

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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The word “progress” is a modern word. It was not used in the ancient and medieval world. But what the word signifies did have some bearing on the philosophy of history that developed in antiquity and in the Middle Ages.

In the ancient world, one view of the pattern of human history was that it was cyclical—an everlastingly recurrent pattern of growth and decline.

Another ancient view was that the golden age of mankind was in the far distant past. Since then there has been a steady decline.

In his *City of God*, Augustine tells us that divine providence operates in the opposite direction. Man's relation to God will have a brighter future.

For both Aristotle and Aquinas, no individual thinker contributes to improvements in thought—improvements in science and philosophy. By the collaboration of many, advances are made.

With regard to progress itself, as that is discussed in modern times, certain questions should be in everyone's mind. One is the question of whether there is any progress in human nature—whether in the course of historical time, human beings are improved in the traits that all human beings, as member of the same species, share.

Another basic question is whether such progress as has been achieved is entirely in human institutions. If so, the next question to be considered is whether this institutional progress is quantitative or meliorative—whether the institutional improvements are in the direction of more and more or in the

direction of better and better.

The facts of history in the last 3,000 years, and certainly in the last 600, contain many examples of quantitative progress; the human population has increased in size; with advances in medicine, human beings live longer than they once did; and as scientific knowledge has grown from century to century, its technological applications have showered on us more and more instruments that have been immensely useful. In this century, there are more scientists alive and working together than in any previous period.

But the question remains whether the more is also the better—whether the progress is meliorative as well a quantitative. To answer this question, we must appeal to the fundamental principles of ethics for the standards of evaluation.

—Mortimer Adler

THE IDEA OF PROGRESS

by Charles Van Doren
Praeger Publishing, NY (1967)

From the Concepts in Western Thought Series
edited by Mortimer J. Adler, Director
Institute for Philosophical Research

Foreword

by Mortimer J. Adler

“The Idea of Progress” is one of a series of studies of basic ideas undertaken by the Institute for Philosophical Research. The Institute was established in 1952 with the avowed purpose of taking stock of Western thought on subjects that have been of continuing philosophical interest from the advent of philosophy in ancient Greece to the present day. In

pursuing this task, it hopes to clarify the recorded discussion of such basic ideas as freedom, justice, happiness, love, progress, equality, and language. It aims to transform what, in every case, at first appears to be a chaos of differing opinions into an orderly set of clearly defined points of agreement and disagreement that give rise to real issues and make possible the kind of rational debate that constitutes genuine controversy.

What we are given to start with in each case is a diversity of opinions, the pattern of which is seldom clear. To put order into that diversity and to render it intelligible require a creative effort to construct the controversies that are implicit in it. Only by an explicit formulation of the pattern of agreements and disagreements, together with the reasons for the latter, can we delineate the issues and indicate how they have been or might be disputed. Too often reasons have not been given for positions that have been persistently advanced. In consequence, important issues have not been disputed in a way that carries the controversy forward and brings it nearer to a resolution.

The Institute has proceeded on the assumption that the issues in the field of any basic philosophical idea concern matters about which objective truth is ascertainable. The future resolution of these issues depends upon more sustained and more rational efforts to deal with them than the history of Western thought has so far exhibited, and the initiation of such efforts depends in turn upon a clear and precise understanding of the issues. Providing this has been the sole aim of the Institute's work from the beginning.

To accomplish its aim, the Institute has developed certain procedures and a distinctive method of work. Its approach to the study of the recorded discussion of basic philosophical ideas is essentially dialectical. The materials being studied—the major documents in the literature of any philosophical subject—are historical in the sense that each has a date and place in the history of thought about that subject; but the Institute's study of these materials is non-historical in aim. It

deliberately abstracts from their historical context and pattern. It views them as if they were all contemporary—as if the documents represented the voices of participants confronting one another in actual discussion. The Institute’s approach is also nonphilosophical in the sense that it does not undertake to develop or defend a theory of the idea under consideration. The only truth with which the Institute is directly concerned is truth concerning the body of thought about a particular subject, not truth about the subject thought about. The Institute, therefore, refrains from taking part in the discussion that it attempts to clarify. It makes a sustained effort to be impartial in its treatment of all points of view and to deal with them in an objective and neutral manner. It strives to function as a detached bystander or impartial observer, not as a critic or judge assessing the merits of conflicting claims and awarding a verdict.

It should be clear why an intellectual enterprise thus designed and directed is facilitated by a collaborative effort under institutional auspices; it would be almost impossible for a single person working alone to accomplish effectively. On any basic idea, the volume of literature to be examined and interpreted is tremendous, even if only the most significant and representative documents are selected for study. In the process of interpretation and in the attempt to treat all points of view with impartiality, the desired neutrality is more likely to be achieved by many individuals working together than by the most determined effort of a single individual. Collaboration and consultation tend to offset the idiosyncrasies of individual temperaments and intellectual biases. The advantage of teamwork is not only the pooling of diverse abilities, but also the correction of blind spots and the checking of prejudices.

The first product of the collaborative effort of the Institute’s staff was a two-volume study, *The Idea of Freedom*, Volume I of which was published in 1958, and Volume II in 1961. That study exemplified the Institute’s dialectical method in the treatment of a basic idea; and its results provided a good measure of what can be achieved by

the application of that method. The present study, *The Idea of Progress*, represents an adaptation of the same method to the treatment of another basic idea. Like *The Idea of Freedom*, it is a product of the collaborative effort of the Institute's staff. While the task of writing this book was undertaken by one member of the staff,

Dr. Charles Van Doren, and a team formed from other members of the staff helped in the examination and interpretation of the literature under consideration; the formulations proposed by Dr. Van Doren were checked and criticized by his colleagues; and the manuscript was revised in accordance with suggestions made by them. The names of the collaborators specifically engaged in the production of the present volume, together with the names of other members of the Institute's staff and the members of its Board of Directors, will be found on page vi.

