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RESTORING HUMAN PROGRESS:

BY

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About the Book:

Is human progress possible? If so, how can it be achieved? Many progressive intellectuals and activists once turned to socialism for answers to both questions, but such individuals generally now appreciate that the answers provided were simplistic and misguided in important respects. Many have thus embraced nihilism, doubting that human progress is achievable or even conceivable. Such individuals then necessarily turn away from efforts to create a better world. The world would benefit from the outline of a coherent program for human progress that manages to escape the simplifications inevitable in adherence to one narrow ideological perspective. This book essays to describe such a program. Some elements of this program are concrete enough for activists to advocate immediately. In other cases there is much work for intellectuals to do in further clarifying the best policies for a society to undertake. This book then is intended to revitalize the efforts of both intellectuals and activists.

Whereas a generation or two ago there was widespread confidence that economic growth, technological advance, and/or the spread of democracy would gradually create a better world, many today fear that these processes generate more problems than they solve. This skepticism regarding the possibility of progress is closely associated with three other attitudes. There is widespread doubt, at least among the intellectual class, that human reason and ingenuity can solve the world's problems. This doubt is related to a concern that the contemporary world is too complex and unpredictable for purposeful human action to have much impact on the future course of events. Finally, there is doubt that there are universal ethical standards: if humanity cannot agree on what is the nature of the good life, we can hardly work toward progress nor recognize it if we achieve it.

This book starts from a belief that there is considerable merit in these four related concerns. However, it will be argued that they need not lead to despair: the idea of human progress is still viable, though progress is not inevitable. This book will therefore outline a variety of goals for both activists and intellectuals to pursue in order to generate a progressive future for humanity. The legitimate concerns noted above regarding complexity, ethics, and the exercise of reason must first be addressed; it will turn out that answers to these three critiques will provide coherence to the various reform initiatives to be outlined:

- A universal ethics can (ironically) be grounded in diversity by appreciating that diverse ethical perspectives often point in the same direction. This book identifies five types of ethical analysis and an 'ethical core' of statements supported by each of these.
- Complexity can be coped with in both scholarship and public policy analysis through the pursuit of interdisciplinarity and by organizing human understanding in terms of exhaustive classifications of the phenomena studied and theories and methods applied. These classifications are provided, as is a best-practice process of interdisciplinary analysis.
- The role of reason in human affairs can be enhanced by identifying and pursuing higher standards of human discourse.

How can we know that progress is neither impossible nor inevitable? The book performs a broad historical survey. This analysis hinges on an argument that it is indeed possible – indeed relatively straightforward – to identify what most people would

consider as progressive with respect to a broad range of phenomena: higher incomes, less disease, more freedom, and cleaner environments. The book then evaluates whether progress has been achieved with respect to a wide array of phenomena over three time periods: the last couple of decades, the last couple of centuries, and the last couple of millennia. Regardless of the time period chosen, progress is observed for many phenomena, regress for many others, and both/neither for still others. Note that such a broad historical survey has never previously been performed. One important purpose of this survey is to overcome simplistic treatments of the subject of human progress: optimists all too often emphasize economic advances while pessimists stress environmental or cultural regress. Discourse regarding the possibility of human progress would be better grounded in a more nuanced understanding of human history.

For the purposes of this book, the survey serves a further critical purpose. Confidence in human progress can only be restored if viable policies exist to encourage this in those areas in which regress has been observed over at least one of the three historical time periods. Too much of the discourse on human progress assumes that certain types of progress – economic or political or cultural – are all-important. Widespread belief in progress requires a program that works toward progress across all phenomena. The final chapters of the book outline such a set of strategies. That is, for each phenomenon for which regress is observed historically it is asked whether there are strategies for achieving future progress. In some cases, the way forward is already fairly clear. In other cases it is necessary to perform further research in order to identify the path forward. Yet in all cases it is possible to hold out reasonable hope of future progress. And notably the various strategies are complementary: progress can be achieved across all phenomena. As noted above these various strategies do not depend on any simple ideology. The book is thus in full accord with postmodern suspicion of meta-narratives (grand explanations of everything or at least many things) while nevertheless transcending postmodern nihilism. It thus holds out hope for a brighter future, but a hope grounded in an appreciation of the complexity of the world rather than some oversimplistic ideology or grand theory.

