

The “Myth of Progress”

By Norm R. Allen Jr.

We live to improve, or we live in vain. – Thomas Paine

Many critics of the New Atheists have accused its leaders of being hopelessly naïve for promoting the idea that human beings actually make progress. Some are more sensible in their critique by contending that the New Atheists promote the Enlightenment idea that human beings are becoming increasingly rational, scientific and moral, especially as they free themselves from the chains of ancient superstition, especially religion. The New Atheists seem to be promoting a utopian vision for society in which human beings can transcend their supposed nature and live peacefully and rationally all over the world.

While many humanists shun scientism and the “scientizing” of society by which science and scientists dictate knowledge – including moral knowledge – and how people should live, it would be foolish to throw the baby (good science) out with the bath water. Moreover, it is simply not true that human beings do not make moral progress.

People often talk about the negative aspects of science, such as the development of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons. However, as the late physicist and New Atheist Victor Stenger noted, no one says we should do away with science. It is clear that without science and its technological offspring, we would still be “living in caves and subsisting on wild berries.” Moreover, as libertarian thinkers have pointed out, we never hear of a technologically and scientifically advanced society trying to revert to pre-scientific and pre-technological times. On the contrary, those societies that are less scientifically and technologically advanced are always trying to catch up to more advanced societies. Good science is here to stay, and we should all be happy about that. (On the other hand, many people do contend that the world could get along very well without theistic religion.)

Good science does not necessarily make us better people. However, we are in many respects better people than those that came before us. There are examples of human betterment all around us.

Only the most inhumane people still believe in chattel slavery. It is illegal because we have made genuine moral progress. There are some people that honestly believe that the abolition of slavery is no big deal. However, they would rapidly change their minds were slavery to be forced upon *them*.

Jim Crow in the American South and apartheid in South Africa have been dismantled because we have become better people. Though we have our prejudices, many of us recognize this and constantly battle against them. Human beings are notoriously slow to make social progress, but it does come eventually.

Women not only have the right to vote but it is likely that the U.S. will have its first woman president. Women are serving as mayors, governors, and congresspersons. They have surpassed men in earning undergraduate and advanced degrees. They are excelling in science and academia.

Same-sex marriage is now the law of the land. LGBT people are now accepted into the military and discrimination against them is discouraged. Television programs and movies featuring openly gay characters as everyday people are common. Openly gay people have been elected to public office.

Nations have done away with rule by kings, queens, emperors, pharaohs, and so forth. Nations are increasingly electing presidents and prime ministers, congresspersons and members of parliament. They are drafting constitutions and embracing the rule of law.

Human beings have even made progress in the ways in which they relate to other animals. There are numerous animal welfare and animal rights groups in existence. People all over the U.S. have taken a stand against dog fighting and other forms of animal abuse. (Many years ago, NFL player Michael Vick would have never been convicted and gone to prison for dogfighting. People have made progress and become much more humane.)

Human beings have done wonderful work in saving numerous animal species from extinction and in issuing warnings about endangered species. Obviously, there was a time when most human beings couldn't have cared less about saving other species from extinction.

Cynics, of course, will sneer at all of this progress. They will say that people are still being enslaved via human trafficking (which is *illegal*.) Racial discrimination still exists (and there are many legal routes to challenge much of it.) Women are still paid less than men. They are still victims of sexual assault and domestic violence (which are *illegal*.) LGBT people are still bullied. They are still assaulted and killed (both being *illegal*.) Animals are still being abused and killed, human beings still eat meat and hunt for fun, and so forth.

All of this is strong evidence against the notion that we are experiencing linear progression toward a utopian society. It is highly unlikely that that is ever going to happen. There will be setbacks and there will always be reactionary forces that have their day. (Then again, as someone once said, “setbacks pave the way for comebacks.”)

Still, someone once pointed out that human beings have an infinite capacity for taking things for granted. However, let us not ignore or downplay the progress that we have made. One of the keys to happiness is appreciating how far we have come. Yet, that does not mean we should ignore how far we still have to go.

Make no mistake. We will probably never be perfect. However, we have made progress. We may never be the species we *want* to be. But we’re a whole lot better than the species we *used* to be. And in many ways, we can continue to get better.