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## HOW TO THINK ABOUT PROGRESS

**Mortimer Adler**

**T**he idea of progress raises difficult questions of fact as well as theory. It is a modern idea and it is one of the few distinctively modern ideas. Perhaps I should say that the idea of progress and the idea of evolution are the only two among all The Great Ideas that really have their rise and vitality in modern times.

The idea of progress makes its first appearance in European thought in the eighteenth century and it becomes a dominant idea in the nineteenth century. Evolution is a nineteenth-century idea. But in such works as the great historical writings of the Italian historian, Giambattista Vico, or in the writings of the French sociologists Pierre Joseph Proudhon and Auguste Comte, and the German philosophers Immanuel Kant and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, this idea plays a very important part.

And then when, in the nineteenth century, the idea of evolution becomes so important in the work of Charles Darwin, the earlier idea, the idea of progress, is very influential in developing the theory of evolution. One finds the notion of progress in Darwin's

work and in the work of his great disciples Huxley and Spencer. In fact, towards the end of the nineteenth century in the collection of works by Herbert Spencer, one finds the idea of progress and evolution wedded in all fields as progress and evolution-in society, in astronomy, in the physical world, and in the biological world. It is a kind of cosmic evolution and cosmic progress. But it is primarily in the philosophy of history, not in biology, not in cosmology, that progress is a central idea and raises a central issue.

## HISTORY AND PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY

You may ask, What is the philosophy of history? How does the philosophy of history differ from history itself? Let me see if I can answer that question since it is so important to know the answer to it in order to understand the significance of the idea of progress. Let me show you the difference between the philosophy of history and history.

Imagine someone standing on a watchtower, looking at the past. A person who is concerned only with the past, with knowing what the past contained, in this sense recording what could be remembered of the past, is merely an historian. The philosopher of history stands to the mere historian as imagination stands to memory, as the sense of the future stands to knowledge of the past. The philosopher of history is someone who, knowing something about the past and observing its trends and tendencies, then turns around, to face in the opposite direction on that watchtower, and projects his knowledge of the past into the future, predicting how history will go on.

If this is what one means by philosophy of history, two things are required for a philosophy of history. There must be sufficient knowledge of the past on which to base predictions, on which to give one a chance to observe the trends or tendencies of past or recorded history. And the second thing is that the philosopher of history must have a perception, a keen perception of the pattern of change, the way in which change has taken place in the past so that he can project that pattern into the future.

It is for this reason that the philosophy of history is itself a modern subject. Along with progress it is a modern thing. And the reason for that perhaps is that until modern times there wasn't enough recorded knowledge of the past to provide a basis for prediction, to provide a basis for an observation of trends and tendencies which would enable one to foresee the future and see the whole sweep of history.

It's obvious, I think, that progress gives us one answer to the central question in the philosophy of history. That question is, What is the pattern of change? What is the pattern of change that takes place in time? What is the picture of the changing state of things, either in the physical world or in the world of human affairs?

### PROGRESS VERSUS CYCLES

If the individual on the watchtower looking back at the past sees events as following a line upward, if as he looks at the past it seems to him that the past is a series of steps upward, stages of advance, each century or each period of time being an advance of a previous time, then he may very likely project the future in this way, as a continuation of that line of progress and see the future as getting ever better, reaching higher qualities, reaching elevations that the past does not reach or increasing in quantity in some way. That is the answer which the philosophy of history based on progress gives. It sees a gradual ascending as one goes through the ages of the past and projects that into the future. But progress is not the only answer. There is another answer that is given in the philosophy of history.

If the person on the watchtower looking at the past sees that the past, the pattern of change in the past, has consisted of cycles in which things have risen only to decline, that there is a continual rise and fall in human affairs, there is always a tendency to rise, but it never reaches more than a temporary peak and from which it comes down, in which there is a decline almost to a point at which things perish, that person will project the future as a repetition of ups and downs. He will say that in all human change, in all history, there will be these cycles, cycles of rise and decline. And his view of history will be cyclical as opposed to progressive.

Now these two fundamental ideas are opposed in the philosophy of history: the idea of progress and the idea of cycles. And that is the first thing I want to do in this discussion, consider the opposition of these two fundamental views of history: the progressive view and the cyclical view. Having done that, I would like then to consider the facts of history, the facts of recorded history, and ask of them the question: What evidence of progress do they show? Is there in history evidence that progress has taken place in the past and provides us with some basis for projecting the future as a progressive development in time? And in the light of this consideration of the facts I would like to conclude with some of the difficult questions raised by the facts themselves.

