

IMPLICATIONS OF HISTORICAL PROGRESS

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Abstract

Often, on the ideological battlefield of world politics, one side identifies its agenda as progress and the opposition as regress. Citing history as its vindication with the claim that one is on the 'right side' of history and the opposition in the 'dustbin', presupposing that history is itself progressive. But historical progress presupposes a purpose of humanity that is independent of human aspirations – a 'transcendent human telos'. Consequently, commitment to the existence of such a telos, as well as an account of its nature and metaphysical possibility are necessary conditions of the coherence of any ideology claiming to represent historical progress.

The modern world has witnessed the ascendancy of the term 'progress' as a weapon on the ideological battlefield of world politics. Each side identifies its own agenda as progress, and the opposition, therefore, as opposition to progress. Then, history is cited as the decisive vindication of that agenda as progress, and the damnation of all else as regress. Thus, one can claim that one is 'on the right side of history,' and that everyone else will be relegated to its 'dustbin'. Such rhetoric presupposes that history is itself progressive, calling into question not only whether that is, in fact, the case, but also what the very concept of historical progress involves.

What follows is an investigation of this question that shows that, in spite of the frequency with which such claims are made from all corners, any coherent and substantial concept of historical progress presupposes the existence of a purpose of humanity that is independent of human aspirations – a 'transcendent human telos'. Consequently, commitment to the existence of such a telos, as well as an account of its nature and metaphysical possibility are necessary conditions of the coherence of any ideology claiming to represent historical progress.

In its most basic sense, "progress" indicates a movement toward something. 'Movement', here, should be understood in its broadest sense; that is, not only a simple physical motion, but as covering a range of phenomena that can be – and are – understood as analogical to simple physical motion in that they represent processes of change characterized by *toward-ness*. This *toward-ness*, though it raises questions that we will address presently, is an essential feature of the idea of progress. Thus, the idea of a simple circular motion cannot be conceived as progressive without thinking into it a correlative linear directionality fixed to a

given reference point. Wherever progress is postulated, four questions can be asked: what is moving, with what sort of movement, toward what, and with what sort of *toward-ness*.

In any given instance of a movement toward something, the something toward which the movement is directed can be thought of as playing a role in the explanation of the movement itself. Each alternative corresponds to a distinct sense of toward-ness that can be understood in terms of Aristotle's distinction between efficient and final causation.

Let the term "teleological progress" connote movement toward a something for the sake of which the movement occurs – a telos. Let the term "efficient progress" connote movement toward a something that does not function as a telos. In this case, that toward which the movement is directed represents nothing over and above the culmination of the movement itself. It may enter into the causal explanation of the movement, but not as final cause; the movement in this case will be exhaustively explainable in terms of efficient causes.

In this way, we think differently about the progress of a student toward finishing his degree (teleological progress), and the progress of a stone rolling toward the bottom of a hill (efficient progress). Whether anything in reality corresponds to one or another of these categories is a separate metaphysical issue. It may be that everything is exclusively explainable in terms of efficient causes, or indeed, final causes. Our purpose here is just to draw attention to how these categories enter the conceptual equation regarding progress.

When historical progress is the issue, it is history that is conceived as moving. It is not the activity of the historian that is generally intended in this context, but the object of that activity. Thus arises the question of what, precisely, that object consists. Whatever it is that we take the object of the historian's science to be, the question of whether history is progressive is a question that is posed of that object. Not only answering the question, but even posing it, presupposes that the real object of history is ascertainable.

The alternative produces a contradiction similar to that in which Karl Popper involved himself by claiming, simultaneously, that "there can be no history of 'the past as it actually did happen'," and that "History has no meaning" (Popper, 1959: p. 303-304). For, if we are committed to the impossibility of ascertaining any objective knowledge about the past, on what basis can we make a definitive claim about it? This holds as well for claims about historical progress as for those about historical meaning.

Popper claims that there are only historical interpretations (Popper, 1959). He writes that the interpretation of history that is taught as the 'history of mankind' is really only the 'history of power politics'. This history of power politics, in turn, "is nothing but the history of international crime and mass murder" (Popper, 1959: p. 305). One wonders if that is to be taken as an assessment of the events themselves, or only Popper's interpretation, as disconnected from the possibility of objectivity as

he claims all history to be. The use of an *interpretation* of history as a series of senseless atrocities to illustrate its meaninglessness could only amount to an *interpretation* of history as meaningless. This would be a strange interpretation from one who also claims that, "although history is meaningless, we can give it a meaning" (Popper, 1959: p. 310). It would seem, rather, to give history *meaninglessness*. But if Popper means that history is meaningless because it *actually is* just a series of senseless atrocities, then he will have tacitly conceded that an account of what actually happened is possible. Our purpose here is merely to illustrate the point that to coherently ask or respond to questions about meaning or progress in history, one must admit the possibility of assessing, accurately and objectively, past events.