This book could only be written by a very interdisciplinary scholar with some expertise in and familiarity with (at least) history, ethics, postmodernism, science studies, policy analysis, cultural studies, economics, and art. I have written books or articles in all of these areas within the last few years.

In sum, a coherent and detailed program for future human progress is identified that need not appeal to any meta-narrative for justification.

Chapter Summary:

Part I of this book (chapters 1 and 2) explores the various elements of the contemporary concern with the very possibility of human progress. Particular attention is naturally devoted in chapter 1 to the three related concerns discussed above. Among the topics addressed in chapter 2 are: the definition of progress, the history of the idea of progress, advantages and disadvantages of believing in progress, and the (limited) relationship between evolution and progress. Chapter 2 also draws on Ernst Breisach's *On the Future of History* and other works to explore contemporary skepticism regarding history as an enterprise: this is necessary as Part II is largely historical in orientation.

Part II (chapters 3 through 11) then examines to what extent it makes sense to speak of either 'progress' or 'regress' historically. Previous works regarding human progress have tended to emphasize a small number of phenomena: optimists point to technological or scientific advance, economic growth, and democratization, while pessimists emphasize environmental challenges, cultural degradation, or the threat of nuclear war. This book takes a disaggregated approach, examining progress/regress across some one hundred phenomena. The disaggregated approach allows for the first time a precise sense of how widespread progress or regress has been in human history. Chapter 3 briefly reviews how the list of phenomena was developed, and the ethical evaluation performed. In particular, it will be stressed that there are five broad types of ethical analysis which often point in the same direction: this allows us to identify with great confidence what is 'progress' with respect to most phenomena. It will also be stressed that the five types of analysis are pursued across the world's philosophical traditions, and thus (at least potentially) judgments about what is good can be grounded in a universal philosophical sensibility. Notably, for some phenomena 'more' is 'better' (as with knowledge) or 'worse' (disease), but for other phenomena (such as institutions or population), whether more is better or not must be carefully examined in context.

The book then proceeds to ask with regard to all of these phenomena whether progress or regress can be identified historically. In each case the question is asked with respect to three time periods: the most recent decades, the last two centuries, and the last two millennia. The results of this historical survey are summarized in a lengthy table in chapter 11. That chapter concludes with a review of where progress, regress, and both/neither have been observed. Rather than reviewing chapters 4 through 10 in turn here, the key results will be discussed together in the next paragraphs.

The evaluations of progress and regress summarized in chapter 11 inevitably require the exercise of judgment: some might see progress where others see decline. I argue that most of the conclusions reached are quite uncontroversial, and that the vast bulk of the rest would represent what a majority of informed observers would conclude. Certainly the analysis is more solid than previous commentary on progress that treated at most a handful of phenomena. The analysis supports two key conclusions. First, over each of the three time periods investigated, there has been progress with respect to some phenomena and regress with respect to others. There is no objective weighting scheme by which to determine whether these periods as a whole were on balance progressive or regressive. Many of my economist colleagues would apply a huge weighting to growth in per capita incomes, and thus see progress everywhere. Others might give priority to environmental degradation and see decline in many situations. The simple fact that human societies have always witnessed both progress and decline may not seem terribly

surprising, but this is rarely explicitly mentioned in public or scholarly debate – perhaps in large part because such a broad survey has never previously been performed.

The second conclusion relates to the literature on the postmodern condition. One question that is often asked of the postmodern condition is whether it is really new, or whether similar concerns might not have been raised in many previous historical epochs. With respect to progress/regress, it shall be seen that all of human history has been a mixed bag. Readers with different weighting schemes may reach different conclusions as to whether the balance in recent decades has been better or worse than over longer time periods. One result of the survey worthy of note is that in most cases those phenomena that see progress in recent decades (or regress) also witness progress over longer time frames (or regress): this suggests that the postmodern condition is far from entirely novel, but also suggests that transcending the postmodern condition will be no easy task.

