

From a historical perspective, is it meaningful to speak of human progress through the ages? Is there a useful distinction to be made regarding technological, cultural and moral progress?

Introduction:

Throughout the study of the human story, progress has played an integral part. There would be no history without progress. Be it technological, cultural or moral in nature, the reliance on the advancement of mankind on progress is total. The creation of vaccines and other medicinal miracles in the late Nineteenth early Twentieth Centuries saved millions of lives from preventable diseases and created a foundation for technological and cultural advances that would have been impossible without them. The same can be said for other inventions, but perhaps on an inverse. At the same time that medicinal advancements were being made, the creation of newer and deadlier weapons led to a new style of warfare that saw millions of young men die on the battlefields of Europe. Would it be reasonable to call this progress? This piece of work will attempt to detail the ways in which progress can have both a positive and negative impact on history, and will draw a conclusion on its meaningfulness when the time comes to look back at history, and how progress has shaped it.

Defining Progress:

Without progress in technological terms, would we live in the world that we do today? Almost certainly not. Everything from steel reinforced concrete, to life saving medicine and techniques, was created by a desire for progress. Advancements in food preservation, ecological monitoring and just about every other field imaginable has created the world we live in today. Without at least acknowledging this, we are fundamentally unable to understand the world we live in, and fully explore the history of our world and our people. In the introduction to his work *The Shock of the Old*, David Edgerton writes “the timelines of technological history... are based on dates of invention and innovation” (Edgerton, 2011, Pg. ix), which begins a book which details the ways in which technological advancement has impacted the history of humankind in the Twentieth Century and onwards.

Seeing the positive impacts that just technological impacts have on the progress of human history begs the question about the impacts of the other two scopes of this piece - moral and cultural progress. Defining cultural progress has been the remit of many philosophers, anthropologists and social historians, whereas moral progress is almost an entirely philosophical area. This work will attempt to examine both from a historical viewpoint, and draw a conclusion from there. It would be impossible to examine any of the three areas detailed already without also acknowledging the ways in which they impact each other. Could technological progress happen at the speed with which it did over the last 300 years, without the societal and cultural environment in which it did? The answer is doubtful no matter who would give it, but it remains an important consideration when discussing the ways in which the world has changed.

It would also be remiss to not acknowledge the ways in which positive human progress, whether culturally, morally or technologically, negatively impacted on the natural world around us. Massive destruction of natural environments has led to a massive extinction globally of native plant and animal life, and will inevitably in the future see even more destruction. Mentioning this near the end of the definition will hopefully raise the point that in most cases, the negative impacts of progress are never, or rarely, discussed, and as far as

this study is able to, the negative impacts of progress will be mentioned alongside its positives.

Moral Progress:

Throughout the entire modern period of the Western hemisphere, slavery has played a crucial role. From the beginnings of the trans-Atlantic slave trade to the abolition of slavery, it has been an integral building block of the modern Western world (Lockhart, 2020). However, the growing calls throughout the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries for abolition, most notable in the United Kingdom through the use of the phrase “Am I not a man and a brother?”, popularised by Josiah Wedgwood, a fierce campaigner for the banning of slavery in the British Empire (Institute of Historical Research, 2019). The movements to ban slavery are perhaps the most explicit example of moral progress, insofar as a mass movement is capable of displaying. It consisted of a huge number of people from different backgrounds and was an important forerunner to such social movements as the Suffragette cause and Black Emancipation. It is also perhaps the greatest example of how a culture that had been built around the creation of and continuation of a system of oppression and white superiority began to liberalise from the inside out. While the movement, and its results, were not perfect - the full end of slavery in the British Empire did not come until almost 30 years later - it laid the groundwork for ways in which peoples would be able to overcome oppression and systems created in favor of it, for generations.

Negative moral progress may be viewed in several ways. The creation of belief systems of superiority, supremacy and control helped to progress the beliefs of some while stifling others. Slavery is perhaps the greatest example of this, and was reliant on that belief being commonplace among the ruling class to perpetuate. Once this stopped being the case, through pressure movements and the like, slavery became an impossible cause to justify within the British Empire. However, that move gave way to the creation of a society that tolerated great injustice and an expanding colonial sphere, as well as the creation of a wildly dangerous and oftentimes destructive industrial state. There is reasonable doubt that the abolition of slavery would have had no impact on this, and would in all likelihood, had it not gone ahead as it did in 1807, would have seen an even more brutal industrial nation that emerged from the Industrial Revolution in the United Kingdom.

