The Idea of Progress: Reality or Myth?

Theodore Abel

Is progress a fact or is it an illusion? This question was asked me by a student shortly after I was honored by an invitation to address this convocation.

As I considered an answer I realized that I could not dispose of the question with a simple Yes or No. And as I became aware of the complexity of the problem it occurred to me that there must be other persons who are perplexed by it. I expect that some of these are present in this audience. In fact, I sincerely hope that most of you are in some way concerned with this issue so that what I have to say may be of interest to you.

Before I take up the problem let me recall to you that by the idea of progress we mean the theory that the human condition, both materially and spiritually, is improving in time on an ascending scale, not by any means smoothly or without occasional tragic reversals but advancing upward 'on the whole, and in the long run.'

The interesting fact about this theory is that it did not enter human thought until modern times. The idea of progress became dominant among social philosophers and was generally accepted by the inhabitants of Western civilization only at the beginning of the eighteenth century.

What were the main ideas about the human condition before the theory of progress made its belated appearance? In antiquity the idea prevailed that mankind in the beginning of time lived in a Golden Age and had been steadily moving away from it ever after. Instead of advancing, it was assumed that the human race has been slipping downward. Plato introduced a hopeful note by suggesting that mankind was moving in an eternal circle and would eventually reenter the Golden Age, but this optimistic notion was tempered by the assumption that men would then start the identical process over again. The cycle, according to Plato, had a span of twenty-five thousand years. If this were true, twenty-five thousand years from today we would be meeting right here, doing exactly the same thing over again.

During the Middle Ages the view predominated that the earth is 'a vale of tears' and merely 'a testing ground' for the soul which alone is capable of improvement. According to this theory the good life cannot be realized here, but only, as St. Augustine expressed it, in the City of God, which can be reached after death, on the condition that we have remained steadfast in the face of the trials, the tribulations and the temptations of this world.

What happened that changed men's minds in our age? Why this departure from a prevailing pessimistic view of human destiny? The reason is not hard to find. The emergence of the idea of progress coincided with the remarkable blossoming of science after Galileo, with the Industrial Revolution, and with the successful movements for political and social emancipation. The impetus provided by these achievements kindled in many minds high expectations of an unlimited and increasing success in mastery over Nature. Men had become aware of the power that Reason has bestowed upon them. This realization imbued them with supreme confidence in themselves as master-builders of their own destiny. In past epochs men might have dreamed of how much better life could be, but at the beginning of modern time they became convinced that life would steadily improve. It is this connection between sudden success in the control of natural processes and exuberant optimism about the future that stirred up this issue of reality versus the fictitious nature of progress.

Critics of the theory have pointed out that the confidence engendered by achievements in science and technology also brought about a rapid secularization of man's outlook, that is, his emancipation from faith in Providence and from reliance on divine help; and that since man is in need of some belief in a meaningful existence he has adopted the idea of progress as a creed to substitute for his fading religious beliefs. The critics, then, claim that the theory of progress, far from being based on a judicious appraisal of probabilities is actually a wishful projection, an ideology. Indeed, ideological elements are quite prominent in the writings of such leading exponents of the idea of progress as Condorcet, Hegel, Marx, and, in our time, Teilhard de Chardin. The notions of unlimited perfectability, of the inevitability of progress, and visionary projections of utopias are examples.