As noted above Part II identifies a set of phenomena for which decline seems to have been the case over at least one of the time periods analyzed. It can then be asked whether there are policies or strategies that humanity might pursue in order to achieve progress with respect to these. While tradeoffs with other phenomena are ubiquitous, so that more progress with respect to one phenomenon often means less progress with respect to another, one can nevertheless ask whether it is possible to structure human societies such that progress is possible across all or nearly all phenomena.

It should be noted at the outset that pursuing such policies or strategies *might not* be in society's best interest. As noted above, there is no objective weighting scheme. There are, however, a number of competing and strongly held subjective weighting schemes. A strategy of pursuing progress on many fronts depends critically on respect for diversity. Once it is appreciated that large numbers of people value progress of a certain type, a respectful society does not casually sacrifice the possibility of that type of progress in pursuit of progress elsewhere. Of course, societal decisions will still depend on how expensive this tradeoff is. Those who value economic growth above all may be suspicious of efforts to protect the environment, while those who value the environment above all may dislike various efforts to enhance growth. Both groups, though, may be open to a hypothetical set of policies that allowed environmentally-improving growth.

The analysis in Part II suggests that environmental concerns should extend beyond biodiversity and global warming to include aspects of the (aesthetics of the) built environment, and human treatment of animals; it should also embrace the implications of environmental change for the fitness of the human species. There are a variety of cultural attitudes where regress can be observed, including sense of community and attitudes toward caring, honesty, trust, optimism, marriage (this is of course a complicated issue with both pros and cons), and responsibility toward the elderly. Arguably, the stories at the heart of cultural transmission have also deteriorated in important ways. With respect to individuals, it can be argued that individuals are less well-rounded, less spiritual (again there are obvious pros and cons), more subject to depression, more likely to feel insignificant, and less able to cope with injustice. In the economic sphere, concerns should be raised about inequality, institutional treatment of control over resources, and the effect of the corporate form on societal ethics. While artistic practice can be applauded in many ways, the role of art in human societies has arguably deteriorated, especially in the sense that it is now a minority pursuit.

There are numerous phenomena for which elements of both progress and regress can be observed, or for which it is hard to discern much of either. These may provide easier targets for the encouragement of progress. Human happiness looms particularly large in this respect. Other such phenomena include resource availability (where the result depends crucially on how the question is phrased), time preference, self-knowledge, childrearing, experience of anger and aggression, work fulfillment, leisure time, charity, balance between public and private activities, ethical political leadership, education, ethnic strife, eradication of 'bad' occupations, human science understanding, population growth, migration, and artistic practice.

Part III (chapters 12 to 17) examines areas of regress in turn and asks how decline (or stasis) might be turned into progress, and whether this can be done without erasing progress elsewhere. [Note that some phenomena for which progress is observed in Part II – notably economic output and technological innovation – will thus be discussed at some length in Part III; I will urge a reorientation with respect to both such that society reaps many of the benefits with fewer costs] It will be argued that this is very often the case, and thus that a broadly-based progress is entirely possible. In some cases, the way forward is quite clear. In other cases, only the broad outlines of a way forward are readily apparent and thus much work needs to be done to flesh out how to proceed. There is thus valuable work for both community activists and for intellectuals in encouraging a broadly based human progress.

Chapter 12 develops a variety of strategies for coping with complexity, both in science and in public policy analysis. Science should be organized in a more coherent (and less hierarchical) fashion with an obvious place for both integrative and specialized research; should appreciate the strengths and weaknesses of diverse theories and methods (and thus also reason, experience, and intuition), and should appreciate the multiple sources of scientific errors and biases (the chapter lists these, and describes the strengths and weaknesses of different theories and methods). Chapter 12 also details how improved communication between scientists and the public can be achieved so that individuals can better make informed decisions. Policy analysts need first to appreciate the value of using all types of ethical analysis in setting societal goals (in part as political ideologies are each grounded in different types of ethical analysis). Solutions should then be explored using the widest range of theory and method possible. Analysts need to be wary of the full range of possible side effects; this is best done with respect to the exhaustive list of phenomena provided in this book. Chapter 12 also outlines various practical strategies for enhancing the role of reason in community decision-making at all levels, but also urges humanity not to neglect the insights available from intuition and experience.

