the Enlightenment’s. Methodologically, new empirical tools have improved our understanding of the conditions of progress. Empirically-minded philosophers are drawing upon insights from evolutionary biology, cognitive science, social science and history to vindicate, challenge or nuance the Enlightenment rationalist model of progress.

The course introduces students to this fast-growing interdisciplinary scholarship on progress and scrutinizes the role of progress in political theory and practice. There are three parts to our collective inquiry. In the first part, we will look at the concept of progress: Is it metaphysical or practical? What are the types of progress? How are they related? In the second part, we will examine how progress comes about. Is human nature an obstacle to progress? If so, is reason a cure? Can liberal institutions facilitate and stabilize progress? Or does progress come from below, through social movements and political struggles? Finally, we will explore the post-colonial critiques of progress. Is progress valuable? Or is it a mere self-congratulatory bias and a weapon of colonialism? If not, how can we de-colonialize the politics of progress?

### **COURSE OBJECTIVES/LEARNING OUTCOMES**

Course learning objectives are a required part of the outline. No particular format for the objectives are required. To assist you in creating your course outcomes, here are the program level outcomes for the philosophy major:

- Knowledge of the nature, conditions, institutions and values of progress.
- Knowledge of the role of progress in theory and politics of social change.
- Ability to critically digest, interpret, and analyze empirically-informed philosophical theories of progress.
- Ability to converse with philosophers of diverse traditions.
- Ability to identify the relations between theory and practice, ideal and non-ideal worlds, and the empirical and the normative.
- Ability to engage in constructive, respectful, oral and written argumentation.

### **REQUIRED/RECOMMENDED TEXTBOOKS, READINGS AND MATERIALS**

Articles will all be available via D2L.

### **COURSE ASSESSMENT AND EVALUATION**

#### **Assessment Components and Grading Schemes**

Grades for this class are based on five elements:

- (1) **Discussion questions** (10%). Starting in week 2, each week, students must post at least one discussion question (1%) on the required readings for the respective week. The questions must be posted to the D2L discussion board by 9AM the day of the class meeting. Your questions will be graded on a Pass/Fail basis, and your grade will be calculated as the total number of passes out of 11 (max 100%). Failure to submit your reading questions or late submission will count as a Fail (0%), unless there is adequate justification (see Absence or Missed Course Assessments below).
- (2) **Comment sheets** (30%). Each student must submit three comment sheets (up to 1200 words), each (10%) summarizing and evaluating one of the required readings for the course. Students should keep the exposition short and leave enough room for their critique (e.g., possible inconsistencies, problems or omissions in the author's argument). This assignment can be submitted via D2L at any point during the term but must be submitted within two weeks of the day that the piece you are commenting on was discussed in class (by 11:59PM). Late submissions will be penalized at the rate of 1/3 of a grade (e.g., from a B to a B-) per calendar day of lateness, unless there is adequate justification (see Absence or Missed Course Assessments below).

- (3) **Final paper proposal** (10%). One proposal (up to 1200 words) on the final paper should be submitted via D2L and emailed to the assigned peer reviewer by April 5, 11.59pm. In the proposal, students should identify a research topic that engages with themes and arguments discussed during the course, set out the questions they want to address in the final paper, and provide an outline or summary of how they will proceed. The proposal will be graded on a Pass/Fail basis. Failure to submit or late submission will count as a Fail (0%), unless there is adequate justification (see Absence or Missed Course Assessments below).
- (4) **Peer review** (5%). Each student will be paired with another and complete for each other a peer review report on their final paper proposal. Peer review report form can be found on D2L. The report must be submitted via D2L and emailed to the relevant student by April 11, 11.59pm. The report will be graded on a Pass/Fail basis. Failure to submit or late submission will count as a Fail (0%), unless there is adequate justification (see Absence or Missed Course Assessments below).
- (5) **Final paper** (45%). Each student must submit a final paper (up to 5000 words, exclusive of references) by April 26, 11:59pm via D2L. This research paper can draw on your response paper. For example, your response papers may identify a particular problem with an argument that the author does not address; your final paper could then discuss the problem in more detail, consider possible responses the author might give, etc. In developing the final paper, feedback on the proposal from me and the peer reviewer should be taken into account. Late submissions will be penalized at the rate of 1/3 of a grade (e.g., from a B to a B-) per calendar day of lateness, unless there is adequate justification (see Absence or Missed Course Assessments below).

## Exams

- No final exam

## Course schedule and reading

### Part I: What's the idea of progress?

#### Introduction

Why is the idea of progress popular in political discourse and philosophy again? Do we really need a theory of progress? Could it be dangerous?

#### Jan 10

- Francis Fukuyama (2022) "The long arc of historical progress" in WSJ: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-long-arc-of-historical-progress-11651244262>

#### Jan 12

- Allen Buchanan and Russell Powell (2018) "Introduction: Why a theory of moral progress is needed" in *The Evolution of Moral Progress* (pp.1-43), OUP.

