

Chapter 17

Concluding Remarks

Human progress is neither automatic nor inevitable. ... Every step toward the goal of justice requires sacrifice, suffering, and struggle; the tireless exertion and passionate concern of dedicated individuals.
Martin Luther King Jr.

This chapter begins by returning to some of the concerns addressed in chapter 1 regarding the very possibility of progress. The next section of this chapter discusses how this book has been able to identify a strategy for progress that does not depend on meta-narrative. The second section reviews the advantages of disaggregation in overcoming suspicion of progress itself. The third section argues that it is quite possible to imagine ways forward without a clear vision of utopia. In all three sections it will be necessary to address the three key issues raised in chapter 1: the possibility of a universal ethics, the human capacity to cope with complexity, and the possibility of reasoned conversation.

The fourth section of the chapter provides in tabular form a summary of the progressive policies or strategies urged in Part III. Since the book has aspired to provide guidance to both scholars and intellectuals on the way forward, the table identifies where action is possible immediately and where more research is needed. The table also briefly identifies where progress in one area would encourage progress elsewhere. In so doing it indicates that it is possible to cope with complexity in order to achieve a wide-ranging human progress. The fifth and sixth sections provide advice to scholars and activists in turn. Some very brief concluding remarks follow.

A Coherent Program for Progress That Shuns Meta-Narrative

Part II of this book showed that progress and regress could each be widely observed across human history. It is not necessary to repeat here the detailed summary of historical experience provided in chapter 11. Progress was at times the result of intentional human actions

(and sacrifices), at other times not. Part III suggested a variety of ways in which progress could be encouraged in *all* areas in which regress had previously been noted (and also suggested ways in which even more progress could be encouraged in some areas where this already occurs). Notably, these reform ideas are essentially pragmatic: they flow from the needs of the phenomena in question rather than from some simplifying meta- narrative. That is, the world we live in faces many problems, and these demand many solutions. To be sure, the complexity of the world demands that humans be more careful in the future than in the past that the solutions to one problem do not create even greater problems elsewhere. The programs for reform outlined above have taken this concern into account. While it is tempting to face the complexity of the world by recourse to some meta- narrative that pretends to be able to solve all of the world's problems, the way forward must involve a more careful analysis of specific human needs.

Care has nevertheless been taken to ensure that these various strategies are mutually compatible: that progress in one area can be achieved without resulting in regress elsewhere. It has been argued that this exercise too – of seeking to identify and negate potential side effects of progressive policies – could also be performed without recourse to any meta-narrative. A properly organized scientific and public policy establishment could achieve progress on all fronts by carefully examining each causal linkage.

It should be confessed, nevertheless, that the book has often had recourse to a small set of guiding principles. Most central has been the belief that it is possible to achieve ethical consensus on what is 'good' or 'better' with respect to a host of phenomena. This argument was raised in chapter 3 and revisited in chapter 15. Without this belief it would not be possible to confidently identify the direction that human progress should pursue.

In chapter 12, it was argued that both science and public policy can cope with complexity. Moreover, an appreciation of the true complexity of the world provides a useful antidote to simplistic assertions that some driving force – technology, democracy, capitalism – is an inexorable force driving good or ill. This argument is less central to the enterprise of the book than the ethical argument, but does support in general all of the analyses in Part III. Only if we believe in science and public policy can we believe in the reasoned pursuit of progress. Yet we very rarely referred to the material in chapter 12 in later chapters. Readers can judge the merits of each individual strategy for achieving progress on its own merits.

Likewise, we argued in chapter 12 for strategies for enhancing the quality of human conversations. Progress here, as in coping with complexity, could potentially generate benefits across the pursuit of all forms of human progress. In particular, better conversations could minimize the abilities of the selfish to manipulate public policy toward their own ends. Again, readers can evaluate both the validity and practicality of each strategy for progress on its own merits.

While much evil is done in the world by the consciously self-interested, more is likely done by those who have rationalized bad acts as supporting good ends. Certainly the totalitarian excesses of the twentieth century were justified on all sides in such a way. Each of the three principles noted above can provide hope that this source of regress can be limited: individuals who have a heightened ethical sensibility, appreciate the diverse effects of their acts, and engage in open conversation with others (and their own subconscious) will be much less able to rationalize evil acts. Still, while they each provide support for a general confidence in progress, none is essential to any particular progressive strategy.

Both scholars and activists can achieve much by applying these three principles widely. Yet in doing so they are not urged to close-mindedness, as meta-narratives necessarily do, but rather urged to embrace every type of ethical analysis, respect every theory and method, and seriously engage the arguments of others.