## THINGS KEEP GETTING BETTER AND BETTER

In considering these conflicting theories, let's begin with the optimistic view that progress is the pattern of history. Let's first consider the extreme form of this view, that progress is the very law of history, as gravity, for example, or gravitation as a law of nature, that progress is therefore inevitable, that it happens whether we like it or not, that things are so constituted that in human affairs, human society, and the succession of civilizations, men are always advancing.

Let me give you some examples of this extreme view that progress is inevitable, a necessary law of history. We find this in the work of the great German philosopher of history Hegel, who looked at world history in the following way: he saw it as consisting of three stages; a first stage which he called the Oriental stage in which only one man, the single despot was free-actually in Hegel's view no man was free because the despot himself did not have real freedom but only arbitrary caprice-necessarily followed by a second stage, the Greco-Roman stage of classic antiquity in which some people were free as citizens and others were slaves; and that led in Hegel's mind to a third and almost final stage of history, the Germanic-Christian stage in which everyone has freedom. And he sees that as a progress in freedom that happens inevitably in the course of human events.

Or take a follower of Hegel, Karl Marx, who looked upon history as the succession of class struggles. For him there are four stages in history, one following another in inevitable succession, necessarily one coming from another. The first stage is the slave economy of ancient times. And that is followed in the Middle Ages by the economy of feudal serfdom. And that inevitably leads to modern capitalist production and the class war of capital and labor. And that in Marx's view inevitably leads to the fourth and final stage of history, the communistic or classless society.

Herbert Spencer is another of these philosophers of history who sees everything as a necessary progress. For him the law of progress is a law of change in which one goes from something, a less complex, less differentiated state of affairs, to a more complicated and more differentiated state of affairs.

There are more moderate versions of this philosophy of progress; as, for example, the version we find in Immanuel Kant.

Kant does not think that progress is necessary or inevitable; he thinks it can happen, that it is possible, that in human beings there are potentialities for development. But whether or not these potentialities will be developed depends upon humans themselves. It depends upon the human race and the use that human beings make of their freedom to realize the ideals that are in some sense the projection of their potentiality.

There are some fundamental questions raised by this theory of progress as a philosophy of history: Is progress necessary and inevitable or is it the result of people exercising their freedom? Is progress interminable? Will it go on forever? Will there be no end to progress or is it getting better and better or higher and higher? Or does the line of progress reach some goal, some final goal which is its terminus or end? And if there is a goal of progress, is that goal attainable in time? Is it reached in time or is the goal only at the end of time when the world is done?

#### RISE AND FALL, RISE AND FALL

Now let's look at the other view, the opposed view, the view that I would call the pessimistic view, that there is no progress in history, no real advance at all, everything is cyclical. Things do improve for a time only to decline after they have improved. This is an ancient view of history. And in its ancient form it was quite extreme.

Let me read you from some ancient writers some indications of this extreme view that history is completely cyclical, that everything that is happening now, happened once before, and will happen again almost in the same way. One finds that in the writings of Herodotus, the great early Greek historian, Herodotus says, "The cities which were formerly great have most of them become insignificant. And such as are at present powerful were weak in olden times. I shall therefore discourse equally of both, convinced that prosperity never continues long in one's day." Rise and fall, rise and fall, almost like the waves of the ocean. History doesn't move on; it just goes up and down.

Or an extraordinary statement by Aristotle, talking now about the arts and sciences. Aristotle says, "Probably each art and science has often been developed as far as possible and has again perished," as if the arts and sciences, the products of civilization were once developed and lost, only to be developed again and lost, to be developed again and lost.

Or we find in Lucretius the picture of the birth and growth and de-

cline of worlds in one succession after another. And some of the rise of civilizations to be followed by their fall and the rise of new civilizations to be followed by their fall. All of this, perhaps, is most pointedly summed up in the words of the preacher in Ecclesiastes, when he says, "There is no new thing under the sun; all is vanity and vexation of spirit."

What you notice about this cyclical view of history is, I think, this: that it applies to history the kind of pattern of change one finds in the biological world of living things. For plants and animals are born, grow to maturity, develop to their prime as it were, and start to decline and end in weakness and death. And what the thinkers who take the cyclical view are doing is finding in this analogy the pattern of historical change: history, society, and civilizations are almost like living organisms.

One modern philosopher of history, Oswald Spengler, wrote a book that was very influential in my youth, *The Decline of the West*. It took exactly this view, that civilizations were like organisms and were born and had their infancy and grew to manhood and the prime of life, only to decline and decay. And he predicted that just as past civilizations had arisen and grown to maturity and declined, so Western civilization, our society, was doomed, necessarily doomed, by the same cyclical motion of history.

