

## **Chapter 11**

### **Summarizing Progress and Regress**

If we will to learn from our own past, we can convert anything that is evil in it into an occasion, an opportunity, a means to good which without it were not possible (Smith, 1917, 314).

Table 11.1 expresses the results of the disaggregated analysis of progress undertaken in the previous seven chapters. For slightly over one hundred phenomena or phenomenon-based characteristics discussed, Table 11.1 indicates whether predominately progress (denoted by P), regress (R), or both (B) were observed; in several cases either the question is not applicable or there are no clear grounds for providing an answer (N). The analysis has been performed for three time periods: the last decades, the last couple of centuries, and the last two millennia. It has been argued in chapters 1 and 3 that there is no objective means of weighting these different results. Certainly it would be folly to simply add up the observations of progress and regress, and declare which was more common. A casual perusal of the table will show that there are many cases of both progress and regress for each time period. Decisions about whether society is progressing or regressing must depend, then, on which phenomena one values the most. Clearly, different people can reach different conclusions simply by emphasizing different phenomena. Some might emphasize caring, biodiversity, or the importance of well-rounded individuals, and despair of human decline. Others might celebrate economic growth, technological advance, and freedom of various sorts, and lean toward a conclusion of net progress.<sup>1</sup>

Advocates of both a 'progressive' and 'regressive' view of human history often speak as if their conclusions were both obvious and incontrovertible. If Section II has served one purpose, it should highlight the simple fact that such conclusions depend critically on (equally valid) value judgments as to which phenomena are most important. As in other cases of

philosophical disagreement, believers in 'regress' and 'progress' should be encouraged to respect each other.

**Table 11.1: Summary of the Evaluation of Human Progress by Phenomenon**

(Notation for Table 11.1: P= progress; R= regress; B= both; N= neither)

Ch.	Phenomenon	Experience: Last Decades;	Centuries;	Millenia	Comments
4	Culture in general	B	B	B	
	Sense of community	R	R	B	
	Identification with larger groups	N	P	P	Mixed blessing
	Ease of cross-group movement	P	B	B	Ltd by nation-state
	Values in general.	B	B	B	
	No human sacrifice	N	P	P	
	Decreased support for war	P	B	B	Not universal
	Decreased support for slavery	N	P	P	
	Decreased approval of aggression	B	P	P	
	Increased approval of achievement	P	P	P	Shd discrim among types of
	Humility	R	R	R	
	Respect for others (egalitarianism)	R	B	B	
	Increased approval of curiosity	P	P	P	
	Increased approval of openminded	B	P	P	
	Sexual freedom	P	P	B	Cost in ethics; some disdain
	Support for 'caring'	R	R	R	
	Honesty	R	R	R	
	Trust	N	R	R	
	Optimism	R	R	N	
	Value of romantic love	P	P	P	
	Marriage	R	R	B	Some benefits to flexibility
	Care for elderly	R	R	B	
	Religious freedom	P	P	B	True believers may disdain
Ecumenicism	P	P	P	Growth of world religions?	
Time Preference	N	N	N		
Greater consensus on everyday norms	P	P	N	Decrease in deference	
Improved cultural expressions	P	P	N	Less expression of hostility	
Stories	R	R	B	Less attention to	
Decreased linguistic diversity	P	P	P	Some would disdain	
Increased ease of language acquisition	P	P	P	Standard. of sp., grammar	
5	Environment in general	B	B	B	Future path unclear
	Pollution	B	R	R	Internal air quality
	Human generated global warming (bad)	R	R	R	
	Biodiversity	R	R	R	
	Resource availability	B	B	P	
	Control of natural disasters	P	P	P	
	Treatment of animals	R	R	B	
	Aesthetic value of nature	B	B	B	
	Transport infrastructure	P	P	P	
	Aesthetics in Architecture	R	R	P	