Progress Disaggregated

Postmodernists have critiqued meta-narratives, and especially the narrative of inevitable progress. The modernist narrative of progress assumed that one or more of technological innovation, economic growth, or democratization would gradually solve all of the world's problems. This book has concurred with this postmodern critique: neither the historical record surveyed in Part II nor the proposals for future progress in Part III support the idea that progress is inevitable and/or can be traced to a small number of inexorable historical forces. Progress should not be assumed but rather must be fought for.

As noted in chapter 1, the contemporary era is characterized by a widespread belief in the *impossibility* of progress. For some this means that society is at present regressing. For others it means that society is neither progressing nor regressing. In either case it is assumed that this result is inevitable (at least until some revolution in human affairs occurs). This book has necessarily parted company from such beliefs. Indeed this book has argued that the denial of the possibility of progress is itself a meta-narrative as deserving of suspicion as is the modernist assumption of the inevitability of progress. Again the survey of Part II illustrated the fact that progress has occurred on many fronts and for many reasons: one must deny modernist simplifications of the course of human progress without denying that progress has occurred. If so, one should be guided to look, as was done in Part III, for practical means by which progress can be extended to other realms.

The antithetical meta-narratives of inevitable progress and of impossible progress each reflect hidden assumptions about how certain causal links operate. Optimists may assume that economic, technological, or political advance necessarily encourages beneficial changes elsewhere, while pessimists emphasize the inevitability of negative impacts on culture and environment.¹ Often, though, optimists and pessimists differ more in their implicit weighting scheme: optimists care more about economic and political outcomes, and pessimists about environmental and cultural outcomes. They consequently often talk past each other: optimists cannot understand why pessimists fail to ‘see’ obvious signs of economic progress, while pessimists wonder how any thinking being cannot recoil at cultural disintegration.

This book has argued at many points that interdisciplinary analysis can potentially achieve a common ground between seemingly incompatible points of view. With respect to the debate on progress versus regress, it has hopefully moved the dialogue forward in four key ways:

- It has infused some empirical basis into this debate. We can at least start from an appreciation of the variety of types of progress *and* regress that have characterized human history.
- It has argued that there is no objective weighting scheme. Both optimists and pessimists are ‘right’ given some weighting scheme. It follows that all should strive to be explicit about the importance they attach to different types of progress or regress.
- It has argued that, since there are a large number of different types of progress/regress, and these are related in complex ways, it is simply absurd to assume that the net result of any process of historical evolution must be a net balance between progress and regress. One can reasonably predict progress or regress, depending on which phenomena one values most, but a prediction of stasis is hard to justify.

- Perhaps most centrally, the book has argued that we are not just helpless observers of the historical scene but can actively work to tip the balance toward progress whatever weighting scheme we may prefer.

As noted above, this book is in no way an effort to resuscitate the idea of meta-narratives.

It has argued that humanity can cope with complexity (only) by organizing diverse bits of understanding into a coherent whole. Nevertheless, the path forward depends on simple yet profound rebuttals of the four key contemporary concerns identified in chapter 1:

- First, and most obviously, the assumption that progress is impossible must be critiqued: this book has argued that this assumption is both empirically invalid as we look at the past and theoretically invalid as we imagine the possible future we could collectively create.
- Second, the concern that a universal ethics is incompatible with a respect for diversity must be overturned. This can only be done by grounding a universal ethics in diversity itself.
- Third, the concern that the world is too complex for human comprehension must be countered, but without recourse to some simplifying meta-narrative. Complexity must be coped with, then, not theoretically but through some organizing device(s) and integrative strategies by which a mass of focused insights are integrated into a coherent whole.
- Finally, the concern that reason does not (at least any longer) guide human affairs must be countered by a concerted effort to encourage reasoned and respectful conversation (while neither neglecting nor accepting without question the insights of intuition). This book has identified several concrete ways in which this might be done.

Part III guides individuals and societies away from assuming that there is one simplistic answer to life's problems. Understandably, both individuals and societies yearn for some more solid guide. 'Where there is no vision the people perish' (Proverbs 29:18).² While they in no way substitute for the careful evaluation of each societal problem, the four principles outlined in the previous paragraph can serve as a guide as to how to approach each problem: believe that progress is possible, refer to a universal ethics in determining goals, draw on integration across multiple theories and methods and causal links in identifying policies that cope with complexity, and engage in reasoned discourse with others to identify the best policies.

Postmodernists often espouse the view that the postmodern condition is a transitional stage to some future society whose outlines cannot yet be imagined. In so doing, they often absorb the insistence of past meta-narratives (notably Marxism) that some revolution would usher in a better world. They do this however without daring to define this better world, for to do so would be to espouse a meta-narrative. They can thus not work toward the achievement of this better world. This is a shame, for the way forward with respect to many phenomena requires taking to heart postmodern critiques, and therefore a pragmatic postmodernism that abandoned pessimism could be progressive.³ History tells us that revolutions never sweep away all vestiges of the former society. And hence even if one predicts revolutionary change it still makes sense to encourage a wider progress now. History also tells us that revolutions or societal decline are often preceded by periods of (in retrospect) undeserved complacency: people failed to realize the scope of their problems or at least failed to try to combat these. Such efforts can only smooth the transition to a better world.

