

MORAL PROGRESS: I

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DURING the three or four centuries in which progress has been a leading (if not the leading) idea in the West, probably no single topic has been of such great concern to those who thought and wrote about it—and none has brought forth such passionate affirmations and denials—as moral progress. There are several reasons why this is so.

First, the judgment that progress occurs at all is based on the judgment that there are changes for the better in human life, and that judgment, in turn, has a moral basis. “Better” is the comparative of “good,” and good is a moral idea.

Second, even those modern writers who attempt to treat the idea of progress as though it were not a moral idea recognize that, for the great majority of other writers on the subject, it is a moral idea, inescapably.

Third, as so many commentators point out, the idea of progress is in some sense the heir of the faith and the passion that another age devoted to Christianity. Most particularly, progress is the concrete

secularization of the Christian idea—and virtue—of Hope. And it goes without saying that the ideas that give Christianity its power to move men's minds are moral, too.

Finally, the idea of progress incorporates, and makes explicit, the highest hopes—whether religious or not—of the human race. To question the moral basis of these hopes is to question the idea of humanity itself.

We should not be surprised, therefore, to discover that moral progress is, for many writers, the *sine qua non* of human progress, of progress in general. In the opinion of most progress authors, improvements of the kind signified by moral progress are the goal of all progress. And if moral progress itself does not occur, the progress (in other senses) that remains is somehow cast in doubt.

What is moral progress? In what does it consist (whether or not it actually occurs)? Progress authors answer this question in different ways. For some, merely acting better is not true moral progress. That is—or would be, if it occurred—an improvement in human nature. It would involve the existence on earth of more moral human beings—either a *fixed, number* of men who are consistently more moral, or an *increasing number* of persons who are moral, or both. The main idea here is that better actions on the part of men in general do not necessarily mean that moral progress has occurred. The improvement in action may be the result of social pressures, themselves impermanent, so that progress is reversible. Different circumstances may force people to act better, superficially, but if they are not changed in their nature they will act worse again when circumstances change back to what they were. In that case, the supposedly “better” people would revert to a “primitive” or “savage” or “natural” condition of morality.

Other writers subtly change the emphasis on the notion of morality in relation to progress. That is, they hold that the only progress, or perhaps the only real, true, or meaningful progress, is moral progress. Let us concede that there are advances in knowledge and techniques, these writers say. Let us concede that the human being is a healthier animal, and that he now enjoys a longer average life-span. But these changes—these advances—are not examples of human progress. That involves an improvement in actions or in nature, or in both. That must occur before it can be said that human progress occurs. All of these other developments are either irrelevant to progress, or they are, in some sense, conditions of progress. Human progress *is* moral progress. No other change deserves the name.

A third conception of moral progress involves a less stringent conception of progress in general. No betterment of human nature is demanded; and it is accepted that not much real improvement in character has yet occurred. At the same time, the writers who hold this position say it is wrong to deny that men act better toward each other on the whole. They promulgate better laws and expect more from one another, which in turn improves behavior. Thus, although men still do not live truly well, they live better than they did in the past—at least the distant past. There is a clear advance from “savage” or “primitive” morality, even if, from time to time, modern men continue to act “savagely” or “primitively.” The surest sign of this, it is held, is that when modern man acts badly he blames himself. Standards of action are higher than they used to be.

A variant of this position is often proposed. It is that, although there may not be much moral improvement observable in history, at least men *know* more about how they should act than they once did. Their understanding of what they ought to do progresses even if they do not progress in their behavior.

Three different positions, then, regarding moral progress are taken by progress authors. Progress is

1. affirmed in knowledge, technology, etc., but denied in morals;
2. equated with moral progress;
3. affirmed in morality as well as in other respects.

The first position is associated with the contention that moral progress would mean a change in human nature, which does not occur. The third involves a notion of limited moral improvement.

Authors taking the first two positions are discussed in the present chapter. Affirmations of moral progress in the sense of the third position are analyzed in Chapter 25.

MORAL PROGRESS AND CHANGE IN HUMAN NATURE: DENIALS OF MORAL PROGRESS

A number of writers maintain that “real” or “true” moral progress involves, or would involve if it occurred, a change in human nature. This view of the topic is almost always accompanied by a denial that moral progress actually has occurred. Thus, Dewey, for instance, says:

Man is equipped with these feelings [i.e., altruism, kindness, peaceful feelings, etc.] at birth as well as with emotions of fear, anger, emulation and resentment. What appears to be an increase in one set is, in reality, a change in their social occasions and social channels.