#### The Enlightenment Conceptions of Progress

What exactly is the Enlightenment conception of progress? In what way is it teleological? Is the concept of progress metaphysical or practical? Is human nature an obstacle to progress? How is "reason" a vehicle of progress? What is the conception of reason here? Enlightenment thinkers tend to see technological, political, and moral progress as intimately linked. How so and why?

#### Jan 17

- Kant (1784) "What is Enlightenment?" at [https://ghdi.ghi-dc.org/sub\\_document.cfm?document\\_id=3589](https://ghdi.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=3589)
- Kant (1784) "Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View" at [https://ghdi.ghi-dc.org/sub\\_document.cfm?document\\_id=3590](https://ghdi.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=3590)

#### Jan 19

- Hegel (1837) Excerpts from *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* at [https://ghdi.ghi-dc.org/sub\\_document.cfm?document\\_id=381](https://ghdi.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=381)

#### Jan 26

- Hayek, "The Common Sense of Progress" in Ronald Harmowy (Ed), *The Constitution of Liberty* (pp.91-106), The University of Chicago Press.

#### Post-Enlightenment Conceptions of Progress

While many contemporary philosophers reject the Enlightenment teleological conception of progress, they believe that the imperative of progress is indispensable to justice. How can the idea be salvaged then? Naturalists and pragmatists offer new and important alternatives. Are they plausible? Do they avoid the pitfalls of the Enlightenment conception of progress?

#### Jan 31

- Philip Kitcher (2021) Chs 1-3, in Jan-Christoph Heilinger (Ed), *Moral Progress* (pp.13-102), OUP.

## **Feb 2**

- Buchanan & Powell (2018) Chs2- 3 in *The Evolution of Moral Progress*

## **Part II: How does progress come about?**

### **The Role of Reason**

We will begin this part by looking at one of the most devastating critiques of the Enlightenment rationalist model of moral progress launched by the sentimentalist. In 2001, moral psychologist Jonathan Haidt articulates and defends the "Social Intuitionist Model" of reasoning, according to which moral reasoning is biased and post hoc. On this picture, not only is reasoning insufficient to change moral beliefs, it serves to rationalize and reinforce false moral beliefs. Put differently, the more we reason, the less likely we are going to improve our moral judgments!

The SIM of reasoning has embarrassed many rationalists and reignited research programs in moral reasoning. Over the past two decades, we have seen more sophisticated models of moral reasoning (for example, combining emotion and cognition), more social models of reasoning, and experimental programs that investigate conditions under which moral reasoning can still be effective in changing beliefs and improving moral action. On Thursday, we will look at one such response from empirically-informed philosopher Hugo Mercier, who uses the argumentative theory of reasoning to rescue reasoning from SIM. While individual reasoning seems hopelessly biased and postdoc, collective reasoning need not be.

## **Feb 9**

- Jonathan Haidt (2001) "The Emotional Dog and its Rational Tail: A Social Intuitionist Approach to Moral Judgment " in *Psychological Review* 108(5)

## **Feb 14**

- Hugo Mercier (2011) "What good is moral reasoning?" *Mind & society*. [Online] 10 (2), 131–148.

### **The Role of Social Norms**

Recall that Neiman criticizes Kitcher's cognitive model of social change and she cites Anthony Appiah's work on the honor code? This week, we will take a closer look at Appiah's own discussion of how the social norm of honor inhibits and facilitates moral progress. His entire book "The Honor Code: How Moral Revolutions Happen?" depicts four episodes of moral revolutions: the end of dueling, the abandonment of foot-binding, the end of slave trade, as well as the ongoing revolution in overturning honor killings. Each episode shows the impotence of pure moral argumentation and the efficacy of honor norms. On Tuesday, we will look at one episode "Freeing Chinese Feet".

Appiah raises the interesting notion of honor norms but falls short of giving an account of them. So we turn to philosopher of social science, Cristina Bicchieri for help. She has spent decades in the lab and in the field (collaborating with the UN) to use the social norm approach to change harmful social practices (e.g., FGC, public defecation, corruption). She believes the key to effective social change is an accurate diagnosis of norms. Social norms are different from moral norms, and also descriptive norms. Each type of norm requires its own method of change.

#### **Feb 16**

- Anthony Appiah (2010) "Ch2. Freeing Chinese Feet" in *The Honor Code: How Moral Revolutions Happen* (pp), W.W. Norton & CO.

#### **Feb 28**

- Cristina Bicchieri (2017) Ch1 Diagnosing Norms in *Norms in the Wild*. OUP.

### **Changing Social Norms**

So now that we know what social norms are, we must ask: how to change them? How does changing individually held moral beliefs different from changing collectively held social expectations? Kitcher doesn't tell us. Appiah doesn't tell us. Though both of them gesture at the need for some form of "collective action" beyond "collective reasoning". Elizabeth Anderson offers one of the most elaborate accounts of the role of contentious collective action in destabilizing social norms. In particular, she defends the role of social movements in disrupting unreflective social habits/social norms, as in the case of British abolitionism.

I happen to think that Anderson got the history of British abolitionism wrong. While I do not object to the efficacy of social movements in general, I believe the reason the abolitionist movement was effective in ending the British slave trade was not because of its democratic nature or disruptive power but because it operated with the logic of we-reasoning, one that underlies many social norms, including the social norm of national honor.

