

Progress: Onward and Upward, Forever
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Growing up in the 1950's, I had always taken progress for granted, though I never gave it much thought. I was aware that when my parents were young, automobiles and airplanes were in their infancy. I remember when we bought our first television set. In the summer, we would spend a week or two on my grandparents' farm, in Connecticut. There, we used an outhouse; my grandfather would go into town regularly to buy ice for the icebox; he milked his cows by hand; his farm equipment was pulled by horses. I was aware that theirs was not a modern, up-to-date, farm.

I could take seriously, back then, the General Electric claim that "progress is our most important product."

On the other hand, it never occurred to me that we had not had sliced bread forever, that it had its start in 1928, only 14 years before my birth. [Wikipedia]

And I assumed that progress was a good thing, though I grew up under the threat of nuclear annihilation. I knew how to get under my desk at school, or how to go out into the hallway, to the protection of the lockers.

Going off to college in the fall of 1960, with this essentially unreflective background, I was surprised to learn, in freshman history, that belief in progress had died with the First World War. This year is the centenary year for the start of the Great War, the war to end all wars, or, as I see it, the totally avoidable, the totally stupid war.

My interest in progress as a topic of reflection and research was reawakened during the fall by discussions in our Forum group. I started to pay attention, in a somewhat deliberate and systematic way. At this point I can draw two tentative yet firm conclusions: First, progress is a very large and complex topic. Second, I don't know much about it. So please don't expect anything complete or definitive from me in the next twenty minutes.

I am a believer in progress, though a cautious one. If you're interested in the etymology, "progress" combines *pro*, meaning "forward," with *gradī*, "to step, go." [from *ghredh*] By the way, Kerry tells me that the opposite of *progress* is not *Congress*.

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A few weeks ago, I started collecting, primarily from the New York Times and NPR, what appeared to me to be examples of progress. Here's a sampling of what I found.

- Containers that can be loaded on ships, trains, or trucks have made the physical side of world trade much easier. [NPR, ATC, 12/5/13]
- We can now treat allergies with pills or drops instead of shots. [NYT, 12/6/13, B1]
- Using cell phones rather than banks for making payments is making life better for the poor in India. [NYT, 12/5/13, B1]
- Nonsurgical sterilization for dogs and cats is now possible, and a lot easier than the old approach. [NYT, 12/3/13, D1]
- There's a police chief – I forget where – who now favors the double blind showing of pictures of possible assailants to victims or other eye-witnesses. [Morning Edition, NPR, 12/8/13]
- Nudges, instead, for example, of rules, can be effective in guiding human behavior (for example, put fruits and vegetables rather than soda and junk food at eye level in the convenience store; make organ donation or retirement plan participation the default rather than options to be selected). [NYT, 12/8/13, Business 1; Freeman, review of Sunstein, *Simpler*, NYRB, 10/24/13, p. 38]
- Advanced prosthetics now enable people to do things undreamed of a generation ago. [WHYY, Radio Times, 12/9/13; Smithsonian, 9/13, p. 68]
- 3D printing is here – even using metal. [NYT, 12/10/13, Science, D4]
- We now recognize the dangers of football.
- General Motors now has a woman [Mary Barra] as chief executive, [NYT website, 12/10/13] and the Federal Reserve Board, too. [Janet Yellen, chair, NYT, 1/7/14, B1]
- Major League Baseball has decided that it needs to stop home plate collisions. [NYT, 12/11/13]

