

# John Gray

## *An illusion with a future*

Questioning the idea of progress at the start of the twenty-first century is a bit like casting doubt on the existence of the Deity in Victorian times. The stock reaction is one of incredulity, followed by anger, then moral panic. It is not so much that belief in progress is unshakable as that we are terrified of losing it.

The idea of progress embodies the faith – for it is a faith, not the result of any kind of empirical inquiry – that the advance that has occurred in science can be replicated in ethics and politics. The line of reasoning proceeds as follows: Science is a cumulative activity. Today we know more than any previous generation, and there is no obvious limit to what we may come to know in the future. In the same way, we can indefinitely improve the human condition. Just as human knowledge continues to increase

beyond anything dreamt of in earlier times, the human condition can be better in the future than it has ever been in the past.

This is a very recent creed. Nothing like it existed before it emerged in Europe around two centuries ago. Yet today it seems to have become indispensable. No one imagines progress to be inevitable, but to deny that it is *possible* seems tantamount to snuffing out all hope. In terms of mass killing of humans by humans, the twentieth century was the worst in history; but surely – it will be objected – we must believe that such horrors can be avoided in the future. How else can we go on?

To reject the very idea of progress must appear extreme, if not willfully perverse. Yet the idea is found in none of the world's religions and was unknown among the ancient philosophers. For Aristotle, history was a series of processes of growth and decline no more meaningful than those we observe in the lives of plants and animals. Early modern thinkers such as Machiavelli and some thinkers of the Enlightenment shared this view. David Hume believed that history is cyclical, with periods of peace and freedom being regularly followed by war and tyranny. For the great Scottish skeptic, the oscillation between civiliza-

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tion and barbarism was coeval with human history; in ethical and political terms the future was bound to be much like the past. The same view is found in Hobbes, and even Voltaire was at times inclined to it.

These thinkers never doubted that some periods of history are better than others. None of them was tempted to deny the fact of improvement, where it existed; but they never imagined it could be continuous. They knew there would be times of peace and freedom in the future, as there had been in the past; but they believed that what was gained in one generation would surely be lost in another. They believed that in ethics and politics there is no progress, only recurring gain and loss.

This seems to me to be the lesson of any view of the human prospect that is not befogged by groundless hopes. Progress is an illusion – a view of human life and history that answers to the needs of the heart, not reason. In his book *The Future of an Illusion*, published in 1927, Freud argued that religion is an illusion. Illusions need not be all false; they may contain grains of truth. Even so, they are believed not because of any truth they may contain, but because they answer to the human need for meaning and consolation.

Believers in progress have identified a fundamental truth about modern life – its continuous transformation by science; but they have invested this undoubted fact with hopes and values inherited from religion. They seek in the idea of progress what theists found in the idea of providence – an assurance that history need not be meaningless. Those who hold to the possibility of progress insist that they do because history supports it. They cling to it because it allows them to believe that history can be more than a tale told by an idiot.

If today life without the possibility of progress seems insupportable, it is worth asking how this state of affairs has come about. Most human beings who have ever lived lacked any such hope, and yet a great many of them had happy lives. Why are we so different?

The answer lies in our history. The modern faith in progress is the offspring of a marriage between seeming rivals – the lingering influence of Christian faith and the growing power of science – in early-nineteenth-century Europe. From the eschatological hopes of Christianity we inherit the belief that meaning and even salvation can be found in the flux of history. From the accelerating advance of scientific knowledge we acquire the belief in a similar advance by humanity itself.

From one angle, the idea of progress is a secular version of Christian eschatology. In Christianity, history cannot be senseless: it is a moral drama, beginning with a rebellion against God and ending with the Last Judgment. Christians therefore think of salvation as a historical event. For Hindus and Buddhists, on the other hand, it means liberation from time. It meant the same in Mithraism – a mystery cult that for a time among the Romans rivaled Christianity. Thus the mystical vision of liberation from time entered deeply into European philosophy, with Plato affirming that only eternal things can be fully real. History was a realm of illusions, a dream or a nightmare from which the wise seek to awaken.