The dialectical clarification of the idea of progress closely resembles, in its general outlines, the pattern employed in the clarification of the idea of freedom. In one important respect, however, it is simpler; and in another, it is more complicated.

All the writers who affirm the existence of progress in human affairs define progress in the same way—as irreversible (though not necessarily continuous) change for the better. They may explain it in different ways or conceive it as having different properties, but they all agree that progress consists in (a) irreversible change and (b) change for the better. The same cannot be said for the writers about freedom. In analyzing the literature in which the word freedom is used, we found that it stands for five distinct subjects, not one. Each of the five freedoms is affirmed by certain authors and denied by others, but no author denies the existence of human freedom in every sense of that term.

Human progress is denied in the one clearly defined sense in which its advocates affirm it. What is more, it is denied in a variety of ways—by those who think that the

pattern of historical change is regressive or cyclical, and not progressive at all; and by those who deny either that we are able to discover any over-all pattern of change in history or that we can ever support the judgment that a course of change is truly for the better.

Dr. Van Doren has brought this complex array of conflicting opinions into clear focus for the first time. Anyone who has been puzzled, if not actually bewildered, by discussions of progress that he has read or heard or in which he has himself participated will be grateful for the ordering and clarification that this book provides. It also throws light on the philosophy of history—a field of thought that sorely needs illumination. Few of us can refrain from thinking about and forming some judgment about the whole course of human life on earth. *The Idea of Progress* challenges us to re-examine such thinking as we have done on the matter, and above all, I think, it should induce us to suspend judgment, or at least to be much more circumspect about the opinions that we adopt or reject.

The Institute for Philosophical Research was established on grants from the Ford Foundation and the Old Dominion Foundation. When the Ford Foundation grant expired in 1956, the Old Dominion Foundation continued to support the Institute's work and was subsequently joined by other benefactors. I wish to express the Institute's gratitude to the sources of financial support that made it possible for it to complete its work on the idea of freedom after the expiration of the Ford grant, and beyond that to produce not only the present work on the idea of progress, but also studies of the idea of justice, the idea of love, and the idea of happiness. These four studies are now being published simultaneously. Other studies, one on the idea of equality and one on language and thought, are currently being undertaken and should be ready for publication in the near future.

In the period since 1962, the following foundations have made substantial contributions to the Institute: the Old Dominion Foundation, the Houghton Foundation, the

General Service Foundation, the Liberal Arts Foundation, the Olive Bridge Foundation, and the Paul Jones Foundation. These acknowledgments would not be complete without an expression of special gratitude for the friendship and support of three men in particular—Paul Mellon and Ernest Brooks, Jr., of the Old Dominion Foundation, and Arthur Houghton, Jr., of the Houghton Foundation.

Chicago

May, 1967

Mortimer J. Adler

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The Idea of Progress (From the Dust Jacket)

Concepts in Western Thought Series

THE IDEA OF PROGRESS

by Charles Van Doren

Mortimer J. Adler, General Editor

Does a definite pattern of change exist in the history of mankind? And, if so, is it irreversible, and what is its direction? Is change necessarily “progress”? For that matter, is progress necessary? Does it consist only in the improvement of man’s products, or also in the improvement of man himself?

Philosophers have argued these questions for centuries. Now, in “The Idea of Progress”, Charles Van Doren not only brings clarity and cohesion to their often contradictory writings but presents their thought in a manner that makes them relevant to the life of every reader.

“The Idea of Progress” is divided into two books. In the first, Mr. Van Doren examines the general controversies that have grown up about the subject of progress. He analyzes the work of those writers who have maintained that

progress—which he defines as “irreversible change for the better”—is a continually present factor in the life of man. He shows how writers as diverse as Augustine, Bacon, Kant, John Stuart Mill, Spencer, Trotsky, Teilhard de Chardin, and dozens of others have affirmed its existence. He discusses, too, the work of those who, through the centuries, have denied the fact of progress: Plato, Aristotle, Nietzsche, and Spengler (who have sought to refute the idea that progress is irreversible in the long run), and Ovid, Rousseau, Ellul, and others (who have asserted that there is an irreversible pattern of change in history, but that that pattern is regressive, moving from better to worse).

In Book Two, Mr. Van Doren examines the differences that divide authors who agree that progress is to be found in history but differ concerning its nature and the necessity for it. Here, the author also surveys the various areas in which progress is manifested—in knowledge, technology, wealth, political institutions, and morality. An Appendix traces progress in the fine arts.

Throughout, the author’s exploration of the idea of progress reflects his wide knowledge of the great scholars of the past and the present—and equally important, his ability to bring the reader to a new level of appreciation and comprehension, whether he comes to this thought for the first time or for the one hundred and first. “The Idea of Progress”—the culmination of four years of exhaustive research by the Institute for Philosophical Research—deserves a permanent position of importance in the library of every reader concerned with a fuller and deeper understanding both of himself and of the world around him.

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As always, we welcome your comments.

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Founded by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann
845 North Michigan Avenue - Suite 950W

Chicago, IL 60611

Tel 312-440-9200 Fax 312-440-0477

E-mail: TGIdeas@speedsite.com

Homepage: TheGreatIdeas.org

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