The greatest philosopher of history in the world today, Arnold Toynbee, takes a more moderate view than that. He reports to us that twenty-two or twenty-six civilizations in the last six thousand years have arisen and have reached a kind of prime, grown to their maturity, only to decline and disappear, to pass away. But he does not think the West is doomed, that the two or three civilizations in the world today that are alive and flourishing need to pass away. It is possible for Toynbee to think that if people exercise their intelligence and their freedom, they can produce a different state of affairs, that a civilization can go on and not necessarily pass away. In a sense, Toynbee is opposing both extreme positions, either that there is necessary progress or necessary alternation of rise and decline. Neither progress nor decline is necessary. Which happens will depend upon the way in which people exercise their intelligence and freedom.

And this, you see, really raises the crucial question in this conflict of the two theories, the theory of progress and of cycles. It is the question whether or not what happens in history obeys necessary laws, laws like the laws of physical nature, or whether, in the processes of history, men are at work bringing about changes by the

exercise of their freedom. Those who give the answer that freedom is an important factor in history, those who affirm freedom tend, I think, to take the optimistic view that the future can be better than the past if men, having ideals to realize, manage by the use of their freedom to so control events that to some extent they realize the ideals that they strive toward.

#### WHAT DO THE FACTS TELL US ABOUT PROGRESS?

Now with this conflict of theories before us, let's look at the record of the facts themselves and see what the facts of progress are. Let's see how much progress we can find in the actual events of past history. Let's consider, first, those spheres of human activity in which the evidence of progress is most obvious. And then, second, let's consider those other spheres of human activity where we have the greatest doubts about whether or not human beings have made progress or not.

The clearest evidence of progress is, I think, in the field of science and technology. The history of science is a history of advancing knowledge, an advancing conquest of nature as it were, by knowing it from century to century. And along with that progressive accumulation of better, more accurate, more comprehensive knowledge, man has through this knowledge a greater command over the physical forces of the earth in which he lives. He has by invention, the application of knowledge through invention, century after century made more and more progress in techniques. Let's call this technological progress.

All one has to do is to think of the progress from the wheel to atomic energy. The wheel you pull by animal power, by human power, muscle first, by animal power, by steam power, and now by nuclear energy. That is a progress in speed of transport and in efficiency in production which is perfectly clear as one goes across the centuries of human history. Or to think of another example in the sphere of our economic life, think of the progress we have made

over the centuries as we have passed from a society in which the production of goods and services requires immense slavery to that society which is just around the corner, when most of our production will be automatic, to what we now look forward to as "automation." This is progressive emancipation of mankind from grinding toil. As one comes down through the centuries men have to work less and less, less in time and less laboriously, less painfully, to produce the goods, the things they need to live by and on.

You may ask, Is it only in this economic sphere, this sphere of transport or productive power that we have made progressive advances as one goes from century to- century? No, I would say no. It was also in the sphere of our social and political arrangements that there is a real advance across the centuries.

About five thousand years ago the first advance was made when humans passed from a nomadic or primitive tribal existence to life in cities. The rise of the first cities was a great step upward in human social life. And then in the succession of centuries one sees the development of higher and higher forms of government. One sees the transition from merely despotic rule by a kind of tribal chieftain to constitutional rule. The invention of the constitution by the Greeks some three thousand years ago was a great progressive step upward, the beginning of citizenship. And as one comes down from the Greeks to our own day, one makes a steady progress to what is happening in our own day for the first time, the democratic constitution. And if one projects this line of progress into the future, one has a right, I think, to predict or to foresee or to hope from the past that the future holds the promise of a world federal government with a democratic constitution with world citizenship, more or less a common fact for all men.

These are the evidences of progress in history: the rise of higher forms of government, the expansion of the human community into a larger and larger society so that in the end one can see that the whole tendency of history is toward a world society, the advances in technology, and in the conditions of human work.

#### DOUBTS ABOUT MORAL PROGRESS

If one looks at other spheres of human activity, one has, I think, serious doubts about progress in human affairs. If instead of considering science, one considers wisdom, man's wisdom, it is much more questionable whether as one comes down the centuries from ancient to modern times there has been a great advance in human wisdom. One is entitled to doubt that there has been any advance at all over the ages. Or if there has been any advance, it certainly is not the same rapidly accelerated rate; it happens very slowly, if it happens at all. And this perhaps is the most serious problem we face today. We are in grave peril as the gap widens between the increase in our power through progress in the arts and sciences and in technology with a gap between the amount of power we have and the amount of wisdom we have increasing. Our wisdom does not increase nearly at the same rate or proportion to the increase in our power.