What if some desirable societal changes cannot be achieved gradually but only through some sort of revolutionary leap? This possibility cannot be dismissed. Nor should it be

assumed. Arguments in favor of ‘revolutionary’ policies need to be carefully examined: in particular possible side effects should be carefully evaluated. If possible the new regime should be tested on individuals who volunteer. Note that arguments for such a revolutionary leap forward must be grounded in a belief in a shared vision of the direction of (some elements of) human progress.⁴ Those postmodernists who forecast a revolution but refuse to predict its shape abandon to fate (or worse yet to demagogues) the future of humanity. One must have great confidence in either a benevolent deity or some grand cosmic plan to do so; such faith seems to accord poorly with the nihilism at the heart of postmodern discourse.

Eschewing Utopianism

It is tempting to be overwhelmed by the myriad problems facing society, especially as one is viscerally exposed to these daily by modern media.⁵ This book has argued that these problems should be seen as a call to action rather than an excuse for complacency. There is a simple ethical principle at work here: the fact that one cannot solve all of the world’s problems does not free one from the responsibility of solving some. A world in which 999,999 children are malnourished is a better world than one in which 1,000,000 children are malnourished. Each of us has the power to improve the life of at least one other person, and thus can encourage progress. Progress may never take humanity to a world without suffering – and perhaps should not, for humans learn by suffering⁶ – but it can take humanity measurably closer to such a world. This itself is a worthy goal.

Postmodernists in attacking meta-narratives argue that it is better to have a true sense that there are no answers than a false sense that there is one simple answer. But this is a false dichotomy. It is better yet to have a true sense that there are some answers to life’s problems than a false sense that there are no answers.⁷ Postmodern angst is an understandable and perhaps

even necessary step on the road from all-embracing ideology to a progress rooted in pragmatic and open-minded discourse. The passion with which some once greeted meta-narratives must be diverted to the support of such a discourse.

The last point deserves emphasis. The appeal of meta-narratives is understandable: individuals want to believe they have ‘the’ answer, and can then devote their efforts without question to its pursuit. This book agrees with postmodernists in disdaining such a simplistic view. But it does suggest a *strategy*: the pursuit of reasoned conversation, grounded in a belief that complexity can be coped with, and that human goals can be evaluated in terms of a universal ethics. Those who would work toward progress must urge honesty and open-mindedness in conversation, and combat manipulation, deception and bias. Rather than fight blindly on behalf of one ideology, individuals should urge careful analysis of societal problems, and shun grand theory just as they shun ideology. They must expose those, *whatever their motives*, who provide misinformation. More generally they must encourage ethical behavior and critique unethical behavior. This will not always be an easy task, and may even at times seem an impossible task, but it is both a worthy and a necessary task. The world would be a better place if this strategy were embraced with the fervor once devoted to meta-narratives.

Former United Nations Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali suggested that ‘Indifference is the eighth deadly sin.’ Elie Weisel has argued that ‘The opposite of love is not hate but indifference.’⁸ Weisel urges individuals to feel the pain of the victims of injustice: one will then know one’s duty. Face-to-face with the millionth hungry child, one should not throw up one’s hands in despair of the other 999,999 but rather give her food. The debate over the possibility of progress becomes moot in such a circumstance: one can help and therefore should.

Likewise even if one thinks environmental problems are insurmountable (and I emphasize ‘if’) this hardly provides a reason for not pursuing other sorts of human progress.⁹

The ethical core outlined in chapter 15 can be imperfectly simplified under three broad principles:

- Work toward a better world.
- Care (in a balanced way) for others.
- Do not abuse power.

The first two of these have been implied in the foregoing. The third provides a worthy guidepost as well. Postmodernism has borrowed from Michel Foucault the important insight that power relations infuse society. While the early Foucault was skeptical that reason could be employed against power, the later Foucault realized that such a position was an invitation to tyranny. He argued that power was always abused and abuse should always be opposed. The way forward, then, involves the opposition to abuses of power whether these occur in the economy, polity, family, world of art, or elsewhere.¹⁰ But opposing abuses of power is distinct from opposing power itself: laws and police and courts will be necessary as long as crime exists, armies as long as demagogues exist, parental discipline as long as children exist, and employment relations as long as work exists.

This point deserves emphasis. This book has been aimed at those who can be energized to fight for human progress. But it is definitely not a naïve enterprise: while aimed at those of good heart it does not assume that the world is entirely composed of such people. Positions of power are often held by those with a selfish bent and a blind ambition. Those of good heart must be ready and able to stand up to such people. Likewise, they must take on those whose heart is in the right place but have chosen misguided or inappropriate strategies for pursuing progress.