- Up-tempo music can speed up customers in fast food restaurants during their busy periods.
[neworganizing.com/content/blog/tip-how-chipotle-makes-you-eat-faster, posted on Fri, Dec 06, 2013]
- Executions in the United States continue to decline. [NYT, 12/19/13, A23]
- Americans are increasingly willing to say that they would vote for an atheist to be president. [Boorstein/Gottschalk interview, C-Span, 12/30/13]
- A new generation of computers is modeled after the human nervous system. “Computers have entered the age when they are able to learn from their own mistakes, a development that is about to turn the digital world on its head.” [lead paragraph, NYT, 12/29/13 A1]
- High pressure transformations, a new kind of chemistry, with diamond anvils, 50,000,000 lbs/sq inch (normal is 14.7 lbs/sq inch), result in new materials, for example, a new form of silicon that can more easily turn sunlight into electricity; oxygen into a metal, conductors into insulators and vice versa. [NYT, 12/17/13, Science 1]
- Long empty factory buildings can be converted to farms for growing vegetables. [Gettysburg Times, 12/16/13, p. A3]
- The survival of monarch butterflies is now being assisted by milkweed planted along migratory routes. [NYT, 12/21/13]
- Storage batteries can now collect solar energy in the sunny afternoon and dispense it in the evening. [NYT, 12/24/13, B3]
- Pope Francis is Time Magazine’s person of the year.
- Marijuana can now be bought and sold legally in Colorado. [NYT, 1/2/14, A1]
- A judge in Washington State and a county in Texas are trying to address the problem of providing indigent defendants an effective right to counsel. [Adam Liptak, NYT, 1/5/14, SR4 (Comal County TX, Gideon vouchers; Judge Lasnik, Federal District Court, Seattle, court-ordered monitor)]

- A revolution in nanotechnology is now expected, at least by some, to change civilization, to yield radical abundance. [K. Eric Drexler, *Radical Abundance: How a revolution in nanotechnology will change civilization*, reviewed by Steven Yearley, TLS, 11/29/13, p. 31]
- The Supreme Court's action on Monday notwithstanding [staying the federal district court's order striking down Utah's same sex marriage ban], marriage equality is now a train that has left the station. There's no going back.

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But you want the big picture, don't you. Are we better off than we were a century ago? A millennium ago? Will we be better off in 2114 than we are in 2014? What about a millennium from now?

And who counts as "we"? What do we mean by "better off"?

By "we" we could mean citizens of the United States – or some subset of U.S. citizens, or we could mean everyone in the world – or even the whole interdependent web of creation, whatever that means. Oh, do we want to include future generations as well?

What about "better off"? Does that simply refer to happiness? I said "simply," but happiness is anything but simple, and should we be looking instead at leading worthwhile, meaningful lives? This could get complicated.

Fortunately, there are social scientists, and others, who are seeking to identify the components or indicators of progress, and to quantify them.

The Happy Planet Index, for example, is designed to measure "the extent to which countries deliver long, happy, sustainable lives for the people that live in them." Using data on life expectancy and experienced well-being, it ranks countries on "how many long and happy lives they produce per unit of environmental input." [New Economic Foundation, <http://www.happyplanetindex.org/about/#sthash.eG0o7a7X.dpuf>]

The United States doesn't look so good under this index, because of our extravagant use of our planet's resources.

The World Happiness Report has identified six key variables that account for the differences among nations in life evaluations. These are:

- GDP per capita,
- years of healthy life expectancy,
- having someone to count on in times of trouble (or "social support"),
- perceptions of corruption,
- prevalence of generosity, and
- freedom to make life choices.

The United States does better under this index: we're only slightly behind Mexico. [unsdsn.org/files/2013/09/WorldHappinessReport2013_online.pdf]

I would suggest this amendment to these approaches to international comparison. Don't look at the situation or the responses of everyone, but focus on those at the bottom, let's say the last quintile, the 20% of the population who are the worst off. How are we doing with respect to the treatment of, the life prospects of, the poor, the vulnerable, the oppressed, those viewed as unworthy minorities?

For this approach I especially find inspiration in two leaders: Jesus of Nazareth and John Rawls of Cambridge.

Jesus, following the great prophets of the Hebrew Bible, taught us to look out for the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the prisoner. [Matt. 25:35-40] It was Jesus who brought good news to the poor, who proclaimed release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and freedom to the oppressed. [Luke 4:18]

John Rawls, who taught at Harvard for many years, was probably the leading moral philosopher of the second half of the twentieth century. He would have us, in evaluating social and economic systems, place ourselves in the position of those worst off, and evaluate the systems from that perspective. [*A Theory of Justice* (1971)]

So if you want to see if we're making progress in this nation, look at how the poor in Detroit or Philadelphia are faring. If you want to see if we're making progress in this world, look at how the poor in Haiti or South Sudan are doing.