Ch.	Phenomenon	Experience: Last Decades;	Centuries;	Millenia	Comments
5	Genetic fitness	R	R	P	Environmental change
	Human abilities (realization of)	P	P	P	
	Genetic drives in general	N	N	P	Genetic selection
	Appropriateness of emotion	P	P	B	Therapy, psychology
	Appropriateness of time preference	N	N	R	
	Genetic diversity	R	R	P	
6	Happiness	B	B	N	Slight correl. w econ devel
	Psychological understanding	P	P	N	
	Self-knowledge	B	B	N	
	Pursuit of individual talents	P	P	P	
	Well-rounded individuals	R	R	R	Specialization
	Freedom of choice	P	P	P	Some overwhelmed by
	Parent-child relationships	B	P	B	
	Respect for personality diversity	P	P	P	
	Feeling insignif from globalization (bad)	R	R	R	
	Ability to cope with injustice	R	R	B	
	Depression (bad)	R	N	N	
	Experience of anger	P	R	B	Decreased cultural support
	Experience of aggression (esp. violence)	B	B	N	
	Honesty	R	R	R	
Anxiety	P	B	R	Econ. security vs. pressure	
6	Health	P	P	B	Some regional backsliding today, global earlier
	Decreased disease	P	P	P	Some new diseases
	Increased nutrition	P	P	P	But junk food, anorexia
	Population	P	P	P	Pos/neg effects; Only a global worry
	Migration	recent B	R	B	19th cent. was golden era
6	Decreased gender stratification	P	P	B	Growing underclass?
	Decreased class stratification	B	P	B	
	Decreased role of inherited status	B	P	P	
	Decreased ethnic strife	B	B	B	
	Identify ourselves as individuals	P	P	N	
	Decreased proportion of bad occupations	B	B	N	

Ch.	Phenomenon	Experience: Last Decades;	Centuries;	Millenia	Comments
7	Economic growth	P	P	P	Some output bad
	Leisure time	B	P	R	Not always put to good use
	Fulfilment at work	B	B	R	Future brighter?
	Decreased unemployment (effects of)	P	B	B	
	Decreased inequality	R	P	R	
	Equality of opportunity	B	P	N	
	Charity	N	N	N	
	Effects on culture	B	B	B	
	Effect of corporate form on values	R	R	N	
	Institutions in general	P	P	P	
	For growth	B	P	P	
	Appreciate advs. of public/private	B	P	N	
	For identifying bads	P	P	N	
	For income distribution	R	P	B	
	For limiting pollution	P	P	N	
8	Freedom (political, religious, occupational)	P	P	P	Encourages progress elsewhere except soc. cohesion
	Justice	P	P	P	
	Government power		P	P	P      Worry about abuse
	Democracy	P	P	N	
	Ethical leadership	N	N	P	Effect of democracy?
	Nationalism	B	B	N	
	Declining incidence of war	P	R	P	But increasingly deadly, and different trends regionally
	Institutions in general	P	P	N	
	Human rights agreements	P	N	N	
	Law and order	B	P	P	
	Efficiency and equity of tax collect.	N	P	P	
	Provision of public works	P	P	P	
	Bureaucratic flexibility	P	N	N	
	Referenda	P	P	N	
	Education	P	P	P	
9	Science	P	P	B	
	Technology		P	P	P
	Natural science	P	P	P	
	Human science	B	B	B	Progress likely dominates, but hard to verify
	Philosophy	P	P	P	
10	Art	B	B	P	
	Art works	P	P	P	
	Art traditions	B	P	P	
	Sci. and philos. understanding of art	B	P	P	May decrease art's 'magic'
	Art's role in society	R	R	B	

Of course, one might object that some of the conclusions in Table 11.1 are misguided. Scholarly consensus was followed where possible, but there had been little scholarly examination of several of these cases. Nevertheless it seems highly unlikely that the general conclusion that both progress and regress can be commonly observed across all three time periods is itself mistaken.