Chapter 13 addresses a variety of economic reforms. These variously encourage environmental stability and ethical treatment of animals; enhancing the built environment; reducing inequalities; enhancing the work experience, increasing leisure time, appreciating the advantages and disadvantages of public versus private activity; and improving corporate ethics (both institutional and cultural adaptations are necessary here). The chapter concludes with a commentary on anti-corporate and anti-globalization meta-narratives: a progressive future requires that we move past such simplistic analyses while accepting many of the policy proposals that flow from these. [As we head into a period of likely regress with respect to economic growth, I can add a section to this

chapter highlighting some of the insights from my *The Causes of Economic Growth: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (Springer, 2009).]

Chapter 14 develops a set of political reforms: The first section addresses foreign policy, and stresses the importance of openness and clarity. Foreign policy was historically exercised behind closed doors, but must now be pursued openly in accord with widely shared ethical values. The second section focuses on practical strategies for enhancing democratic governance. Campaign finance reform, ethics of leadership, and citizens' fora and referenda are among the subjects addressed here. Educational reforms are also considered.

Chapter 15 pursues the argument that humanity can – ironically to be sure – ground a universal ethics in an appreciation of diversity: there are a handful of key types of ethical analysis and these often point strongly in the same direction. An ethical core of statements for which this is the case is outlined (No other author has performed such a task). Of special interest here, individuals need to appreciate the danger of taking positions that feel good rather than do good (note that this is easier to achieve if there are clear goals to battle for); and realize that the fact one cannot solve all of the world's problems does not free one from the responsibility to solve some of these. Chapter 15 also suggests improvements in a variety of cultural attitudes (and thus argues against simplistic versions of cultural relativism): sense of community and social responsibility, achievement, anger, aggression, consumerism, honesty, trust, marriage and childrearing, leisure (and time in general), and multiculturalism. Individuals are urged to seek a balance between pleasure and service, work and leisure, self-awareness and societal responsibility: the benefits with respect to happiness, depression, and feelings of insignificance are discussed. The chapter includes a discussion of the 'clash of civilizations' meta-narrative, identifying both valuable insights and key exaggerations.

Chapter 16 looks at the world of art. It suggests that postmodern art is valuable but limiting, and thus encourages a much broader conception of the role that art should play in human society. This chapter thus suggests reforms to both artistic practice and to scholarly appreciation of art. The chapter also addresses how progress can be reinforced in several areas in which it is already observed.

Chapter 17 summarizes the arguments of the book, and outlines how both scholars and activists can work toward the extension of human progress. A lengthy table summarizes each of the strategies outlined, and the possible ways in which these may interact. It is emphasized that the various policy proposals are complementary. As is commonly the case in interdisciplinary works, the main (but hardly exclusive) novelty of the book lies in drawing connections across different subjects: in this case in establishing a coherent policy agenda without recourse to meta-narrative. The book ends with an observation that humans are indeed in charge of their destiny, at least to some important extent.

Relationship to Previous Research of Author:

My previous research has ranged widely and has been consciously interdisciplinary. I am thus well positioned to write a book that ties together such a wide array of topics and disciplines. I have deliberately aimed this book at a wider audience.

Part I benefits from a longstanding authorial interest in human progress. With respect to progress in understanding, I have accepted the importance of various postmodern critiques but maintained confidence that enhanced understanding is possible in many works, especially *Classifying Science: Phenomena, Data, Theory Method, Practice* (Springer, 2004), and ‘Modernism, Postmodernism, and Interdisciplinarity’ (forthcoming, *Issues in Integrative Studies*).