#### **Mar 2**

- Elizabeth Anderson (2014) "Social Movements, Experiments in Living, and Moral Progress: Case Studies from Britain's Abolition of Slavery"

#### **Mar 7**

- Agnes Tam (2020) "Why moral reasoning is insufficient for moral progress" *Journal of Political Philosophy*

### **The Role of Philosophical Expertise and Non-Ideal theory**

In Weeks 9 & 10, we return to a question that has been bothering us for a while: what good is philosophy or philosophical expertise in social change? Kant and Hegel think it helps us identify the ends of change/telos of history. That view is increasingly unpopular, for many reasons. Some think that abstracted from experience and feasibility concerns, these utopian ends are irrelevant-not for imperfect beings like us. Others (like Charles Mills) think that ideals are mere ideologies. They are not useless but unjust, misguiding us on what justice ought to be. Yet some

think that ideals are still useful for showing us where to go, but we need non-ideal theories to devise a pathway to go there. We won't have time to read everything in the debate between non-ideal and ideal theory. We will focus on the feminist critique of ideal theory and one important defense of ideal theory, even in a non-ideal world.

We begin with a sharp and crisp summary from Amia Srinivasan, outlining different versions of non-ideal theory. Note that she herself is so critical that she does not even believe that "theory" is needed for the feminist movement. That's right, not even non-ideal theory. (For those who are interested in how to do feminism without theorization, please read Srinivasan's book "The Right to Sex". Highly recommended!)

### Mar 9

- Srinivasan, A. (2018). Feminism and Metaethics. In *The Routledge Handbook of Metaethics* (1st ed., pp. 595–608). Routledge.

While Srinivasan thinks theory is useless in advancing progress for women, Sally Haslanger, another important feminist, defends one form of non-ideal theory, called "social critique". You will see all your previous hard work in understanding pragmatism, social norms, ideologies, power, and social structures pay off here!

To round up our discussion on non-ideal theory, we will look at one important defense of ideal theory from Adam Swift. In his view, non-ideal theory and ideal theory play distinct roles in social change. They supplement each other. Experience can be distorting of understanding what a better society is. So relatively fact-insensitive abstract theorizing is still important for identifying the end goals of social change.

### Mar 14

- Sally Haslanger (2021) "Political epistemology and social critique" in *Oxford Studies in Political Philosophy* Vol. 7. Edited by David Sobel, Peter Vallentyne, and Steven Wall, OUP.

### Mar 16

- Swift, A. (2008) The Value of Philosophy in Nonideal Circumstances. *Social theory and practice*. [Online] 34 (3), 363–387.

## Part III: Critiques of Progress

This is our second time engaging with critical theory. As we have seen, Haslanger (2021) uses resources from critical theory to develop her ideology critique as a vehicle of social change. This time, we look at how some critical theorists themselves are critical of critical theory(!). An important figure in this dialogue is Amy Allen. In her influential book "End of Progress", she completes two tasks: negative and positive. The negative task is to show and problematize the colonialist foundation of critical theories in Hegelian, Kantian, Marxist and Habermasian thought. The positive task is to show how we can de-colonialize critical theory, and revive its function of emancipation. In this course, we focus on the positive task. In the chapter "From the

Dialectic of Enlightenment to History of Madness", she argues that Foucault's method of genealogy and Adorno's "ethics of resistance" offer resources to be critical of our social practices without falling prey to "reason" and its domination.

For the analytically trained philosophers in the course, you might find this chapter inaccessible at places. But I believe as philosophers, we should expose ourselves to diverse methodologies and norms of inquiry, and as engaged philosophers, we should consider all tools of social change out there!

On Thursday, we will look at a practical application of the Foucauldian method of genealogy and deconstruction. Hoko Horri is a legal theorist, not a philosopher, so the Foucauldian account of genealogy and deconstruction she employs may not be as developed as it should be. But that is not a critique. What's interesting for our purposes is how it can be applied in the actual discourses around child marriage. The human rights instruments against child marriage are considered products or cases of "progress". Horii argues for the opposite. It is a brilliant illustration of the critique of the enlightenment project of progress.

### **Mar 23**

- Jesse Prinz (2008) "Moral Progress" in *The Emotional Construction of Morals* (PP.288-308). OUP.

### **Mar 28**

- Amy Allen, (2017) "Ch5. From the Dialectic of Enlightenment to the History of Madness" in *The End of Progress*, Columbia.

### **Mar 30**

- Hoko Horii (2020) "A blind spot in international human rights framework: a space between tradition and modernity within the child marriage discourse", *International Journal of Human Rights* 24(8)

I hope to end our journey on a note of cautious optimism! That is by reading political theorist Catherine Lu's article "Progress, decolonization, and global justice: a tragic view". She argues that tragic narratives can make sense of the indeterminacy of progress and realize and restore a sense of agency among the oppressed, even in the darkest times.

### **Apr 4**

- Catherine Lu (2023) "Progress, decolonization and global justice: a tragic view" in *International Affairs* 99(1)

## **Final Paper Workshops**

### **Apr 6 & 11**