While some who believe in regress may relish their sense of despair (and the freedom from social responsibility that may accompany this), I would hope that most people would like to stem the tide of decline. Those who are most concerned about the environment should wish progress there, while those who are most concerned about cultural decline should wish progress there. Those who believe in progress, and like to revel in the glory of human accomplishment, should also like to see progress extended to as many domains as possible. In other words, they should move beyond dwelling on humanity's successes and worry about the losses that have accompanied these. By extending the range of phenomena for which one can speak of progress, human confidence that the net direction of change is for the better can be expanded. Perhaps, at some future date, all will be able to look back at their most recent history, and celebrate progress across all phenomena.<sup>2</sup>

Part III will take up this challenge. It might be worried that if the analysis in Part II is misguided in particular respects, then Part III will aim at the wrong targets. If, in particular, progress has been identified for a phenomenon where regress actually existed, Part III will pay little or no attention to the phenomenon (unless it is closely related to other phenomena where regress was observed). There is thus some danger that the future imagined in Part III would be a little less progressive than the author imagines. But Part III is not intended as the final word on human progress. Rather it is intended to open a conversation about the possibility of widespread

human progress; future authors can expand the call for progress to other realms. The possibility that regress has been identified where progress actually occurred is even less problematic, for human societies should hardly be dissuaded from even more progress, unless of course such progress encourages regress elsewhere.

Writers on progress or regress often refer, at least implicitly, to some grand cosmic scheme, or perhaps the hand of God (recall Teilhard de Chardin from chapter 5). This tendency is understandable, and not necessarily without merit. Yet it is important not to lose sight of the role of individual men and women. Innovators, entrepreneurs, and agitators for political, social, and cultural change were responsible for much of what has been called progress in the preceding chapters. Likewise, demagogues, rapacious businesspeople, warmongers, and criminals were responsible for much of what has been termed regress. Yet it should also be appreciated that people with good intentions often achieved bad results due to the unforeseen effects of their acts. Reformers can only partially insure themselves against this result by being acquainted with scholarly understanding of how the world works. But they are much more likely to do good if acquainted with such understanding than not. Good hearts do their best work in concert with good minds. What lessons can be drawn from history?: that making a better world is possible, but that it requires an exercise of will as well as of wisdom. Humans must strive for the good, and have the humility to repair their mistakes.

The analysis in Part II also sheds light on a narrower question: how unusual is the contemporary period? In the vast majority of cases in which regress is identified over recent decades, regress is also found for previous periods (the same holds for progress). Nor is this merely an artefact of the way the three periods were all defined so as to culminate in the present. Regress in such cases can generally be observed in previous centuries and beyond as well. In

some instances (but far from all) regress may be occurring at an accelerated rate. Still it is noteworthy that widespread regress across many of the phenomena stressed by critics of contemporary life can also be observed in previous time periods. Thus, the switch from a progressive to a pessimistic attitude does not for the most part reflect a dramatic change in societal experience of progress versus regress. It reflects instead a change in the *perception* of progress and regress. It could be that those who saw progress all around them in the nineteenth century falsely assumed that progress in certain realms would inevitably spill over into others. Contemporary nihilists may in turn be guilty of downplaying the importance of some types of progress in order to focus their attention on areas in which regress or stasis rules.<sup>3</sup>

The analysis above is useful in another respect. Gunther Stent, in *Paradoxes of Progress* (1978, 29-33), suggests that human progress has been occurring at an accelerating rate. The last centuries were more progressive than the preceding millennia, and the last decades more progressive than the previous centuries. This acceleration in progress could not continue indefinitely, and thus – paradoxically – the rate of progress must sometime soon begin to tail off. This argument, while quite different from the main thrust of contemporary pessimistic commentary, is nevertheless implicit in the work of many pessimistic authors: they cannot imagine that the rate of change of the recent past can long continue. Stent focused on a mere handful of the phenomena surveyed above: primarily population growth, technological and scientific innovation, and economic growth. Indeed as we shall see in Part III Stent suggests that humans only strive for progress in these few areas. The more inclusive analysis of Part II provides a quite different sense of the history of human progress from that of Stent. Once we widen our gaze to engage all types of human progress and regress we can – paradoxically – be both less celebratory of the recent past and more optimistic toward the future.

### Setting the Stage for Part III

The reader can be spared the necessity of examining each element of Table 1.1 in detail.