Before the coming of Christianity it was taken for granted that history is without meaning. True, the belief that God reveals himself in history can be found in the Old Testament, but it is a reading of the history of the Jewish people, not of that of the species. It was only after Saint Paul turned the teaching of

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Jesus into a universal religion that the Old Testament was interpreted as an account of history as a whole. This move to universalism is commonly seen as a major advance, but I am unconvinced. The political religions that wrought such havoc in the twentieth century were secular versions of the Christian promise of universal salvation. A world without such transcendent political hopes would still have suffered from ethnic and religious violence; but mass murder would not have been committed with the aim of perfecting humanity.

The role of eschatological beliefs in modern political movements has not been much studied. Amongst analytical philosophers, ignorance of religion is a point of professional honor, while social science continues to be dominated by theories of secularization that were falsified generations ago. Yet the connection between Christian eschatology and modern revolutionary movements has not gone entirely unnoticed. It is the central theme of Norman Cohn's book, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages*. First published in 1957, Cohn's masterly study is indispensable to understanding twentieth-century politics.

The late medieval movements Cohn describes held to a radical version of the Christian eschatology: the old world was coming to an end, and a new one was coming into being without any of the flaws that had disfigured human society throughout history. The same view of history and the human future was reproduced in modern radical ideologies. Cohn's mystical anarchists believed that God would bring about this transformation in human affairs. Bakunin and Marx believed – even more incredibly – that humankind could do so unaided. A similar fantasy animated Fukuya-

ma's absurd announcement of the end of history.

It is no accident that Europe is the birthplace of Marxism, and America of neoliberalism. Neither could have arisen, or even be fully understood, outside a culture pervaded by the belief that salvation is an event in history. Modern projects of universal emancipation are earthly renditions of the Christian promise of salvation.

In contrast, the pagan world was remarkable for the extreme modesty of its hopes. For Marcus Aurelius and Epicurus, the good life would always remain the privilege of a few. The notion that the mass of humanity could be saved – or was worth saving – was unknown. Only with Christianity did the notion enter European antiquity that all humankind – or all of it that accepted the Christian message – could be saved. In holding out the prospect of an improvement in the human condition, secular humanists are renewing the vast hopes kindled by Christianity in the ancient world.

Although – unlike Bakunin, Marx, and Fukuyama – they don't proclaim an end of history, most of our secular humanists do look forward to a better world than any that history records. The catastrophes of the twentieth century may have taught them social progress is a matter of inching along rather than of great leaps forward, but they continue to believe that human action can remake the world. The method may be piecemeal social engineering rather than – as in Marx or Bakunin – revolutionary transformation; but the aim is the same.

The current conception of progress is a secular religion, but it has another and no less important source in science. Intermittent throughout most of history, the growth of human knowledge is now continuous and accelerating. Short of a

catastrophe greater than any that can be realistically imagined, the advance of science is unstoppable. This fact is the second source of the modern faith in progress.

The reality of scientific progress is demonstrated by increasing human power. There are more humans alive today than ever. The face of Earth is being transformed by human expansion. Unnumbered species of flora and fauna are being driven into extinction, and the global climate is changing. The root of this increase in human power is the growth of human knowledge. Philosophers may dispute the validity of scientific knowledge; cultural anthropologists may represent science as one belief system among others – yet, faced with the fact of growing human power, skepticism about the validity of scientific knowledge is pointless.

Still, there is loss as well as gain in the advance of science. There is no built-in harmony between human well-being and the growth of knowledge. The most predictable by-product of scientific progress, for instance, is an increase in the intensity of war. The long-term impact could be to make Earth uninhabitable to humans. Even so, it is frivolous to deny scientific progress – as some postmodernist thinkers seem to want to do. The error in the dominant modern worldview is not that it affirms progress in science to be a reality when it is not. Rather, its mistake is to imagine that the progress that has occurred in science can be replicated in other areas of human life. Human knowledge changes, but human needs stay much the same. Humans use their growing knowledge to satisfy their conflicting needs. As they do, they remain as prone to frailty and folly as they have ever been.