The book has at various places discussed techniques for doing precisely that. It can be stressed here that this battle is lost before it is undertaken if people of good heart either abandon hope of progress or of identifying the best paths to progress.

Meta-narratives promise a great reward for a limited sacrifice: one is freed of the need to think too much for the meta-narrative does that for one, and the meta-narrative promises a clear path to utopia. Reality provides a harsher tradeoff: one must strive and strain for small advances. The task of promoting progress is arguably more worthy because the task is harder.

The Paths Forward

With some trepidation, I provide in Table 17.1 a summary of the various progressive policies and strategies identified in Part III. The Table necessarily simplifies the analysis of previous chapters. Readers intrigued by a particular entry will hopefully consult the more detailed analysis. The Table serves a few goals. It highlights the range of progressive policies and strategies. It shows that there is much concrete work for both scholars and activists to perform. It thus should combat the widespread sense of helplessness ('I do not know how to work toward a better world') while providing projects to suit all talents and inclinations. Some of the proposals will strike the reader as obvious, or even banal. This is not problematic as long as it is appreciated that they are both worthy and under-appreciated within contemporary literature. Table 18.1 highlights the complementarities across different types of progress, in order to reinforce the argument that a broad program of progress is entirely feasible in the face of complexity. It should be stressed that the list of proposals, while extensive, is in no way exhaustive: this book has spent little time worrying about enhancing progress where this already exists, and has also encouraged creative solutions to societal problems.

Table 17.1: The Paths Forward

| Chapter | Phenomenon | Activists' Strategy | Scholarly Research Needed | Support Progress Elsewhere |
|----------------|----------------------|---|--|--|
| 12 | Science (Complexity) | Urge a more coherent and policy-relevant scientific enterprise. | Pursue interdisciplinary and specialized research symbiotically. | Coherent public policy depends on coherent scientific insight. |
| | | Ditto | Collectively embrace all phenomena, theory types, and methods. | Ditto |
| | | Ditto | Organize and unify scientific understanding without recourse to meta-narrative. | Only then can we hope to cope with information overload and rapid change. |
| | | Ditto | Pursue clarity. | |
| | | Ditto | Establish the range of applicability of theories. Emphasize study of causal links. | |
| | | Ditto | Emphasize comprehensive surveys and textbooks. Develop websites that organize and summarize understanding. | These are potentially invaluable tools for policy analysis and public understanding. |
| | | Encourage confidence in science but recognize its limitations. | Appreciate that proof is impossible, but can amass argument and evidence. | Both a universal ethics and the pursuit of reasoned discourse rely on this. |
| | | Ditto | Be aware of, and try to overcome, scholarly biases and errors. | Reinforces and depends upon ethics, especially courage and humility. |
| | | Encourage interdisciplinarity. | Reform graduate education, granting agency policies, and career expectations. | Complex problems require interdisciplinarity. It also encourages creativity. |
| | | Ditto | Encourage collaboration and open-mindedness. | This would enhance the productivity of the scientific enterprise. |
| | | Ditto | Reform undergraduate curricula to provide coherent interdisciplinary education. | |
| | | Appreciate the possibilities for, but limits of, prediction. | Report predictions with suitable caveats. | Public policy should be designed with the near future in mind. |

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| 12 | Public policy (Complexity) | Use all types of ethical analysis in identifying societal goals. | Apply to all phenomena. | Superior policy analysis supports many types of progress. |
| (14 too) | | Use all relevant theories and methods in evaluating means. (Be creative.) | Need to identify and communicate strengths and limitations of these. | Ditto |
| 12 | | Look at all possible side effects. Pursue balance in policy. | Causal link based analyses are invaluable here. | Ditto |
| (14 too) | | Pursue clear and open-minded activism. Eschew meta-narrative. | Pursue clear and open-minded analysis. | Ditto |
| | | Engage in dialogue with scientists. | Engage in dialogue with the public. | Science as well as policy benefits. |
| | | Appreciate that no policy is perfect. | | Otherwise see policy failure everywhere. |
| 13 | Economic output | Recognize the limitations of GDP measures, especially with respect to leisure, inequality, and the environment. | Develop better measures of economic well-being. | These measures provide a basis for public discourse on a range of economic and environmental issues. |
| | | Encourage individuals to think about the importance of leisure versus goods (especially conspicuous consumption). Develop institutions that facilitate reductions in work time. | | |
| | | In particular, urge individuals to find new sources of meaning to replace overcoming economic scarcity. | | Then economic progress frees more time and money to support other types of progress. |
| 13 | Occupations | Create 'good' jobs. | | |
| 13 | Income Distribution | Reduce inequality through progressive taxation and reform of corporate executive bonuses. | We need to better understand the incentive effects of such policies. | |
| | | Enhance income support policies, but otherwise focus on helping the poor find (better) jobs. (Note that both personal and societal responsibility are important.) | Provide better information on the specific needs of different subgroups of the poor. [There is a key role for activists here too.] Imagine novel policies. | Postmodern angst reflects the perceived 'failure' of social policy, so successes here should encourage confidence in the possibility of progress. |