Posing a question presupposes the rationality of the question. A necessary condition of a question's rationality is that the application of the predicate to the subject in question does not involve a category mistake. Just as we will not ask whether history is triangular except on the presupposition of history's having a fixed spatial dimension, we will not ask whether history is progressive except on the presupposition of history as a movement with a point of reference toward-ness which constitutes progress. Consequently, to postulate that history is regressive or stagnant also presupposes history as a movement with a point of directional reference toward-ness which constitutes progress.

To Popper's credit, he sees an important connection between the question of progress in history and that of meaning. If we claim that history is progressive, he writes, "we commit the same mistake as those who believe that history has a meaning that can be discovered in it and need not be given to it" (Popper, 1959: p. 311). For us to progress is to move towards some kind of end, towards an end which exists for us as human beings. 'History' cannot do that; only we, human individuals, can do it; we can do it by defending and strengthening those democratic institutions upon which freedom, and with it progress, depends (Popper, 1959).

The argument here turns on Popper's definition of progress as 'movement towards an end which exists for human beings.' But it also turns on an affirmation of the possibility of human progress. Above, Popper has reasonably introduced 'the past' as the object of history. Surely, the past of human beings is the relevant one in this case. Reference to this past is essential to any idea of human progress, because the directionality that is entailed in a movement's being 'toward an end', as well as the very idea of movement itself, necessarily involves such a reference.

The object of history is the movement of human beings - it is where we have been, and since the question of historical progress is a question about the object of history, then it is the same as the question of human progress. It is the question of whether the movement of human beings is toward, as Popper says, 'an end which exists for us as human beings.' If it were, such an end would represent the telos - the purpose, and in that sense, the meaning - of humanity, history, and indeed, of life. But Popper's assertion that 'only we, the human individuals' can progress, attaches to that end, dependence or relativity to the individual aspirations of human beings.

Given that conception of progress, Popper is right. History cannot do it. But then, strengthening democratic institutions would count as progress only for those who have set goals to which strengthening democratic institutions contributes. In relation to the goals set by Popper's 'enemies of the open society', it would be regress. It is a contradiction, given the view that progress is relative to individual aspiration, to claim that progress depends on democratic institutions, or indeed on anything. If progress is conceived of as relative to individual human ends, in all their variety, then it would be just as true to say that regress depends on democratic institutions. No objectively meaningful concrete specification of this sense of the term 'progress' is possible. No concept of progress relative to individual aspirations can rationally be predicated of history. To postulate even the possibility of historical progress is to postulate an end independent of such aspirations.

But to positively postulate that history is progressive entails even more. Such a claim amounts to more than just the contingent claim that in history, progress has occurred. The nature of history is such that any categorical statement that history is progressive is also a statement that history is necessarily progressive. The categorical statement assigns progress to history in its wholeness, and history is still in the process of becoming. Each day that passes adds to it. Thus, anything predicated of history as such, is, by its nature, predictive. The categorical claim that history is progressive suggests some principle or mechanism directing the course of history inevitably to its end. Strangely, in saying that history is progressive, the most important reference made is to the future. What has thus emerged is a concept of historical progress articulated as a movement – a process of change in the state of affairs - of humanity, toward an end that is independent of individual aspiration and at which humanity will inevitably arrive.

This matches the sense in which Karl Marx interprets history as progressive. Several passages in *The German Ideology* clearly rule out the idea that the progress toward communism is to be taken as progress in the teleological sense. Marx criticizes the German ideologists for their teleological interpretation of history:

History is nothing but the succession of the separate generations, each of which exploits the materials, the capital funds, the productive forces handed down to it by all preceding generations...This can be speculatively distorted so that later history is made the goal of earlier history...Thereby history receives its own special aims and becomes "a person ranking with other persons"...while what is designated with the words "destiny", "goal", "germ", or "idea" of earlier history is nothing more than an abstraction formed from later history, from the active influence which earlier history exercises on later history (Marx and Engels, 1999: p. 57-58).

Communism, then, is inevitable, not because it is the "goal" of history, but in virtue of the material conditions of life. "Thus all collisions in history have their origin, according to our view, in the contradiction between the productive forces and the form of intercourse" (Marx and Engels, 1999: p. 89).