To question the idea of progress is not to cast doubt on the improvements that

have actually occurred. Nor does it entail rejecting the reality of universal human values. There are postmodernist thinkers who maintain that we cannot pass moral judgments on other cultures and epochs: there are only different forms of life, each with its own ideals and standards. If this were so, it would make no sense to evaluate history in terms of progress – or decline. Ethics would be like art, in which judgments can be made regarding progress and decline within particular traditions, but not between traditions whose styles vary widely. Lacking universal standards, there would be no way to judge that one culture or period in history was an improvement on any other.

There are affinities between art and ethics. The notion that one way of life could be best for everybody is like saying that one style of art could be better than every other. That is obviously absurd, but it does not mean we cannot judge different cultures and eras. No way of life is best for everybody, but some are bad for everyone.

For humans as for other animals there are species-wide goods and evils. Drawing up a list is not easy, but fortunately that is not necessary. As soon as we find a value that looks universal, we see that it clashes with other, equally universal values. Justice clashes with mercy, equality with excellence, personal autonomy with social cohesion. Freedom from arbitrary power is a great good – but so is the avoidance of anarchy. Moreover, goods may rest on evils: peace on conquest, high cultural achievement on gross inequalities. There is no natural harmony among the goods of human life.

Conflicts among basic human values do not arise only in extreme situations. In good times they may be masked, but they flow from the endemic conflicts of human needs, and they are permanent.

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Ethics and politics are practical skills that humans have devised to cope with these conflicts. Unlike scientific knowledge, the skills of ethics and politics are not easily transmitted. They have to be learnt afresh with each new generation, and they are easily lost.

Humans are intensely curious, but they fear the truth; they long for peace, but they are excited by violence; they dream of a world of harmony, but they are at war with themselves. Despite tireless efforts to show that their values cohere in a single vision of the good, they do not and never will. Each value expresses an enduring human need but clashes with other human needs, equally urgent and no less permanent.

The perception that humans are somehow radically defective appears in the myths of cultures separated by long stretches of time and space. Formulated in the doctrine of Original Sin, human imperfectability is expressed most powerfully in the biblical myth of the Fall. In the form of an assertion of ingrained human delusion, it is also found in Hinduism and Buddhism. It forms part of what may be called a human orthodoxy, which recognizes that the human animal is incorrigibly flawed.

In contrast, secular humanists believe that the growth of knowledge can somehow make humans more rational. From Auguste Comte and John Stuart Mill to John Dewey and Bertrand Russell, it has been believed that progress in science would be matched by progress in society. These thinkers accepted that if intellectual progress were to falter or stop, progress in society would cease too. Yet none of them ever imagined that while the growth of knowledge continued to accelerate, ethical and political life could regress. Yet that was the reality during most of the last century, and there is no

reason to think the present reality will be any different.

The most dangerous threats confronting us today are the results of the interaction of expanding human knowledge with unchanging human needs. The spread of weapons of mass destruction is a response to intractable political conflicts; but it is also a by-product of the diffusion of scientific knowledge. Science has enabled living standards to be raised in advanced industrial societies; but worldwide industrialization is triggering a struggle for the control of scarce natural resources. It is the practical application of science that has made the present size of the human population possible; but the mix of population growth with advancing industrialization is the human cause of climate change. Science brings knowledge, but knowledge is not an unmixed good. It can be as much a curse as a blessing.

This is a thought that goes very much against the grain of Western philosophy, which, after all, was founded in the faith that knowledge and virtue go together. Socrates was able to affirm that the unexamined life is not worth living because – in Plato’s account, at any rate – he did not doubt that the true and the good are one and the same; that beyond the shifting realm of the senses there is another world in which all goods are reconciled in perfect harmony; that by knowing this other realm we can be free. This mystical faith pervades Western philosophy and underpins the modern creed of progress, in which growing knowledge is seen as the pathway to human emancipation.

The myth of Genesis has a different message. In the biblical story, the Fall of Man follows his eating from the fruit of the tree of knowledge. The result is an intoxicating sense of power, accompa-



nied by all the ills that come when flawed creatures use knowledge to pursue their conflicting ends. Greek myth teaches the same lesson when it tells of Prometheus chained to a rock for stealing fire from the gods. Knowledge is one thing, the good life another.