Four days ago, January 8, marked the 50th anniversary, the semi-centennial, of the kick-off of the War on Poverty. President Lyndon Johnson announced this campaign in

his first State of the Union address. Many millions of people have lived much better lives, as a result of the various anti-poverty measures that we've taken. But our efforts have been limited, our commitment intermittent. We can, we should, do much better. [see Nicholas Kristof, "Progress in the War on Poverty," NYT, 1/9/14, A21; Paul Krugman, "The War Over Poverty," NYT, 1/10/14, A23]

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For Unitarian Universalists, progress is a religious topic. In introducing our responsive reading a little while ago I mentioned James Freeman Clarke, one of the leading Unitarian ministers of the second half of the 19th century. The fifth of his five points summarizing the heart of Unitarianism was the progress of mankind – we could say humankind, or humanity – onward and upward, forever. [James Freeman Clarke, *Vexed Questions in Theology* (1886), pp. 10-16, cited by David Robinson, *The Unitarians and the Universalists* (1985), pp. 234-35]

Clarke, by the way, was one of the leaders of what was called the Broad Church movement within Unitarianism, following the Civil War. This is an oversimplification, but there was a split within Unitarianism among three groups:

- There were those who identified as Christians – Unitarian, not Trinitarian, Christians, emphasizing ethical teaching, not atonement and vehicles of salvation.
- Next were members of the Free Religious Association and their sympathizers, who wanted to sever the tie between Unitarianism and Christianity. The FRA gradually declined as a force within the American Unitarian Association, but its place, a few decades later, was taken by the Humanist movement.
- Transcendentalists, who were the descendants of Ralph Waldo Emerson, and his intellectual circle, could be identified as a third group. Like the FRA, they, too, would not be bound by Christianity, feeling that nature and other religions of the world were equally valid sources of religious inspiration.

Clarke, and other Broad Church folks, as their name implied, said that there is room enough in Unitarianism for all of the above.

As the responsive reading asked, what did Clarke mean by *forever*, progress *forever*? What do we mean by *forever*? In the long run, we're all dead. In the long run,

the sun will burn out, the whole universe will expire, humanity and any other intelligent life will be gone. So let's read *forever* somewhat metaphorically as meaning for a very long time, as many, many generations, or perhaps simply as a rhetorical flourish.

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Here's another question you may have been wondering about: what does the Bible say about progress? I hope that others with more knowledge than I in this area will correct me, but my conclusion, based on quite limited research, is that the Bible has little or nothing to tell us about progress. The societies described in the Bible appear to me to be static. I have not found any discussions of progress and very few examples of progress, whether of material progress, institutional progress, or scientific progress.

But this got me to thinking. What about progress in religion? When we think of religion, in general, or of particular religions, do we consider whether there has been progress, or how there might be progress in the future? Certainly on the institutional side we do. The addition of 50 new parking places or increasing the hours of the religious educator from 20 to 30 a week or publishing a large print version of the hymnal are signs of progress. But can we measure progress in doctrine, in theology?

Here are some features of a religion that, in my opinion, could gain the favor and allegiance of reasonably well educated, sensible people in the second half of the 21st century. I would count as progress steps taken to adopt or embody these features.

- This religion would be universally accessible. That is, it would not be restricted ethnically or geographically or by gender or age. It would claim no secret knowledge; it would erect no unreasonable barriers to affiliation. While it may have practices that set it apart from others, it would not have practices that unreasonably exclude others.
- This religion would recognize that, even in religion, change, evolution, and growth are possible, sometimes even desirable, especially if done gradually, not abruptly, by consensus, not division; it would not claim or aspire to infallibility.
- This religion would recognize that it operates within history, not without, that its story should not conflict with the well established conclusions of historians and archeologists, and that while myths and legends have value, their literal interpretation can be problematical.