“There is at any time,” he continues, “a sufficient amount of kindly impulses possessed by man to enable him to live in amicable peace with all his fellows; and there is at any time a sufficient equipment of bellicose impulses to keep him in trouble with his fellows.” Most if not all of the supposed moral progress of the past is therefore an illusion. Men are not any different; varying circumstances call forth varying responses.

However, Dewey emphasizes that the possibility of future moral progress must be taken seriously. “For the first time in history mankind is in command of the possibility of progress,” he declares. “The rest is for us to say.” Even if human beings do not change fundamentally, the social occasions of behavior can be improved. Advances in science, in technology, and an increase in wealth allow the creation of a better social milieu. Thus, although human nature remains constant, human behavior can improve.

Dewey also emphasizes the role of education in this process. Walter Lippmann, taking a similar position with regard to moral progress, emphasizes the part played by the statesman in producing an improved environment for moral action.

It is probably true that the impulses of men have changed very little within recorded history. What has changed enormously from epoch to epoch is the character in which these impulses appear. The impulses that at one period work themselves out into cruelty and lust may at another produce the richest values of civilized life. The statesman can affect that choice.

It should be recognized, however, that both Dewey and Lippmann are denying the occurrence of moral progress in the past, and questioning the possibility of permanent moral progress in the future. If progress in this respect is nothing more than an effect of other developments, and if these are not intrinsically progressive—as, for these two authors, they do not seem to be—then hopes for lasting moral progress are illusory.

C. G. Darwin holds the same position, except that he more strongly asserts that the apparent moral progress of recent times will be reversed. This phenomenon is the result of the special situation in which man has found himself in the last two or three centuries, a situation that cannot endure. The truth is, Darwin says,

that all our present codes about the sanctity of human life are based on the security of life as it is at present, and once that is gone they will inevitably be revised, and the revision will probably shock most of our present opinions.

Darwin foresees a future “callousness about the value of the individual’s life, and . . . cruelty to a degree of which we do not willingly think.” He expects that wars will continue to be fought, increasingly for land, which will grow more scarce and valuable as population more and more exceeds food supplies. The fact that land is so valuable may mean that certain kinds of destruction will not be practiced as in the past; he expects, for example, that atomic bombs will not be used in future wars, since they would invalidate precisely the gains sought. But “in view of the cheapened value of human life there is little likelihood,” he says, “that the hostile population will be treated in a more humane manner than has been the custom in the past.”

Darwin sees another reason, perhaps a more basic one, why moral progress should not be expected in the future. Speaking of various character types, or “roles,” that have less or more success in life, and are thus less or more likely to be dominant in future populations, he describes one type that can be expected to produce more trouble as time goes on. This is the “hero,”

using the term not in the modern sense of a man embodying all the virtues, but in the original sense used by Homer. The Homeric hero, who has his counterparts in many other semi-barbaric conditions of life, is brave and reckless, but selfish, undisciplined and something of a bully.

His very selfishness confers an advantage on his type, Darwin points out, and, since he revolts against discipline, he is likely to have his way. In addition, it is characteristic of him that

he is usually by no means monogamous, but very much the reverse, so that his qualities are likely to be reproduced and multiplied many times in the next generation.

Is it possible, Darwin asks, that in the long run the earth will be wholly peopled by heroes? The fact that this would make it a very disagreeable world is irrelevant, “for there is nothing in nature to dictate that the world has got to be agreeable.” However, it is not, it seems, very likely. Heroes (bullies) need room, as it were, to move. The world of the future is going to have little waste space. Nevertheless, Darwin feels that there will be more bullies rather

than fewer. And since it is characteristic of bullies that they “positively enjoy making their fellows miserable,” an increase in their numbers seems to indicate not only a lack of moral progress but positive moral regress. This is the more true since the class of men he calls bullies is one of the prime causes of the relapse from civilization into barbarism that Darwin sees as a frequent occurrence in the past, and regards as an equally frequent one in the future.

Such men are apt to be brave and self-confident, but selfish and concerned only with their personal interests, and above all indifferent to the sufferings of those around them. Such men, always ready to assume leadership, only interested in their own advantage, and indifferent to the fate of their fellows, are perfectly adapted instruments for destroying the delicate balance of civilization.