The power of these myths comes from the insight that humanity cannot go back. Contrary to the proclamations of Rousseau and some Green thinkers today, we cannot revert to a simple life. Once we have eaten from the tree of knowledge we must somehow cope with the consequences.

The core of the idea of progress is the illusion that knowledge enhances human freedom. The reality is that it merely increases human power. Science cannot end history; it can only add another, extremely potent ingredient to history's continuing conflicts. This is the truth intimated in the biblical myth and demonstrated in the history of the twentieth century.

Despite the evidence of experience, progress has had many evangelists over the past two hundred years. In their different ways, Hegel and Marx, Bakunin and Mill, Popper and Hayek, Habermas and Fukuyama all preach the same faith: knowledge is liberating; science can be used to create a world better than any history has known. But the most successful propagandists for the idea of progress were the French positivists Henri de Saint-Simon and Auguste Comte, who in the first half of the nineteenth century developed a cult – the Religion of Humanity, as they called it – that offered salvation through science.

Positivism is a complex body of ideas, but the tenet of the positivist creed that is relevant to my present theme is the belief that the growth of scientific knowledge enables the intractable conflicts of history to be left behind. Saint-

Simon and Comte believed that with the advance of knowledge, ethics and politics could become sciences. Once the debris of metaphysics and religion had been cleared away, science would be the source of our view of the world. A new terrestrial morality – a scheme of values having the authority of science – would be formulated. Applying this new morality, science could bring into being a global civilization without poverty or war, in which the conflicts of the past would be only memories.

Unlike many who were influenced by their ideas, the positivists did not think that religion would disappear in the new world. They recognized that it answered to enduring human needs, and they set about devising a new faith: a bizarre but, for a time, hugely successful cult, with its own priesthood and liturgy, daily observances based on the 'science' of phrenology, and even a special sort of costume fashioned – with buttons sewn up the back so that dressing and undressing could only be done with the help of others – to promote social cooperation.

The Religion of Humanity is a ridiculous confection, but the central ideas of the positivists have had an enormous influence. J. S. Mill, Karl Marx, and Herbert Spencer are only a few of the nineteenth-century thinkers who absorbed the positivist belief that science would enable the abolition of poverty and war. Lenin's project of a stateless socialist society was an echo of Marx's formula that when communism is achieved the government of men will be replaced by the administration of things – a formula Marx owed (via the French utopian socialist Louis Blanc) to Saint-Simon. At the end of the twentieth century, the positivist belief that the diffusion of science and technology would engender a universal civilization resurfaced in the neoliberal cult of the global free market.

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Now, as in the past, the Enlightenment ideal of a universal civilization has triggered a violent backlash. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, romantic and Counter-Enlightenment thinkers such as J. G. Herder and Joseph de Maistre proclaimed the value of faith and the singularity of cultures. In the twentieth century, the Nazis exalted race and instinct. Today religious fundamentalists seek to resist the advance of science by returning to a prelapsarian condition of doubt-free innocence. Such movements claim to reject the modern world and the faith in progress that drives it, but a little examination shows this to be self-deception.

The Nazis certainly rejected Enlightenment values of human equality, personal liberty, and toleration; but they affirmed the Enlightenment idea that a new humanity without the flaws of the old could be created. Comte's project of a science of sociology based on physiology was taken up by Cesare Lombroso, the founder of criminal anthropology, and later became an element in Nazi scientific racism. The Nazi conception of progress condemned much of humanity to slavery or extermination; it was not by accident that it produced the worst genocide in history. Even so, the Nazis shared with the positivists the goal of using science to develop a new humanity – a peculiarly modern project. With Nietzsche they shared the modern faith that human life can be transformed by an act of will.