- This religion would strive to incorporate and promote sound moral principles.
- This religion would raise its children to carry on the tradition, but not in an uncritical way. It would treat its children as persons of worth and dignity, in age appropriate ways.
- This religion would recognize that God suspends neither the laws of nature nor the principles of logic, that prayers and rituals intended to gain favor from God are ineffectual – at least for that purpose – that we humans are responsible for our own fate, that the only way that God can work in the world is through our hands, and that bad things do happen to good people (and good things to bad people) – you don't always get what you deserve.
- This religion would recognize that the true God will always remain at least one step beyond any god of our imagination or creation. [see Mark Johnston, *Saving God: Religion after Idolatry* (2009)]
- This religion would recognize that death is part of the cycle of life and would expect death to provide neither punishment nor reward but, more likely, eternal rest. It would find salvation, if anywhere, in this world, not in the next.
- This religion, while welcoming scientific and other intellectual endeavors and achievements, would recognize the persistence of mystery and would accept the likelihood that mystery will remain when we are gone.
- This religion would not attack other religions but seek to coexist and, where possible, cooperate with them.

Do those criteria, these ten suggestions, describe any religion you know?

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I have trouble dealing with progress as one big thing. It's easier to deal with it in pieces – technological progress, material progress, scientific progress, moral progress, medical progress, musical progress, baseball progress, and so on, and on.

Consider Beethoven. I can't imagine progress beyond Beethoven. Of course, we've had many other forms of music since Beethoven. Do Wagner and Stravinsky and

Schoenberg and Joplin represent progress? I don't know. But if we consider the kind of music that Beethoven was writing, no one has done it any better in the last two hundred years, and I don't think anyone will in the next two hundred – but how can we know?

No one in more than seventy years has equaled or surpassed Joe Dimaggio's 56 game hitting streak; no one since Ted Williams has hit over .400. Is progress in these two measures of baseball achievement at an end? I think so. But if we look at baseball more broadly, we should not be surprised by better all-around players in the remainder of this century.

In the large lot, single-family house neighborhood adjacent to our townhouse development there are now three new houses under construction. They all replace smaller houses, tear-downs; they all have three car garages. Is this progress? To me it looks like another contribution to global warming.

Fantasy football is quite popular now, so I've heard. I actually know nothing about how it works; is my prejudice against it unjustified? Certainly those who indulge in it could find something worse to do with their time and money. But I can think of so many better things that they could be doing, from feeding the hungry, to tutoring children, reading the New York Times, playing real football – touch, not tackle – or even participating in a Bible study group.

Self-driving cars are on the way [see R. Bilger, "Auto Correct," New Yorker, 11/25/13], but think of the down side of this "progress."

In the past century, [writes an urban designer in Seattle,] the automobile has diminished city life and despoiled the countryside. We are only now beginning to understand the profound health threats posed by a sedentary, auto-centric life style, and the only thing less energy-efficient than a single-passenger vehicle will be a zero-passenger vehicle. We still have a few humane streets, where a subtle wave or fleeting eye contact can help choreograph interactions among pedestrians, cyclists, and drivers. It is doubtful that any machine, however sophisticated, will ever be sensitive enough to navigate such a nuanced environment. [Lyle Bicknell, letter to the editor, New Yorker, 12/23 & 30/13]

It is possible that by the end of the century we will have enabled men and women to live a generation or more longer than we do now. Would this be progress? Maybe, maybe not. We can see some of the dangers – use of resources, disruption of traditional family, work, and retirement arrangements. But there's so much we don't know. Perhaps better not to go there. [see Roger Cohen, "When I'm 64," NYT, 12/25/13, A27]

If what we have is enough, if what we have is just right, then more is not better, more is not progress.

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We may be in favor of progress, we may believe in progress, but we should understand that progress is not inevitable. We hear frequently that though the arc of the moral universe is long, it bends towards justice. Martin Luther King, Jr., made that image famous, but King understood, he fully understood, that that arc did not bend toward justice on its own, all by itself. No, that arc would bend toward justice only if we humans worked for justice, only if we stood up to injustice.

Likewise, while we may believe in progress, it's up to us. We can't just sit by and watch.