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| 13 | Income distribution (cont.) | Encourage charities through tax policy and the provision of information. | Charities can more readily experiment if novel social programs are identified. | |
| | | Emphasize difference between deserved and undeserved income. | | Reinforces reflection on leisure versus consumption. |
| 13 | Income distribution (global) | Increase foreign aid, remove restrictions, and focus on education, health, transport, clean water, and agricultural technology. | | Supports world peace, cross-cultural understanding. |
| | | Encourage freer trade through open negotiations that protect the environment. | | Also supports world peace, cross-cultural understanding. |
| 13 | Unemployment | Monetary and fiscal policy should allow somewhat greater inflation in order to reduce unemployment. | More realistic models of business cycles are needed. | Unemployment has large psychological costs. |
| | | Try to build public infrastructure during recessions. | | Ditto |
| 13 | Corporations | Combat the ethical challenge of corporations by tightening laws, recognizing the ethical core, enhancing whistleblower protection, encouraging corporate democracy, and ensuring that corporations are not given unfair competitive advantages. | Explicate the advantages and disadvantages of public versus private enterprise. Also investigate the possibility of better institutional support for labor-managed firms. | Unethical behavior by corporations otherwise sets a powerful but negative example. |
| 13 | Non-human Environment | Ensure that economic agents face the full environmental costs of their activities. | Develop better estimates of these, and mechanisms for assigning costs. | Thus prevent environmental damage that is more costly than the benefits of the economic activity. |
| | | Reduce global warming. | Develop cost-effective strategies. | While economic costs need not be huge (and not always positive), it is critical to pursue environmental enhancement as efficiently as possible. |
| | | Reduce pollution. | Ditto | Ditto |

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| 13 | Non-human environment (cont.) | Educate individuals on the effects of their activities. | | |
| 13 | Animals | Discourage factory farming. | Identify the extent of the health risks. | Possible health and ethical benefits. |
| 13 | Population | Distribute birth control technology in areas of highest population growth. | | In countries with very high population growth, reductions will likely enhance per capita incomes. |
| 13 | Built Environment (see also architecture) | Provide financial incentives for aesthetically pleasing construction. | Develop a better understanding of the environments in which humans thrive. | Studies suggest that happiness is affected significantly by built environment. |
| | | Provide neighborhood and central gathering places. | Ditto | This affects happiness, communal feeling, and public discourse. |
| 14 | International Relations | Demand openness in foreign policy. In particular this should stress support for democracy and human rights. | | Encourages cross-cultural understanding and hence peace, while supporting democratic decision-making at home. |
| | | Respect different democratic institutions, and democratic decisions, as long as these do not threaten democracy or human rights. | | Ditto |
| | | Support autocrats only if it can be argued that the alternative is worse (or perhaps confess self-interest). | | Ditto |
| | | Encourage civil disobedience rather than violent protest. | Examine the historical experience. | More likely successful and accords better with ethical core. |
| | | Pursue international understanding by developing language facility, encouraging travel, and encouraging religious freedom and ecumenicism. | Clarify the link between language and culture, and identify religious common ground. Establish that a universal ethics includes democracy and human rights. Recall the long history of cross-cultural collaboration. | |

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| 14 | (International relations continued) | Support democratically inspired border redrawing. | Clarify the best procedure. | This encourages world peace, but also respect for international consensus. |
| 14 | War | Pursue war within international consensus; value others as ourselves; respect but do not reify sovereignty. | | Peace is the goal, but violence may be necessary against some autocrats. |
| 14 | World Government | Support, but appreciate it depends on democracy. | | Peace and democracy must be pursued in concert. |
| 14 | Migration | Immigration policy should balance domestic and international concerns. | Try to overcome misunderstandings of both economic and cultural effects of migration. | Migration can potentially benefit all. |
| 14 | Democracy | Celebrate universal ethics, reasoned discourse, and engaging complexity. | | Democracy can support peaceful progress on many fronts. |
| | | Support ethics watchdogs. Prepare public for inevitable prosecutions. | | Ethical societies require both rules and internalized values. |
| | | Support whistleblower protection. | Identify best balance between protecting accuser and accused. | |
| | | Reform campaign finance (especially for corporations). | Identify best practices. | |
| | | Strengthen conflict of interest rules. | Ditto | |
| | | Strengthen rules on access to information. | Ditto | |
| | | Change cultural attitudes to respect differences of opinion. | | Otherwise politicians are encouraged to inaction. |
| 14 | Referenda | Support referenda on key issues. | Ditto | |
| 14 | Consultative fora | Support this form of citizen discourse. | Ditto | This can be the best means of coping with complex issues. |
| 14 | Education | Encourage public discourse regarding class size (and computer use). | | Quality education encourages both economic growth and democracy. |
| | | Allow parental choice within set standards. | | |