Cultural Progress:

The previous discussion of how the end of slavery was an important and impactful shift in moral progress also helps to highlight the ways in which culture progresses. The banning of slavery quickly became an integral part of British internal and foreign policy, which was increasingly visible in the ways in which the British Empire interacted with other nation states throughout the world. Perhaps the most visible and impactful of these can be seen in Brazil, where British intervention led to the banning of slavery there in 1888 (Graham, 1966). Were the advances in moral progress that the banning of slavery and its associated movement in the United Kingdom not to take place, then the cultural shift that took place after the abolition in the British Empire would not have happened. Britain took on an active role in the abolishment of slavery throughout the world, and was an important advocate for the banning of both the slave trade and the institution of slavery as a whole. Richard Graham writes in his work *Causes for the Abolition of Negro Slavery in Brazil* that “the actual invasion of Brazilian ports by British ships are clear evidence of commitment to this goal” (Graham, 1966). Had the movement for Abolition not taken on a popular place within the culture of the British

Empire, it is unlikely that British seamen would have taken part in, and the British government would make such aggressive moves, in foreign policy.

However, the British cultural obsession with eradicating slavery led them to pursue a more “benevolent imperialism” as it has been christened in recent times (Satia, 2021). This was done with the abolition of slavery and similar acts at its heart. In what is now modern day Nigeria, this was done to supplant the control of the Edo kings and create a British colony in this extremely valuable part of Africa (Phillips, 2022, Pg. 31). Banning slavery was a major part of the British justification for conquering this part of the world, and was widely viewed as a reasonable cause for invasion among the British public, without question. Using the justification of Abolition, something which other European powers could not reasonably defend as their Abolitionist movements would inevitably raise opposition to such a move, allowed the British to do as they pleased in the region, something which would inevitably culminate in the seizing of the Benin Bronzes, the creation of the Niger River Protectorates and the continued emotional and cultural harm that has been done to Nigeria ever since.

Technological Progress:

By far the most visible and widespread form of progress is technological. The invention of aeroplanes, medicine, space travel, instant communication and the internet all directly and immediately changed the world. Life was never the same after any of these inventions, and all were driven by a desire for progress. There is no way of observing technological innovation as anything other than progress, for good or ill. As we have seen throughout this examination of history, progress has been both a blessing and a curse for mankind. Machine guns and bombs are comparable in their impact to their contemporaries, such as penicillin and the smallpox vaccine in their impact, just in another way. Airplanes, which had initially been designed for commercial flight suddenly became an integral part of warfare, as did industrial output and almost every other form of modern, industrial life. The creation of doctrines like total war exist just to reinforce this - every aspect of life became an intimate part of the process of waging war.

At the same time, mining technology allowed for a greater amount of material to be discovered, mined and transported for cheaper amounts of capital and in much quicker times - often at the expense of those labouring to do so. The invention of the steam train allowed for huge amounts of material, personnel and goods to be transported long distance, across land, at a time when the only alternative was by sea. Quick, efficient and overwhelmingly safe transport allowed for the creation of a world that very quickly became reliant on this for communication and organisation. The advent of modern colonialism, the creation of massive colonial possessions in Africa and India, as well as the need to coordinate these areas in times of war created perhaps the greatest drive for locomotive and train building in history. The creation of such massive industrial projects as the Cape to Cairo Railway are testament to this, and are one of the most blatant examples of colonial ambition in Africa (Institute of Civil Engineers, 2024).

Even the creation of such integral parts of the modern economic order, like the Suez and Panama Canals, were built around the need to streamline communication and trade with colonial partners in other parts of the world. The British saw the Suez Canal as an integral lifeline with India, which, if cut, would cost them the “Jewel in the Crown”, and played an integral part of British economic, foreign and defense policy up until the mid Twentieth

Century (Stephens, 2021). Understanding the ways in which technology impact our lives, and has impacted the lives of those before us, is a crucial phase of understanding just how much it affects us, and will continue to affect us into the future, in new and potentially unknown ways.

Conclusion:

To understand progress is to understand history. There would be no history without progress, and no progress without history. Whether motivated by the past, or driven by the future, some of the most impactful people in history have wanted to make progress. They have been politicians, historians, inventors and generals. All have had some impact on the story of humankind, one that is without a doubt driven massively by the need and want for progress. We have to understand that if we are to examine the world around us.

As we have seen, the ways that moral and cultural progress have developed are in many ways intertwined, while also remaining different and distinct from each other. Technological progress on the other hand has continued to happen regardless of the moral and cultural impacts on it. Whether it is the creation of new, deadly technology such as dynamite and machine guns, or the breakthroughs in medicine such as penicillin and modern vaccines, technology has always been at the forefront of human progress. Understanding this allows us to place new importance on breakthroughs and developments throughout history, and to have a better grasp as to the importance that progress holds in the collective consciousness and perception of history.

Progress can be many things, as we have explored. But one thing that it is not is final. There is always a future development in the realm of technological progress, there are always new cultural phenomena and new ways of engaging with moral concepts. Understanding this allows us to better understand our contemporaries, as well as those who came before us and shaped their own areas of history. We can better grasp how slavery shaped the world, how the increasing reliance on technology has developed into a world that is now more connected than ever before, and how morals can be twisted or disguised to benefit the controlling powers. All of this is an integral part of how we should view history, and those who shaped it and took part in it.

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