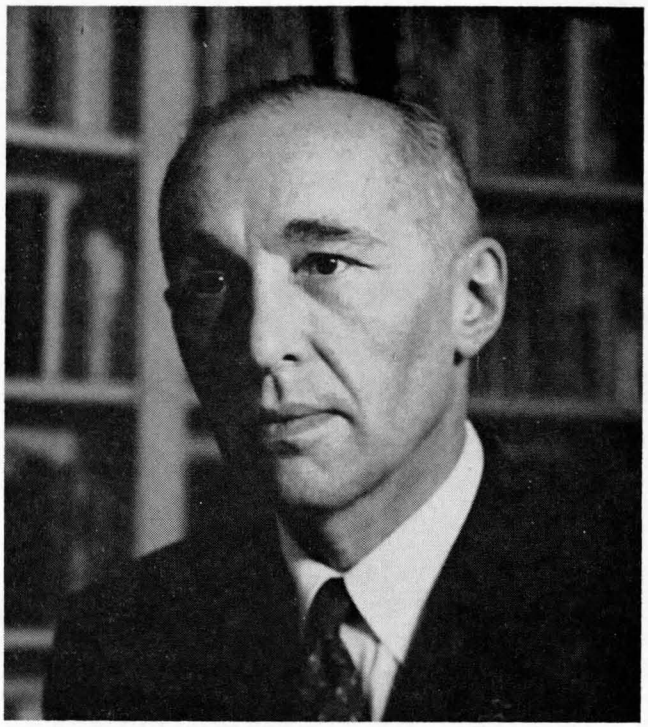
The assertion that the idea of progress is nothing more than ideology in disguise is not the only criticism advanced against its acceptance as valid theory. An even more effective argument has been directed at the very core of the idea, which is the assumption that we have a way of knowing whether or not the human condition

is improving. This criticism takes it for granted that in order to measure change we must have a clearly specified goal toward which mankind is moving as a standard for evaluation. That goals do provide standards of progress our own experience makes clear. For example, we have no difficulty in judging whether or not we are progressing as golf-players since par which is the specified goal, or any score below par, provides us with an objective standard of measurement. Similarly, we speak of progress in aviation for here the goals of safety, speed, and comfort provide us with a basis for comparison. In fact, a visit to the Smithsonian Institution in Washington offers an ocular demonstration of progress in its exhibition of planes in chronological order beginning with the original contraption of the Wright brothers, the Spirit of St. Louis of Lindberg, etc.

True, not all goals furnish such clear-cut criteria. Standards are most precise where efficiency of performance is the chief issue. We encounter no difficulty in judging that an iron plow is better than a wooden one, a computer better than an adding machine, penicillin better than the incantations of a witch doctor. But outside of such fields as technology or medicine we seldom have criteria of comparable objectivity. There are, of course, specifiable goals pertaining to art, religion, or literature, but on what basis other than our personal feelings can we judge that Rodin's work is better than Phidias', Kant's philosophy an improvement on Plato, or one religion better than another? We have, alas, no objective standards with which to measure the depth, the width, and the breadth of beauty, goodness or truth.

The goals and standards of progress I have spoken of all refer to particular things or areas of achievement. To be relevant to the idea of progress a goal must refer not to particulars, but to a totality, which is mankind. The question therefore is: Has mankind a goal that can provide a standard for evaluating improvement and progression in human living? Unfortunately most of the goals that have been formulated, commendable as they may be, are too vague or too general to provide a means for measuring the progress of the human race. 'Happiness for all' and 'universal harmony' are typical examples of such goals.

The closest I can come to formulating a general goal which also has a workable standard is freedom from tension. We can all agree that human striving is primarily directed toward solving the problems which we encounter in pursuing our satisfactions and interests: relaxation, success, security, health, recognition, and so forth. Most problems which become our concern are shared by all human beings either separately (like toothaches) or collectively (like the flooding of rivers). Because similar or common problems affect everybody,



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their elimination is an acceptable goal for mankind; and it provides an effective measure. For we can determine whether or not the condition of mankind has improved by counting the number of problems which have been eliminated in the course of time. There is no dearth of evidence of this kind. We can enumerate hundreds of problems which have plagued mankind that have been solved or prevented. The clearest example is the eradication of many diseases and the consequent measurable increase in the average human life-span.

However, evidence is a double-edged sword in this case. For although it is a fact that we have eliminated problems, it is also true that some of our solutions have produced a flock of new ones. For example, the invention of the automobile solved a problem of mobility which troubled our ancestors; but look at the problems which now confront us as a result of this invention that did not bother our ancestors: air pollution, traffic congestion, road accidents. In fact, it is difficult to think of anything we have accomplished in improving our lot that has not produced some new concerns in its wake.