Or if one looks at another field, one has serious doubts about progress. Consider man's moral character as opposed to the way in which he has improved his economic arrangements or his social and political institutions. There is some evidence, I suppose, of moral progress in the fact that over the centuries we have one way or another tended to abolish, eliminate, or attenuate human slavery. Yet it is not entirely clear that this is due to man's moral improvement. It may be due simply to the fact that technological progress has made it unnecessary to have slaves. We may not be able to take the credit for the progress in the emancipation of slaves or the abolition of slaves, for it may not be entirely an exercise of wisdom on our part or good character, but something that happened as the facts of technological change provided the occasion for another mode of production.

And the most serious doubts about man's moral progress come from the fact that in the twentieth century human beings seem to be just as inhumane toward other human beings as they were twenty-five centuries ago. Not only in two great world wars, but in concentration camps and enforced labor camps and in a variety of ways, one seems to see man's inhumanity toward man unchanged. This is disheartening, and it seems to argue that there is no progress in man's moral character, that as he improves his institutions, as he improves his command over nature, he does not improve in his heart and soul, that man is as much the beast and brute today, only with more power than he had twenty-five hundred years ago or five thousand years ago. These are the most serious reasons for doubt that progress happens' always and in all spheres of human activity.

Now these reasonable doubts about progress combined with the obvious fact of progress, the clear evidence of progress in certain fields, I think, raises for us the ultimate questions about progress that we want to consider in the little time that remains to us today.

One of these ultimate question is, What factors or conditions are indispensable to progress? I think we can give the answer to this question at least in part. I think it is clear, for example, that progress depends upon tradition. If we did not conserve what has been accomplished in the past, we could not advance from it into the future. It is necessary for each- generation to conserve the accomplishments of the past as a basis for making any advance to higher levels in the future. Hence tradition or conservation is an indispensable condition of progress.

But there is a second, perhaps even more important condition of progress. And that is that we overcome in all human affairs the inertia of custom. Custom is the great enemy of progress.

Let me quote you, I think, a very good statement on this point by John Stuart Mill. Mill said, "The despotism of custom is everywhere the standing hindrance to human advancement, being unceasingly antagonistic to that disposition to aim at something better than the customary which is called according to the circumstances the spirit of liberty or the spirit of progress." And Mill says, "The progressive principle is antagonistic to the sway of custom. The contest between these two principles, custom and progress, constitutes the chief interest of the history of mankind."

Finally, if you think as I do that progress is not inevitable, not a law of history, that it need not occur, then the human race makes progress only on one further condition, namely, that people set for themselves ideals, high ideals to realize, and setting these ideas before themselves, then exercise their freedom, their intelligence, and all their powers to do what they can against chance and circumstance, to realize the ideals progressively. The use of freedom intelligently is an indispensable condition of progress if, as I think, progress is not a simple, inevitable law of history.

#### HUMAN NATURE DOES NOT CHANGE


There is a second ultimate question that I should like to talk about very briefly, what is for me the most interesting question of all. It

is the question, Does progress in human affairs occur only in the outward conditions of human life in the institutions, the arrangements, all the things outside of man that man contrives, designs or arranges? Or is there progress in human nature itself? Do men as men in their very nature get better from century to century, age to age, epoch to epoch?

One answer to this question is given by those who call themselves the perfectibilists, who believe in the endless perfectibility of man, who think that man is in his very nature improvable. The biologists do not give us complete warrant for thinking this. It is true that the anatomical records of the human body, as it has been born generation after generation, over the centuries, show some improvement, some change and perhaps improvement in the physique of man. There is no clear evidence that man's intelligence has increased in the record of human life on earth, leaving out now those questionable prehistoric men, and talking only about historic men. And it is

certainly doubtful in the facts of history whether there is improvement in man's moral nature century after century.

Nevertheless the moralist tends to think that there can be an improvement in the long course of time in the very nature of man himself. I must confess that I take the opposite point of view. It seems to me that man as man is a constant in history. Or there may be slight accidental changes in minor things. But the essence of human nature, what man is, his moral and mental limitations, I think, will be the same at the end of time, at the end of human time as they were at the beginning.

All the progress that is made, in my judgment, is progress in human institutions, what men are able to do with their environment, how they are able to change their society, how they are able to arrange their laws and customs. Men can change other things, but not men themselves. 

*We welcome your comments, questions, or suggestions.*

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