This purely efficient mechanism is allegedly discoverable through a study of the historical events themselves. This highlights what many would take to be an advantage on the side of any assessment of history as progressive in the efficient sense over such an assessment the teleological sense. The metaphysical commitments one is obligated to undertake are likely to be fewer in this case. All one needs to postulate is that the events occurred, and the materialist dialectic will be subject to empirical verification. *The German Ideology* clearly presents communism as inevitable:

Communism is not a *state of affairs* which is to be established, an *ideal* to which reality [will] have to adjust itself. We call communism the *real* movement which abolishes the present state of things. The conditions of this movement result from the premises now in existence (Marx and Engels, 1999: p. 56-57).

This passage seems also seems to carry the implication, in that “communism is not a state of affairs to be established”, that it is not something that will come to fruition merely as a fulfillment of goals set by the proletariat. That is, communism is an end independent of individual aspiration. The premises that necessitate communism carry the force of inevitability because the fact that the modern proletariat will set communism as a goal for itself is itself an effect of efficient causal conditions, as were the motivations of everyone in history, according to Marx. He writes, in criticism of Kant:

Neither he (Kant), nor the German burghers...noticed that these theoretical ideas of the bourgeoisie had as their basis material interests and a *will* that was conditioned and determined by the material relations of production...he made the materially motivated determinations of the will of the French bourgeoisie into *pure* self-determinations of “*free will*”... (Marx and Engels, 1999: p. 99)

This should be enough to establish that Marx considers history progressive in what we have termed the efficient sense. Certainly, it is logically possible that the course of history leads inevitably to a predictable end in virtue of a mechanism that resolves into a complex of efficient causes. The question, however, lies in whether this sort of ‘progress’ satisfies the meaning that is really intended when the term is used.

This question arises in that the virtue in which communism is called progressive in this sense is nothing over and above the fact that it is the end toward which history is inevitably being moved by the material conditions directing it. The impact of this fact is illustrated by the following experiment. Imagine Marx, today, realizing that he hadn’t considered a few new material conditions of which he had no way of knowing in his time, including the development of nuclear weapons. Taking these facts into account, he now realizes that instead of communism, the next contradiction between the forces of production and the forms of intercourse will result, inevitably, in the annihilation of the human race. Thus, historical progress is

actually the inevitable movement of humanity toward annihilation. And, this 'progress', is as progressive as it was when we thought it would be communism.

Any objection that movement toward communism would be more progressive than movement toward annihilation only invites the question: what elements were inherent in the former that are lacking in the latter, on the basis of which the former can be called progress in a more meaningful sense? They have both been considered progress by virtue of the same fact – that of their being necessitated by material conditions. If communism as an end is more progressive than annihilation, it must be by virtue of something over and above its inevitability. Anyone who would consider movement toward annihilation regressive must abandon the concept of historical progress in the purely efficient sense.

History as a movement toward communism could only be more progressive than annihilation if it were to represent progress in some sense other than the purely efficient sense. In spite of Marx, it would have to be progress in some teleological sense. But our previous reflections have shown that a movement toward communism (or toward any state of affairs) could not be considered historical progress while progress is conceived as relative to human aspiration. Then it would be just as true to call communism (or capitalism, or democracy, or whatever you like) historical regress as historical progress. Each would only be the progress of those with aspirations to which it conforms, not of history itself. To press the argument that some particular state of affairs would represent historical progress, in spite of the fact that there exist people with contrary aspirations (for whom it would be regress), on the grounds that it conforms to aspirations everyone ought to have, is just to postulate a telos of humanity that is independent of human aspiration. Any substantial and coherent postulation that history is progressing toward such a state of affairs presupposes that humanity is moving toward the inevitable fulfillment of a goal that is independent of human aspiration (some 'transcendent' telos) and that the favored state of affairs represents the fulfillment of such a goal.

These implications, drawn from the very concept of progress, lead decisively to the conclusion that any ideology that explicitly rules out the metaphysical possibility of a transcendent telos ultimately denies itself the possibility of coherent appeals to historical progress in its defense. Furthermore, no ideology that makes such an appeal to progress can remain neutral with regard to either the existence or the nature of such a telos. In other words, appeals to historical progress as the vindication of one's platform – political, social, or otherwise – commit one to the belief that there is, in fact, an overarching objective purpose of humanity in relation to which such progress is measured. This, in turn, obliges one to satisfactorily articulate an account of the nature of such a telos as well as an explanation of its metaphysical possibility.

References

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