

# HUMAN PROGRESS AND ITS MOURNFUL DOUBTERS

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THE broad sweep of evolutionary thinking, so familiar to the reading public, may have done something to create a common view of "things in general", but it would be far from the truth to say that western civilization is characterized by a unified outlook upon life. On the contrary, all kinds of philosophy are being cultivated. Materialism, idealism, naturalism, spiritualism, besides various mixtures of eclecticism—all have their trains of followers, and no hope can be held out that the near future will witness the sway of a dominant philosophy of life. Some original spirit has asserted that the greatest need of the western world at the present time is an epidemic of Buddhism, with its "calm appeal to all eternity" and its unifying negations, but this is not likely to be taken seriously. We are too much in love with life to admit of being inoculated with Buddhistic germs. For, if Buddhism should actually sweep our continent, would it not happen to us according to the old doggerel:—

He died, to be sure,  
But the fever left him.

Amid this variety of world-views, one outstanding notion, it is widely said, has crystallized in the crucible of western thought—the idea of Human Progress. Perhaps it is as much a kind of faith as a clearly defined idea; but whatever it may be, it implies the conception of indefinite moral and social improvement. The validity of the assertion is hardly debatable, and while it may not prove the existence of "a golden vein running through the various schools of present-day thought", as an enthusiastic writer contends, yet to the extent of its soundness it does indicate the existence of a rallying point, like the ancient Tower of Babel, where kindred spirits from many schools may meet and compare notes, even if, as in Babel of old, we find it difficult to understand each other's speech. The idea of progress may be true or false, but no man who is at all in contact with vital minds can escape it. To the keenly interested lover of mankind, human nature rarely fails to reveal its deep capacities for moral and social advancement, which

explains the universal experience that faith in progress is most in evidence where the world's best work is being done.

The notion itself, in its present form, is of comparatively recent origin, scarcely prior to the career of Comte and the construction of his intellectual edifice. Like every other living and life-giving product of the human mind, it has grown with the lapse of years. We may now speak of the common destiny of all nations, and the social and economic unity of the race, but no thoroughly balanced student of human nature can thus speak without an awe-inspiring intimation of the vast progress that must be achieved if these visions are ever to be realized. And if the idea of progress is growing, so must be the conception of the potentialities of human nature.

### I

Mr. H. G. Wells's *Outline of History* was already famous when its author was sent to Washington to report the proceedings of the disarmament conference. During his sojourn in the American capital, he became the guest of the terrible "Gridiron Club", an association of newspaper men, which justly prides itself upon being no respecter of persons. Its banquets are a veritable ordeal to visitors of fame and high position. Accordingly, Mr. Wells was introduced to the club as an author who had written "a very interesting and authoritative book on a subject about which nobody knows anything." How the thrust was received, we are not informed. The Gridiron Club, however, was treading on holy, yet dangerous, ground. Mr. Wells's summary of modern thinking upon the pre-historic world is a chapter in that new book of revelation which no previous age could have written, and it reflects the spirit of a century of infinite toil and patience. If it is—though only in essence—a picture of the true progress of the race, we may well pause at the thought of the potentialities of the human species, and we must face the challenging question—What right has anyone to draw the boundary lines of the soul's future kingdom, and say, "Hitherto shalt thou come, but no further"? If the picture is false, then clearly we have wasted our time and talent: the scientists have given us a phantom, "the empty outlines of a ghost", to be painfully exorcised in years to come.

To deal with primitive forms of life and the evolution of pre-historic man is one thing; the true interpretation of authentic history is quite another, and the difference is shown plainly enough in Mr. Wells's work. The calm recorder of Nature's achievements becomes by turns the eulogist and the severe critic of historical men and situations. Something has happened; the responsibility for the

moral and social state of humanity has been shifted from Nature to man. With the advent of the higher psychic life, according to the theory, the primitive brute is metamorphosed into a moral agent, self-directing and self-propelling; and the drama of civilization, with its intrigues, corruptions, heroisms, and agonies, is staged. Henceforth, man's moral and social progress depends upon himself; he may advance, retrograde or stand still; he is now the captain of his soul.