Darwin himself probably does not regard such destruction as true moral regress. The average condition of human life, in his view of it, is not much above barbarism. Civilization is the exception rather than the rule. It occurs infrequently and cannot be expected to endure. Hence there is no more reason to expect that life will grow radically worse—except from the viewpoint of a “golden age” morality—than there is to expect that it will grow radically better. Over the next million years the picture is neither black nor white, but a rather consistent gray.

There are hints that the above writers are suffering from disillusion because of the events of the twentieth century—two world wars and other catastrophes—that seem to provide evidence that there has been no thorough moral improvement in mankind. Other writers specifically mention these events and admit that they are disillusioned. Heilbroner, for instance, lists some occurrences that are not conducive to moral optimism. We often imagine, he says, that life is much better today than, say, in the Dark Ages, but this depends very much on whose lives we conjure up in these two periods.

After all, we live at a time when German brutality reached what may be, statistically, a record for the systematic extermination of life, and when Russian despotism at its worst took us back to the level of morality of the cruder Biblical kings.

Freud also discourses at length on the disillusion felt by believers in progress as a result of the cruelties and barbarism of the First World War. The essay “Thoughts for the Times on War and Death,” published in 1915, expresses a kind of despair. We are constrained to believe, he says, that never has any event been destructive of so much that is valuable in the commonwealth of hu-

manity, nor so misleading to many of the clearest intelligences, nor so debasing to the highest that we know.

Freud is particularly overcome by the immorality of “science herself,” which supplies weapons of more and more horror, and which, in the person of the anthropologist, “is driven to declare the opponent inferior and degenerate,” and, in that of the psychiatrist, to publish a diagnosis of “the enemy’s disease of mind or spirit.”

Freud sees immorality and betrayal of civilization everywhere. He is shocked by the reflection that it is precisely “the great ruling powers among the white nations upon whom the leadership of the human species has fallen” that have so eagerly run into conflict with one another. If *they* have not progressed morally, then the human race has not done so through any of its representatives. Indeed, it is just this conclusion that leads Freud to the position taken by the other authors discussed above. We may derive this consolation, Freud says

—that our mortification and our grievous disillusionment regarding the uncivilized behavior of our world-compatriots in this war are shown to be unjustified. They were based on an illusion to which we had abandoned ourselves. In reality our fellow-citizens have not sunk so low as we feared, *because* they had never risen so high as we believed.

In the heart of every one of us, he declares, is a murderous intent that is not eradicated by civilization, and is only feebly held in check by it.

To sum up: Our unconscious is just as inaccessible to the idea of our own death, as murderously minded towards the stranger, as divided or ambivalent towards the loved, as was man in his earliest antiquity.

Moral progress is only an illusion. Man remains the same.

In another work, Freud is no less firm in denying the supposed improvement in moral character that would be, for him, the basis of true moral progress. Men are not gentle, friendly creatures wishing for love, he says, who simply defend themselves if they are attacked. On the contrary,

a powerful measure of aggression has to be reckoned as part of their instinctual endowment. The result is that their neighbour is to them not only a possible helper or sexual object, but also a temptation to them to gratify their aggressiveness on him, to exploit his capacity for work without recompense, to use him sexually without his consent, to seize his possessions, to humiliate him, to cause him pain, to

torture and kill him.

“*Homo homini lupus*,” he adds; “who has the courage to dispute it in the face of all the evidence in his own life and in history?”

At the same time, the story of what man “by his science and practical inventions has achieved on this earth, where he first appeared as a weakly member of the animal kingdom, and on which each individual of his species must ever again appear as a helpless infant—O inch of nature!— is a direct fulfillment of all, or of most, of the dearest wishes in his fairytales.” Progress in knowledge, in techniques, in wealth, is an indisputable fact. But it does not result in moral progress. Man has always been, and probably will remain, a wolf to man.

MORAL PROGRESS AS COEXTENSIVE WITH HUMAN PROGRESS

The position, just discussed, that moral progress would constitute, if it occurred, a change in human nature, that such a change is not observable, and that moral progress therefore, strictly speaking, does not occur in history—this position usually, as is evident from the mere statement of it, comes down to a denial of moral progress. The position, with which we now deal, that moral progress is coextensive with human progress—that man progresses morally or not at all—does not, on the other hand, always constitute a denial that moral progress occurs, for it is said by some writers who hold this conception that progress does occur in this sense. No other changes except moral improvements deserve the name of progress; but such improvements are to be observed.