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| 14 | (Education continued) | Reward student creativity and imagination. | | These will be more likely to exercise creativity as adults. |
| (12 too) | | Encourage reasoned discourse and ethics; show how to cope with complexity. Apply to practical situations. | | These are essential attitudes for progressive citizenship. |
| | | Recognize the challenges faced by disadvantaged students but also their potential. | | |
| 15 | Ethics | Urge ethical behavior, while respecting diversity. | Clarify the extent of the 'ethical core.' (See Table 15.1) | Need ethical consensus in order to identify the direction of progress. |
| | | Critique unethical behavior. | Ditto | |
| | | In particular, encourage a balanced life that involves both caring and working toward a better world, while opposing abuses of power. | | In particular, there is no purpose in pursuing reason or coping with complexity if there is no possibility of ethical consensus. |
| | | Expand the ethical core by urging changes in tradition and/or intuition. | Ditto | |
| 15 | Humility | Urge humility. | Ditto | Science benefits. More generally arrogance causes angst. |
| 15 | Caring | Urge balance between caring and self. | Ditto | Enhances happiness (as does health, some types of consumption, security, and ethics). |
| 15 | Anger, aggression | Oppose displays of anger and aggression. | Ditto | Reduces anxiety. |
| 15 | Schemas | Urge self-awareness. | | Critical for happiness and democracy. |
| | | Encourage a belief in progress, universal ethics, reason, and coping with complexity. | | Encourages self-efficacy, and thus work toward various kinds of progress. Changes in science, technology, and economy affect culture, but effects need not be negative. |

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| 15 | (Schemas continued) | Discourage consumerism. (Shield children from advertising.) | Ditto | Can be happier with less. Conspicuous consumption limits cultural cohesion. |
| 15 | Stories | Encourage stories that transmit key values. | Identify which cultural phenomena are most important for cultural cohesion. | |
| 16 | Art | Produce art that shows the good as well as the bad in the world, and signals possibilities of progress. | Examine each causal link. Transcend meta-narrative. | Art can move individuals to all sorts of good acts. |
| | | Expand participation in artistic production. | | Aided by new technology. Encourages happiness and self-awareness. |
| 16 | Architecture | Create spaces that people wish to live and work in. | Analyze the effects of architecture on human lives. Critique flawed works. | Affects both individual well-being and sense of community. |
| 16 | Gender, race | Fight discrimination at home and abroad. | | Both oppressed and oppressors benefit. |
| 16 | Technology | Shape innovation to serve societal goals. In particular encourage a balance between product and process innovation. | Clarify these goals, and how technology might serve these. Respect the uncertainty inherent in innovation. | Technology can generate economic, environmental, and other sorts of progress, but also regress. |
| 16 | Crime | Pursue stronger penalties for some serious and repetitive crimes. Elsewhere, focus on providing youth with alternatives | Focus analysis on different types of crime, and different causal links. | Increased security is important for happiness, economic interaction, and social cohesion. |
| 16 | Drugs | Consider de-criminalization or legalization of some | Much needed research on the effects of various drugs, and of the effects of changing price and quality. | Huge relationship with crime; also possible source of government revenues to pursue progress elsewhere. |
| 16 | 'Globalization' | Encourage openness in negotiations. Focus on particular problem areas such as the environment and executive pay. | Articulate both the good and bad effects. | Globalization can produce many benefits, if the costs are identified and contained. |

Notes: Not all 'phenomena' are phenomena as identified in Table 3.1. Occasionally it is noted that topics were addressed in two different chapters. The source is the text of chapters 12 through 16.

Some proposals mentioned only briefly in the preceding chapters (especially in the notes) have been left out of the table. It should also be stressed that there is scope for activity by both activists and academics on each point: when certain cells of the table are left blank this indicates only that no special role was identified in the text. With respect to scholarship in particular it deserves to be stressed that we do not know everything that we could about any of these phenomena. Note also that related discussions of activist strategies, academic research, and feedback effects are often separated in the text.