Part II of the book is grounded in two recent books of mine: *A Schema for Unifying Human Science: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Culture* (2003) and *Unifying Ethics* (2005). Only by establishing what is ‘good’ across a wide range of phenomena is it possible then to ask whether society has progressed. The analysis in these two books is briefly reprised in chapter 3; it is only rarely necessary to refer to these works in chapters 4 through 11. Part II naturally also draws on my career of research and teaching in the fields of economic history and history of technology. Notably, the field of economic history in general, and my research (and teaching) in particular, has grappled with several of the phenomena and processes stressed in the literature on progress: economic growth, technological scientific and institutional innovation, population growth and migration, natural resources and the environment, and nutrition and health.

Part III draws upon a wide range of my previous research. The discussion of ethics naturally draws upon *Unifying Ethics*. The discussion of public policy draws upon two articles, ‘Interdisciplinarity and the Teaching of Public Policy’ (*Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 2005), and ‘Politics and the Five Types of Ethical Analysis’ (*International Journal of Politics and Ethics*, 2002). The discussion of science draws on *Classifying Science* as well as the chapter on Technology and Science in *Unifying Ethics*. Political issues were addressed in both *A Schema* and *Unifying Ethics*. I have addressed one element of educational reform in ‘“Comprehensive” Curricular Reform: Providing Students with an Overview of the Scholarly Enterprise’ (*Journal of General Education*, 2003). The chapter on the economy benefits not only from the above works but from my career as an economic historian: I have written books about the Industrial Revolution (1991) and Great Depression (1995), as well as a treatise on economic methodology (*Econ-Art: Divorcing Art from Science in Modern Economics*; Pluto Press, 1999), and have recently published with Springer (2009) *The Causes of Economic Growth: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*. I have also taught courses about economic growth and development for decades. I have co-authored a text on the history of North American technology: *Technology and American Society: A History* (2nd ed., Prentice-Hall, 2004); I am thus well placed to critique concerns regarding technological determinism. The chapter on culture draws upon *A Schema for Unifying Human Science: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Culture* (2003). The chapter on art draws on chapters on art in each of *A Schema* and *Unifying Ethics*, and also the extensive research performed for my methodological treatise *Econ-Art: Divorcing Art from Science in Modern Economics* (Pluto, 1999). Yet while I am able to draw on a vast amount of previous research, the thrust of this book is entirely novel. Part III will both extend the arguments in these previous works and show how the various proposals for societal reform are consistent.

Timeliness of the Book:

The book makes a timely contribution to both popular and scholarly discourse in several ways:

- Too many intellectuals and activists have become skeptical of the very idea of progress, and thus cease to work toward this. The book outlines a clear path forward.
- Intellectuals and activists that once grounded their actions in socialist ideology need a coherent but open-minded program for reform.
- A host of more focused arguments – for example, that environmental or cultural degradation is an inevitable side effect of economic growth, that the root of modern difficulties lies in poor childrearing practices associated with changes in the nature of families, or that the process of technological innovation lies outside of human control – need to be placed in a broader context and subjected to careful analysis. In each case, these arguments are not without merit, but can be shown not to negate the possibility of progress.
- Postmodernism, even if thought to be past its prime by many, is still an important element of intellectual discourse. This book accepts the importance of a variety of postmodern critiques of society, but nevertheless transcends postmodern pessimism regarding the possibility of progress
- The ethical challenge of our times is this: how to respect diversity while also encouraging honesty, responsibility, and other ethical precepts. The book argues that a universal ethics can be grounded in diversity once it is recognized that diverse types of ethical analysis often point in the same direction.
- The book also responds to concerns that the world is simply too complex by arguing that both scholars and policy analysts can cope with complexity without recourse to any (necessarily limiting) grand theory or method. Rather, the key is to organize human understanding in terms of exhaustive classifications of phenomena studied and theories and methods applied. If human understanding were better organized, the complexity of the world would seem much less overwhelming.
- It is widely noted that in most/all developed countries confidence in government has waned in recent decades. This trend likely has multiple causes. Immanuel Wallerstein, among others, has argued that it reflects a wider pessimism that human societies can collectively achieve progress. The book carefully outlines a role for government in some but not all types of progress.
- There is also widespread skepticism of the political process (which naturally complements reduced confidence in government). Much of this reflects the sad state of public discourse. The book outlines several strategies for enhancing the quality of public discourse.
- Scholarly and public debate often suffers from a limited understanding of how the world we live in compares with that which has gone before. The historical material in the book articulates many ways in which human society has progressed and many ways in which it has regressed.