A similar belief is evident in radical Islam. From its inception as a body of thought in the mid-twentieth century, radical Islam has seen itself – and been seen by others – as a profoundly anti-Western movement. But in fact many of its themes have been borrowed from radical Western thought. The idea that the world can be regenerated by spectac-

ular acts of violence echoes the orthodoxy of French Jacobinism, nineteenth-century European and Russian anarchism, and Lenin's Bolshevism. Movements such as Nazism and radical Islam do not offer an alternative to the modern faith in progress but an exacerbation of it.

Like older faiths, progress and the Religion of Humanity are illusions. But whereas the illusions of older faiths embody enduring human realities, the faith in progress depends on suppressing them. It represses the conflicts of human needs and denies the unalterable moral ambiguity of human knowledge.

Nothing is more commonplace than the insistence that what we do with scientific knowledge is up to us. But we – enlightened thinkers, friends of reason and humanity – are few and feeble, and no doubt as deluded as the rest of the species, if not more so. The hopes to which believers in progress cling are only the values of their time and place, shifting eddies in the shallow current of conventional opinion. Today *bien-pensant* economists are adamant that human prosperity can only be secured by a universal regime of free markets; a generation ago they believed only managed markets could do the trick. A generation before that, many were missionaries for central planning. Current beliefs about free markets and globalization are just the latest in a series of intellectual fashions, each convinced of its finality, every one of them superseded by events. Only those who are blessed with short memories can believe that the history of ideas is a tale of progress.

Still, giving up the idea of progress is a drastic step. It may be an illusion, but it has sometimes been a benign one. Would we have seen the abolition of slavery, or the prohibition of torture,

without the hope of a better future? Instead of giving up the idea of progress, why not suitably revise it?

There are alternative visions of progress more attractive than the discredited dogmas of the last twenty years. Like the Marxists of a couple of generations ago, neoliberals believe one economic system is best everywhere. But the free market is not the terminus of history; different countries with varying histories and present circumstances may need different economic arrangements. Again, neoliberals follow Marxists in thinking of economic development in terms of increasing human power over the natural environment; but – as the former Soviet Union demonstrated all too clearly – the end result of that approach is ecological devastation. Neoliberals will insist (they always insist) that free markets can deal with natural scarcity; but Western political leaders appear not to share their confidence. The last major war of the twentieth century – the Gulf War – was a conflict over the control of oil. The present century looks as if it will contain more conflicts of this kind – mainly over energy supplies, but also fresh water. Rather than leave Earth’s depleting natural resources to the vagaries of the price mechanism punctuated by resource wars, would it not be better to seek to moderate the human impact on the planet, and thereby foster a more sustainable kind of development?

I am sure it would be better if we had a vision of progress that respected the limits of Earth. In other writings, I have tried to sketch some such view. Yet I have come to doubt that such theoretical constructions can ever prevail against the power of human passions. When vital necessities appear threatened, humans will act as they have always done: They will try to secure them now – even if the result is war, and the ruin of all. Belief in progress is harmful because it

obscures these realities. Far more than the religions of the past, it clouds our perception of the human condition.

In his great poem “Aubade,” Philip Larkin wrote of religious faith as “that vast moth-eaten musical brocade” – a system of falsehoods contrived to shield humans from their fear of death. His description may once have contained some truth, but it is better applied nowadays to the secular faith in progress. Whatever their faults, traditional religions are less fantastical. They may promise a better world beyond the grave, but they do not imagine that science can deliver humanity from itself.

Can modern men and women do without the moth-eaten musical brocade of progressive hope? I think not. Faith in the liberating power of knowledge is encrypted into modern life. Drawing on some of Europe’s most ancient traditions, and daily reinforced by the quickening advance of science, it cannot be given up by an act of will. The interaction of quickening scientific advance with unchanging human needs is a fate that we may perhaps temper, but cannot overcome.

In time, no doubt, the religion of progress will disappear, as the way of life it animates fades from the world. Other faiths will appear, more or less remote from human realities, but equally irrational. Who now remembers Mithraism, or the curious faith of the Gnostics? These religions sustained and consoled millions of people over many centuries, only to vanish almost without trace. Yet those who hold to the possibility of progress need not fear. The illusion that through science humans can remake the world is an integral part of the modern condition. Renewing the eschatological hopes of the past, progress is an illusion with a future.

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