This is true even for matters that we normally consider intrinsically good, for example, the increase in the average life-span which I mentioned before. At a scientific meeting some time ago Professor Hornell Hart of Duke University presented a paper in which he showed that life expectancy (which has risen in the last two centuries from twenty-five to seventy-two years on the average) will by the year 2100 reach an average

of two hundred years. This means that the grandchildren of the students whom we honor today can be expected, barring accidents (and bombs, of course), to live a minimum of one hundred and fifty and a maximum of three hundred years. But did the professor rejoice at this seemingly blessed promise? No, he was glum. He was worried mostly over the effect the increased life-span might have on marriage. For, he argued, most men and women will marry young, as they do now. It is fine to expect to celebrate a silver wedding anniversary, even the golden wedding anniversary, but how many people would be willing to live for three hundred years with the same partner?

It seems likely that the ratio of problems to solutions is relatively constant throughout history and therefore not a measure of progress. The over-all intensity of the tensions of life does not seem to decrease, even though the nature of the tensions vary in time. And some problems are perennially the same. Imagine a Sumerian or an ancient Egyptian coming to life today. He certainly would look with amazement at the material accomplishments of our civilization. But he would soon find that beneath all this splendor and complexity the same problems of human relations exist that people were facing five thousand years ago: the travail of growing up, the conflict between the young and the old, competition for position and status, troubles between boy and girl, not to speak of intergroup conflicts and threats of war.

You can see the difficulties one faces when one tries to pinpoint a general goal in terms of which progress could be validated. It is not surprising therefore to find that modern philosophers of history like Spengler, Sorokin, or Toynbee, and most existentialists, seek other ways of interpreting the sense of human history.

Spengler, for example, has gone back to the old Platonic conception of the eternal, cyclical form of movement in time. According to him civilizations appear like a plant from a fresh soil, and like a plant they grow, develop, mature, and die. In this process each civilization passes through the same stages. Hence, our own civilization in due course will disappear to make room for the next one which will suffer the same fate. Toynbee and Sorokin hold essentially the same cyclical view of history even though they present different versions of the process. The implication of this position—in which the existentialists concur—is that mankind is not climbing up a ladder, as our forefathers believed, nor sliding down a precipice, as the ancients held, but is living in a kind of squirrel cage. The conclusion drawn is that the more energy men expend, the faster they go nowhere.

Have we then no alternative but to accept the view that the idea of progress is sheer myth and illusion?

It is my feeling that the drastic finality of such a conclusion somehow runs counter to common sense. Even a casual acquaintance with the past informs one of significant differences in the felicity of modes of human living. We all know the story of our ancestors whose only shelter was a cave, in front of which they had to burn a fire all night to fend off wild animals; the hand-to-mouth existence that they led by hunting and their inability, because of it, to live in larger groups than a horde composed of a few families. Something has happened since that time and we do feel justified in calling it a definite improvement.

Furthermore, a more sophisticated surveyor of human history could point out that the basic changes which human ingenuity has brought about have also established new levels of living. That is to say, human development can be viewed as a process through which mankind is lifted from one plateau of existence to a higher plateau. Such a higher plateau, for example, was reached after some brilliant minds in the Neolithic period discovered the art of taming animals and cultivating crops. The discovery of these great skills enabled men to settle down, to start large communities, to institute a growing division of labor, to introduce various refinements of civilized living, and to develop trade and commerce. Mankind was lifted to another plateau with the discovery of how to utilize the powers of nature such as electricity, to do what only human and animal muscles could do before. This discovery enabled us to realize the opportunities for civilized living which we are enjoying today.

A new plateau may be in the making before our very eyes. Once we have fully harnessed the forces of the atom we may enter an era which will dwarf the boldest fantasies of the most vivid imagination. On this new plateau we can confidently expect a mode of living in which there will be no scarcity and no drudgery. All material concerns will have disappeared. As a result of such developments mankind might even undergo a spiritual regeneration which could helpfully transform existing human relations. I see plateaus like these as ascending levels of living—one higher than the other. And I observe the striking fact that in spite of the unending fluctuations up and down which Sorokin has charted, so far mankind as a whole has never dropped back from the plateau it reached to the lower one it had transcended.

I am sure that these facts carry some meaning that has a significant bearing on the idea of progress. But what is it?