Market for the Book:

The book should appeal to various academic and non-academic audiences. The main audience that I have had in mind while writing is the educated layperson who would like to work toward human progress but who doubts that it is possible to do so. There is a widespread (and healthy) skepticism of ideology in the contemporary world. One unfortunate side-effect is that many well-meaning individuals lack a clear sense of how to work toward a progressive future. This book first identifies an array of phenomena for which progress should be encouraged. It then develops a coherent but non-ideological program for encouraging progress across all of these phenomena. It is common these days to decry the demise of the public intellectual: I believe that my previous research prepares me to make a broad but carefully argued statement about the way forward for society. I write in a jargon-free style easily accessible across disciplines and to those outside the academy.

As with any work of an interdisciplinary nature, the potential market among scholars and students is large but fragmented. Scholars in many disciplines have written about progress, generally from a disciplinary perspective. These scholars will appreciate a book that shows how their particular interests are connected with the concerns of other disciplines. There are a growing number of interdisciplinary programs in the academy, and these often address public policy issues, examine how to cope with complexity, engage ethical issues, and grapple with grand theories such as postmodernism. This book, especially as it is grounded in and illustrative of the literature on how to perform interdisciplinary analysis, would provide a valuable addition to the corpus of texts employed in such programs. Scholars and students of public policy analysis should find the integrative treatment of a wide range of policies of interest. Scholars of ‘ethics across the curriculum’ – which urges the application of ethical analysis to the subject matter of all disciplines – should be interested in a text that not only engages questions of what is ‘good’ or ‘better’ in a coherent manner across all human science disciplines, but provides guidance on how scholars and students might work toward a better world. The purpose of the ‘ethics across the curriculum’ approach is to have students reflect in a sophisticated manner on the ethical issues relevant to their studies. Finally, scholars and students of science and technology studies should be interested for several reasons: the book describes how scientific practice could be reformed to better serve society; the book discusses how science and society could better interact; and the book points toward a number of areas in which scientific research is needed in order to clarify the progressive path.

Specifications:

17 chapters, preface, glossary, references, 120,000 words (the glossary and Table 17.1 could be cut to bring the total to 110,000), 6 tables, no other graphics required though diagrams could be added if the publisher wished. The manuscript is completed.

Relationship to Other Works:

Donald Wood's 2003 book *The Unraveling of the West* is similar to this book in some ways. He too worried about the demise of the idea of progress, and proposed a series of reforms. I will draw on his analysis of the contemporary condition in Part I, and touch on some of his reform proposals in Part III. Wood speaks of a post-intellectualism with four key characteristics: over-specialization, ignorance, lack of reason in human affairs, and blind acceptance of authority. My proposals for reform provide direct responses to each of these concerns. My reforms cover a broader range than Wood's, for mine are grounded in a detailed historical survey whereas his lacked this historical perspective. My reform proposals also differ in many respects as a result of my previous research and teaching experiences. As well, I can argue that my reforms are consistent and coherent, while Wood confesses that his are somewhat eclectic. I concur with Wood that we must achieve a societal ethics that respects diversity, but disagree with his appeal to religion. I accept his celebration of individualism, but would place a similar emphasis on societal responsibility. I accept his critiques of democracy and education, but suggest novel reforms in both cases. I am somewhat more optimistic than Wood with respect to economic growth, the environment, and population.

Among the better books on progress in the last decade or so are: *Progress: Fact or Illusion*, edited by Leo Marx and Bruce Mazlich. (1996), and especially *History and the Idea of Progress*, edited by Arthur M. Melzer, Jerry Weinberger, and M. Richard Zinman (1995). I also draw upon Robert Nisbet, *History of the Idea of Progress* (1980). None of these nor any other work performs the sort of detailed analysis that characterizes Parts II or III of this book.

Restoring Human Progress
Rick Szostak

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