Those areas in which regress was observed in some period (and the chapters in which these will be discussed in Part III) are:

- *Culture*: sense of community; attitudes toward humility, respect for others, caring, honesty, trust, optimism, marriage, and care for the elderly; stories. (Chapter 15 primarily, but also 13)
- *Natural Environment*: pollution; biodiversity; global warming; built environment; treatment of animals. (Chapter 13)
- *Genetic Predispositions*: genetic fitness, genetic diversity (Chapter 13)
- *Individual Differences*: well-rounded individuals; feeling insignificant; ability to cope with injustice; depression (Chapter 15)
- *Health*: at a disaggregated level could speak of regress with respect to some diseases. (Chapter 16)
- *Social Structure*: No regress, though progress could be more rapid.
- *Economy*: inequality; effect of corporate form on ethics (Chapter 13)
- *Politics*: incidence of war (Chapter 14)
- *Art*: role in society (Chapter 16)
- Note: no regress was found with respect to *Technology, Science, and Philosophy*.

Elements of both regress and progress were often found within the same time period for the same phenomenon (in a few cases progress was identified for one period and regress for another). In such cases observers could readily disagree as to which was dominant. It is thus prudent to explore the possibility of encouraging greater progress in these cases as well. Indeed progress

may be more readily achieved here than in the cases above:

- *Culture*: culture in general; values in general; time preference. (Chapter 15)
- *Natural Environment*: environment in general; resource availability; aesthetic value of nature. (Chapter 13)
- *Genetic Predispositions*: motivations; appropriateness of time preference (some regress over longest time period). (Chapter 15)
- *Individual Differences*: happiness; self-knowledge; parent-child relationships; respect for personality diversity; expression of anger and aggression; anxiety. (Chapter 15)
- *Health*: population (Chapter 14); migration (some regress in middle period) (Chapters 14, 15).
- *Social Structure*: ethnic strife (Chapter 15); bad occupations (Chapter 13)
- *Economy*: work fulfilment; leisure time; appreciating advantages of both public and private; effects on culture. (Chapter 13)
- *Politics*: ethical leadership; nationalism; education. (Chapter 14)
- *Technology, Science, and Philosophy*: human science. (Chapter 12)
- *Art*: art in general. (Chapter 16)

Finally, while those phenomena for which progress was observed are only examined in Part III if they are closely connected with phenomena that showed regress, it is useful to list them here for reference. Note that progress in many cases is very slow:

- *Culture*: identification with larger groups; ease of cross-group movement; human sacrifice; support for slavery and war; attitudes to aggression, achievement, curiosity, open-mindedness (but not recently), sexual activity, and romantic love; ecumenicism; religious freedom; consensus on everyday norms; cultural expressions; linguistic

diversity and ease of language acquisition..

- *Natural Environment*: control of natural disasters; transport.
- *Genetic Predispositions*: realization of human abilities.
- *Individual Differences*: psychological understanding; pursuit of inherent talents; freedom of choice.
- *Health*: health in general; disease; nutrition.
- *Social Structure*: stratification; individualism; inherited status.
- *Economy*: economic growth; effects of unemployment; equality of opportunity; institutions in general.
- *Politics*: freedom; justice; power; democracy; institutions in general.
- *Technology, Science, and Philosophy*: technology, natural science; philosophy.
- *Art*: art works; traditions; understanding of art.

## Notes:

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<sup>1</sup> I confess that I wonder how many people can imagine their life being better in the eighteenth or tenth or earlier centuries, when backbreaking labor and a much shorter life expectancy were the rule. Yet I can also wholeheartedly embrace the concerns of those who would see regress. Part III will argue that modern individuals can enjoy the fruits of economic advance while consciously eschewing some of the negative characteristics of modern society (like consumerism), and that societies can choose to have progress across a much wider set of phenomena.

<sup>2</sup> I speak here of those phenomena for which there is a broad consensus on what progress might mean. There may always be phenomena for which people differ in their view of what progress might entail. Even here some elements of progress might be possible: improved methods of birth control would be welcomed by majorities on both sides of the abortion debate, for example.

<sup>3</sup> It is worth recalling in this respect that Michel Foucault, the source of many postmodern ideas, rejected the label of postmodernist and urged others to be humble about ascribing special status to their time (Alvesson 2002, 26). Alvesson (24) suggests that the late nineteenth century was a period of even more dramatic change.