The Challenge for Scholars

Table 17.1 has identified numerous areas in which society would benefit from increased scholarly understanding. Even where no note was made of this, enhanced scholarly understanding can always be useful in the identification of superior policies. As with activists, scholars need to approach particular societal challenges with an open mind, seek open-minded discourse (both within and beyond academia), and realize that a universal ethics often though not always points toward shared goals. Sadly, much research in the human sciences is too vague and theoretical to provide a reliable guide to policy decisions. Postmodernists do a valuable service in guiding scholars away from simplistic generalizations and encouraging careful empirical work. They go too far in suggesting that complexity cannot be coped with: these more focused scholarly studies can be integrated into a coherent scholarly understanding. In providing policy advice, scholars have a responsibility to recognize the limitations of their own narrow area of expertise: it is all too common at present for scholars to assume that their insights are all-important.¹¹ The efforts of interdisciplinary scholars to integrate different scholarly perspectives is therefore as essential to societal progress as the efforts of more specialized scholars to develop new insights in the first place.¹²

At present, most human science scholars are still ‘modernist’ in orientation: they operate within some meta-narrative. A significant number are ‘postmodernist’ in orientation. They sense that modernist meta-narratives are inappropriate, and have abandoned reasoned argumentation as a result. They survey decades of imperfect attempts to solve social problems, and feel that it is impossible to chart a course forward.¹³ ‘Critique, critique of critique, critique of critique of critique, and so on, or deconstruction, deconstruction of deconstruction, and so on, make up much of the intellectual fare, with ‘resistance’ and ‘opposition’ as other options;’ yet critique is senseless without some statement of an alternative.¹⁴ This book suggests a middle ground. The scholarly enterprise needs both careful analyses of narrowly defined questions and efforts at integration. As with ethics, from diversity springs coherence: scholars can aspire to an enhanced understanding that can in turn support superior public policy.

Interdisciplinarity encourages creativity. In some instances in Table 17.1, we can define a societal need well but can only dimly see possible solutions. The alternative to giving up in such situations is to attempt to harness humanity’s immense creative potential. Richard Florida, in urging the ‘creative class’ to play a greater role in the wider society, suggests that society needs above all else to have a reasoned dialogue about where our creative potential can best be directed.¹⁵ Such a program is indeed valuable, but need not and should not deter us from recognizing that for many areas of regress a path forward is already clear.

The Challenge for Activists

It is not good enough to have one’s heart in the right place: one must also have one’s head there as well. Much of the evil in world history was performed by people who thought that they were doing good. Meta-narratives have been particularly guilty of inspiring people to do the unspeakable in their name. Postmodernism urges suspicion of meta-narratives, but also

highlights myriad critiques of the contemporary world. The challenge for activists is to try to encourage societal progress without being seduced by some simplistic meta-narrative.

Table 17.1 outlined a number of fairly obvious paths to different types of progress. Activists can tirelessly espouse the value of believing that progress is possible, that a universal ethics is achievable, that complexity can be coped with, and that reasoned conversation must be valued rather than close-mindedness. Activists can also be confident in many more focused proposals. Postmodernists emphasize the overwhelming nature of consumerism: individuals are bombarded with encouragements to make buying things the central focus of their lives. The alternative message – that there are more important things in life (but that buying some things that support the good life is a reasonable *component* of life) – needs to be sounded loudly and repetitively. Likewise, activists can be very confident that exploring ways of providing jobs to the unemployed, reforming stock option plans, exposing the dangers of factory farms, extending and deepening democracy, ensuring that foreign policy goals are clearly articulated and pursued, and encouraging art that shows the way to a better future – among several other initiatives– are the right things to do.

‘Such a bold agenda requires many kinds of expertise working at many levels of society – personal and household, community, national, and global;’ It will proceed best when activists share a common over-arching vision of the possibilities for progress.¹⁶ Yet such an over-arching vision can do more harm than good if it oversimplifies the world in which we live.

There would be no role for scholarship if the path forward were always so clear. Environmentalists face the challenge that without a clear understanding of the ideal environmental policy they may often seem to oppose every form of economic activity. The public shares a concern that the environment deserves greater protection but worry that self-

styled environmentalists will pursue this goal without enough concern for other societal goals. Likewise the constant public attacks on the corporation or globalization seem incomprehensible to those who appreciate that each of these serves a valuable economic function. To be sure, political discourse may benefit from those who espouse 'extreme' views, but notably only if these views are engaged rather than ignored by others. This book has not denied a role for passion in human affairs, but passion serves little purpose, and can easily prove harmful, unless wedded to an accurate vision of the way forward. The open reasoned discourse urged above requires that activists be ready to recognize the potential downsides of the policies they might advocate, and respect that others may have different but equally valid priorities. The goal of such discourse is precise policies. These may, for example, recognize that corporations are necessary, but restrict executive pay, or constrain corporate activity to more closely conform to the ethical core.