Clearly, the meaning has nothing to do with utopian goals, nor with increase in personal happiness, nor with the number of specific problems we have succeeded in eliminating. What we do sense to be the case, especially in the plateau paradigm, is that the betterment which

the idea of progress implies refers not so much to the value of what we achieve as it does to the *conditions which make achievement possible*. The capacity to achieve is the unique feature of man. He is the only creature we know who is creative, who is capable of shaping and combining things, who searches, and who can express in symbols his feeling and ideas. The potentiality of man's creative capacities is uncharted and we can only guess that there are unlimited possibilities yet to be realized.

Of course achievements do not come about automatically. They require persistent effort and a determined venturing-forth beyond existing frontiers. But, above all, there must be favorable conditions to make achievements possible. It is because conditions change that we are able, as time moves on, to do things which we could not do before, to make manifest what was only a potentiality to enrich our heritage and to enrich our lives.

Perhaps a skeptic or cynic may argue with me: "You assume that the realization of human potentialities is desirable. But may we not be better off if nothing changes?" He might continue, "You also say that the emergence, in time, of conditions that make new achievements possible is evidence of progress; but why bother about achieving anything?" I think we do bother and will go on bothering about it because creativity is built into our organisms, and also because we have a deep-seated sense for the mystery of 'things to come' and excited anticipation of things that can be. Even more concretely, we have some direct experience of the fact that different conditions play a decisive role in determining the kind and amount of satisfaction of our needs and wants that we can achieve.

Suppose you want to purchase a car, or you are looking for a mate, or you seek entertainment. What would you consider the most favorable condition for satisfying your want? Certainly it will be the one that offers you the widest range of choice. Secondly, the most favorable condition will be one in which what you can now choose is also most readily available. Thirdly, you would surely prefer a condition that provided you with free access to what is so available. I judge that this combination of range of choice, abundance, and ease of access to what we need and want are conditions that all human beings cherish. It is precisely because conditions like these expand and multiply that we can speak of the steady improvement of the human condition.

This, then, is my argument in favor of the idea of progress. However, it does not quite justify the assumption that progress is now an incontrovertible fact. So, what can we say in conclusion? A brief excerpt from a speech delivered by President Kennedy one fine St. Patrick's day is both relevant and useful. "George Bernard Shaw, speaking as an Irishman, summed up an approach to life as follows: 'Other peoples,' he said, 'see things and say: Why? But I dream things that never were—and I say: Why not?'

"It is that quality of the Irish," continued President Kennedy, "the remarkable combination of hope, confidence, and imagination, that is needed more than ever today. The problems of the world cannot possibly be solved by skeptics or cynics whose horizons are limited by the obvious realities. We need men who can dream of things that never were and ask: Why not?"

And so, the next time that someone asks me: "Is progress real?" I promise not to deliver myself of another speech, as I have just now. I will simply reply, "Why not?"

THRIFT SHOP

On May 1, 1964 the Alumni Association joined Everybody's Thrift Shop. Immediately an S.O.S. went out through the *Quarterly* and by word of mouth to as many Hunterites as we could reach. As a result loads of merchandise began pouring in and we were in business. We list on p. 27, as an expression of our gratitude, those who contributed "thrift" during the year May 1, 1964-May 31, 1965. We look forward, in our second year, to a continuing flow of merchandise.

The only fly in the ointment now is that we cannot seem to attract enough workers. The ladies who come are tops but there still is a crying need for more helpers. It's most gratifying work—whether it be sorting, marking, selling, or being officer of the day. It's interesting and challenging.

But you must participate to make it a success! There's lots of money to be made but there must be merchandise and *hands* to work!

Get your friends in business to give us their discarded merchandise. We will arrange transportation with no charge to the donor.

The Shop is located at 330 East 59 Street, east of Second Avenue. The telephone number is EL 5-9263. Our Committee is on duty on Wednesday morning and all day Friday.

In the first eleven months we have netted over $5700, which shows what a fine business we're in—and there's more to be made, if only you'll help us!

Frances *Schonfeld* Grossman, Chairman
Thrift Shop Committee