This view is explicitly stated, for example, by L. P. Jacks. Any writer on progress, he says, at least any writer who affirms the occurrence of progress, must be dealing with the question of moral progress. This is inevitable, he declares, because every progress author deserving of that appellation

must show that the particular sort of progress he is dealing with is real or genuine progress, and this it cannot be unless it is moral.

Progress is not progress in the abstract, he declares, “whatever that may mean, but progress *for us* constituted as we are; and since our constitution is essentially moral all progress that we can recognize as such must be moral also.”

Science, Industry, Government, might all claim progress on their own ground and in their own nature, but this would not prove progress

as we understand the word, unless it could be shown further that these things contribute to human betterment in the highest sense of the word. *Their* progress might conceivably involve *our* regress.

Having stated his understanding of the meaning of the terms “progress” and “moral progress,” Jacks goes on to state his belief concerning them. ‘To believe in moral progress as an historical fact, as a process that has begun, and is going on, and will be continued—that is one thing, and it is my own position. To believe that this progress is far advanced is another thing, and is not my position.’ Moral progress is a fact, Jacks holds, but it is also a fact that we are much nearer to the beginning of it than to the end of it. And he remarks that

we should do well to accustom ourselves to this thought. Many of our despairs, lamentations, and pessimisms are disappointments which arise from our extravagant notions of the degree of progress already attained.

He lists some of the signs educed for significant moral progress—that we read books, ride in airplanes, eat dinner with a knife and fork, pay taxes cheerfully, study human science, “talk freely about humanity, and spend much . . . time in making speeches on social questions.” It is true that these things are signs that we have progressed morally, he says, but we should not flatter ourselves; they are not cause for complacency. A good rule for optimists would be: “Believe in moral progress, but do not believe in too much of it.” Morally considered, we are still in “a Neolithic age, not brutes indeed any longer, and yet not so far outgrown the brutish stage as to justify these trumpeting.” Indeed, there would, he thinks, be more optimists in the world, more cheerfulness, more belief in moral progress if this fact were admitted and understood.

And he makes particular reference to the first world war that, in the view of the authors discussed in the previous section, was a cause of absolute dejection. The war has revealed us to ourselves as nothing else in history has ever done, Jacks declares. Thus he counters Freud’s point about the lesson of the war. The war


has not discredited science, nor philosophy, nor government, nor anything else that we value, but it has shown that these things have not brought us as far as we thought. That very knowledge, when you come to think of it, is itself a very distinct step in moral progress. Before the war we were growing morally conceited; we thought ourselves much better, more advanced in morality, than we really were, and this conceit was acting as a real barrier to our further advance. A sharp lesson was needed. . . . This sudden awakening to the truth is

full of promise for the future.

J. A. Froude concurs in holding that progress reduces to moral progress. What is often called progress, he says, is only change, and change that is sometimes for the worse. “Mere” heaping up of wealth, “mere” extension of the suffrage, is not necessarily progress at all. “Purity, justice, right, unselfishness” are the criteria of real social advance. The progress of civilization depends on the extent of the domain that is reclaimed, as he puts it, under the moral law. Stephen Alexander holds that not only does progress mean moral progress but morality also means progress. All morality is a process of change, of development, and this change is always for the better.

Progress, the most important of the dynamic conceptions, will be found to be involved in all morality. . . . It will be found that moral ideals move by a process which, allowing for differences, repeats the law by which natural species develop, and of this process the dynamical conceptions represent different elements. . . . Progress is essential to morality. Every moral ideal is an arrested moment in the passage from one ideal to a higher.

And for W. W. Campbell, progress is essentially the development of new and higher moral imperatives—new moral values, new ideals. It is idealism alone that civilizes man.

That which is purely practical, containing no elements of idealism, may sustain existence and to that extent be valuable, but it does not civilize. I believe it is the idealism of pure knowledge, the idealism in applied knowledge, the idealism in industry and commerce, the idealism in literature and art, the idealism in personal religion, which leavens the life of the world and pushes forward the boundaries of civilization. 

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