The more controversial types of progress are often dependent at least in part on less controversial types of progress. Non-democratic governments have often proven more willing to sacrifice the environment to other goals.¹⁷ They also tend to be more corrupt than democracies, and thus less likely to combat various forms of economic injustice. Globalization is more likely to be channeled in positive directions in a world of honorable foreign policy discourse. Activists wary of the intricacies of the globalization debate may therefore achieve the most good by focusing on democratization, integrity in foreign policy, and reasoned discourse.

Final Thoughts

The possibility of progress should neither be assumed nor denied. The human temptations to accept the possibility and even inevitability of progress in order to give meaning to life, or conversely to deny the very possibility of progress in order to free oneself from social

responsibility, need to be recognized and then transcended. This book has provided some empirical basis from which to evaluate the idea of progress. Progress is seen to be neither inevitable nor impossible. It is seen not to depend on any one or two motive forces in human history, but rather to often require conscious and focused efforts to make the world a better place. Nihilists often bemoan the degree to which contemporary individuals are urged by the media to devote their lives to earning and spending money. This book too urges individuals to break free of such influences in order to value what is important in life. Individuals should value friends and family and the pursuit of individual talents; they should also appreciate that each of us can and should make the world a better place.

Notes:

¹ 'The postmodernist believes that the once proud and powerful system that he described has crumbled under the weight of events and processes that it could not absorb. But these are matters that need to be proved, not presumed' (Lyman, 2001, 13). The holistic arguments of those who speak of the postmodern condition are somewhat immune to direct argumentation. Only by carefully examining each causal link in turn can the possibilities and limitations of human progress be appreciated.

² Cited in Goodman (2003, 20).

³ Indeed, Laclau (2001) believes that postmodernism, once properly appreciated, will be a continuation of modernism's emancipatory project, precisely because it points to errors within modernist thought.

⁴ Gray (2004, 16) notes that while radical Islam is generally seen as anti-Western, it has in fact absorbed from Western thought the idea that acts of violence can generate a historical revolution that ushers in an era of progress. They also join postmodernists in believing that a universal ethics cannot be grounded in diversity.

⁵ The *Encyclopedia of World Problems and Human Potential* (1994) lists 12,203 problems. There is, notably, a great deal of overlap. This book has addressed the bulk of the 170 'basic universal problems' listed, though only indirectly at times. Most of the more detailed problems can be seen as derivative of the problems addressed here.

⁶ Goodman (2003, 93).

⁷ Nietzsche, on whom postmodernists draw, can be interpreted as urging nihilism, or instead as sweeping away past errors so that true reason could be pursued (Meynell, 1999, 3-4). Postmodernism too can potentially be seen as pointing to errors in modernism such that an even better approach to human progress is possible.

⁸ Both in Schwab (1995). The Boutros-Ghali quote is from the book's epigram.

⁹ Humans need 'the courage to accept what we cannot change in order to do what we can about the rest.' (Lenert, 1997, 191). Scholars especially should be wary of assuming that some things cannot be changed.

¹⁰ Abuse can be defined as benefiting oneself or one's family at the expense of others. Power can be defined broadly as the ability to succeed in the purposeful attempt to change things in ways that affect other's actions, and thus all individuals have opportunities to abuse power. The rule can be made even stronger by urging the use of power for the general good, but this would encourage some toward an unbalanced life of self-denial. A weaker utilitarian version is possible wherein one would be allowed to benefit oneself if the sum of the cost to others was less than the gain to oneself (Szostak, 2005, 54).

¹¹ Economists may be especially guilty here. I discussed how they often ignore steps in a logical argument outside their expertise. Thus if they are confident that B causes C they will calmly assure politicians that A causes C by blithely assuming that A causes B. See Szostak (1999).

¹² This is not an invitation for specialized researchers to ignore the wider world or for interdisciplinary scholars to be vague and superficial. Appropriate scholarly practices for both are outlined in detail in Szostak (2004).

¹³ See, for example, Lyman (2001). He notes that Parsonian structuralism had once given sociologists the pretence that they could impose stability on an ever-changing world. Sociologists are now much less confident that they can either understand or reform society. Ilcan (2004, 26) notes that postmodernists have attacked the idea of order and control associated with modernity. Why then should postmodernists be so disenchanted by the failure to control society's problems flawlessly?

¹⁴ Nederveen Pieterse (2000). Bertens (1995, 244) suspects that postmodernism would not have been so popular in academia if not associated with the dramatic expansion in size of academia: a huge younger generation used postmodernism to attack the authority of a small older generation.

¹⁵ Florida (2002, 325-6).

¹⁶ Korten (1999, 261). While I have critiqued Korten's meta-narrative I can fully endorse these sentiments.

¹⁷ Various authors in Nederveen Pieterse (2000) celebrate the role of democracy in ensuring that freer trade is constructed to benefit all, and to safeguard the environment.