The way in which man has made or unmade or neglected himself should therefore properly be the sum and substance of his history, and it does not seem an extravagant demand that history should speak on these subjects in a language and with a voice which nobody could misunderstand. Yet, is this entirely the case? From a surface point of view it is a tangled story of shreds and patches, and one of the most difficult things in the world to comprehend. Students of equal sincerity and penetration may differ, and do differ, as regards the verdict of history with reference to man's moral and social progress. We have learned some of the reasons for this state of things. In the first place, according as we are inclined, by nature or education to emphasize man's self-making or self-unmaking or self-neglect, we have of necessity our view of the story. Moreover, our vision of the various historical epochs will largely depend upon the particular virtues we deem the most important, as well as upon the specific vices we can least tolerate. The age of the Antonines and the thirteenth century have each been upheld as "the golden age" of mankind. If Schopenhauer had written a history of the world, it is certain that he would not have discovered any golden age in it, and who can doubt that he would have been convincing? An additional difficulty is found in the fact that each generation knows best "the bitterness of its own heart", and can not so readily enter into the agonizing conditions of bygone ages. Here is the explanation of much of the wholesale condemnation levelled at the moral and social conditions of our own time. As has been said, "Every great prophet, from Jeremiah to Ruskin, has been convinced that his own age was the worst of all." Carlyle spoke of the Roman world as "a warm summer's day", full of work and full of pleasure, but he was never in a mood to bestow much praise upon the moral and social life of his own age. It is difficult to disregard the old assertion that history is only one-half objective truth; the other half is a reflection of the spirit of the historian.

As the case stands, and in full view of the recent world disaster, the despairing political and economic conditions of many nations,

criminals, but few will have the hardihood to deny. Furthermore, we are told with undeniable force that every man has a right to be well born, and that it is the duty of society to provide each child with parents mentally and physically sound. This sentiment is obviously growing. It is significant that the world congress of birth-control advocates, which was held in New York this spring, met with no opposition from either the local or the federal authorities.

The birth-control propaganda is the most sweeping effort of any age to force the moral and social improvement of mankind. It claims to sing the morning song of all human advancement, yet its voice sounds more like the wail of final despair. If its measures are justified, then clearly all other efforts must have failed. The futility of moral and intellectual instruction, the ineffectiveness of social welfare work, and the failure of religion as a creator of spiritual values and a builder of man's inner world—all must be admitted. Birth-control is therefore the last desperate resort. Will it prove any more successful? Will the "higher grades" of human beings continue to produce still higher grades, or may we suspect that this supreme effort will end in collapse and deterioration? No satisfactory answer can be given; but we might well watch with profound interest the reaction of nature, for reactions there certainly would be.

### III

We are not here concerned with the old problem of the genesis of the ethical sentiment, but we are very much interested in its exodus. To all men who accept the idea of organic evolution, whether by means of natural selection or some other process, the pre-historic growth of man's moral and social power must be a foregone conclusion. Long before the dawn of written history, human society existed, with ethical codes and laws and ordinances as iron clad as anything we have in our day. That sunken world of the past which is known as the Age of Totemism, and which is regarded by men like Prof. Wundt and his disciples as the harbinger of historic civilization, was evidently characterized by an intricate system of legal enactments designed to safeguard the moral life of the tribes,—laws that could not possibly have existed in the earliest stages of human culture. That these laws seem ridiculous enough to our minds, is beside the subject. The main fact to be considered is, that what we are now pleased to term "spirit", as a datum objective to nature, was a growing thing in nascent humanity, and that even in pre-historic times we can trace the increasing struggle between the "natural" and the "spiritual"

in the human species. Much of the legal and ethical material in the Old Testament has a date prior to the dawn of Babylonian civilization. If, however, no further progress can be traced in historic times, if through our growing power of self-direction we have created a deadlock that can not be broken, historic man must be considered a failure as contrasted with the success of his pre-historic ancestors. At the very dawn of the earliest civilization there is, indeed, a sinister sign—the Egyptian Sphinx. Here is a deadlock; nature and spirit have fought each other “to a standstill”. The Sphinx, as a symbol of the mysterious union of nature and spirit in humanity, is true; but our question is, must we also accept this state of stagnation as prophetic of all the future? If so, then Dr. Spengler and his disciples are right; there is no moral or social progress.

Before attempting a further discussion of this point, however, it may be profitable to point out that the relation between nature and spirit is not generally as antagonistic as a perverted theology has tried to make us believe. While the processes of nature are entirely “natural”, and the achievements of history are regarded as spiritual, yet history and nature have in truth many traits in common. In both we witness the elimination of the unfit, the severe struggle for supremacy, the persistence of the truly life-bulding idea, the same increasing complexity of organism, and the same anxious care for the future. Furthermore, as Prof. Hutcheon of the Meadville Theological School has recently reminded us, where nature and history are alike successful they employ the same method, namely, the combining of conservation and radicalism. Nature incessantly draws upon the storehouse of the past for her material, and then transforms it to meet the needs and suit the purposes of a changing world. Where history has ventured to reverse this process—cut loose from the past, create brand new material, and start afresh with a clean slate—it has invariably broken down. To set forth the achievements of history as only in part the outcome of man’s conscious endeavour—as the result of the united efforts of spirit and nature—would be by no means a new suggestion, but it may need a little attention in an age so prone as ours to over-emphasize the sway of consciousness in our practical life. To the extent that history has followed the method of nature, and has adapted its old material to the needs of the present, instead of throwing itself across the path of evolution by thoughtless anarchy, moral and social progress has been inevitable.