

Adler, Mortimer J., "How to Think About Progress," How to Think About The Great Ideas: From the Great Book of Western Civilization. ed. Max Weismann, Open Court Publishing, Chicago © 2002. Pgs. 435 – 445

The philosopher of history is not merely concerned with recording the past but also with projecting "his knowledge of the past into the future" . . . "It is for this reason that the philosophy of history is itself a modern subject"(436)

"Two fundamental ideas are opposed in the philosophy of history: the idea of progress and the idea of cycles . . . the progressive view and the cyclical view" (437).

### **The Progressive View: Perfectibility**

**Hegel**, the great German philosopher, believed history consisted of three stages:

- A. "The first stage which he called the Oriental stage in which only one man , the single despot was free."
- B. " A second stage, the Greco-Roman stage of classic antiquity in which some people were free as citizens and others were slaves.
- C. "A third and almost final stage of history, the Germanic-Christian stage in which everyone has freedom" (438).

**Karl Marx**, a follower of Hegel, looked upon history as a succession of class struggles. For him there are four stages of history, one following another in inevitable succession:

- A. The first stage is the slave economy of ancient times
- B. The second stage is the Middle Ages and the economy of feudal serfdom
- C. The third stage is modern capitalist production and the class war of capital and labor.
- D. The forth and final stage is the communistic or classless society.

**Herbert Spencer** sees history as moving from a "less complex, less differentiated state of affairs, to a more complicated and more differentiated state of affairs" (438).

**Immanuel Kant** "does not think that progress is necessary or inevitable; he thinks it can happen, that it is possible, that in human beings there are potentialities for development. But whether or not these potentialities will be developed depends upon humans themselves" (439).

Related to these philosophies, Adler raises several questions:

Is progress necessary and inevitable, or is it the result of people exercising their freedom? Does progress have an end goal? Is that goal attainable before the end of time?

### **The Cyclical View of History: Rise and Fall, Rise and Fall**

The opposing view of history is that "everything that is happening now, happened once before, and will happen again almost in the same way" (439).

To support this view, Adler reminds us of **Herodotus**, and early Greek historian, who said, "'the cities which were formerly great have most of them become insignificant. And such as are at present powerful were weak in olden times. I shall therefore discourse equally of both, convinced that prosperity never continues long in one's day'" (439).

**Aristotle** makes an extraordinary statement about the arts and sciences, "Probably each art and science has often been developed as far as possible and has again perished,' as if the arts and sciences, the products of civilization were once developed and lost, only to be developed again and lost" (440).

All of this, according to Adler, is best summed up by the preacher in **Ecclesiastes**, "There is no new thing under the sun; all is vanity and vexation of spirit" (440).

In this sense history, Adler points out, is almost like a living organism, a biological entity. It grows to maturity, develops into its prime, and starts to decline into weakness and death (440).

One modern philosopher of history, **Oswald Spengler**, predicted in his book The Decline of the West that Western civilization was necessarily doomed by the same cyclical motion of history (440).

**Arnold Toynbee**, in Adler's view the greatest modern historical philosopher, holds a more moderate view. "Toynbee is opposing both extreme positions . . . Neither progress nor decline is necessary. Which happens will depend upon the way in which people exercise their intelligence and freedom" (440). Toynbee warns however that in the last six thousand years 22 to 26 major civilizations have "grown to their maturity, only to decline and disappear . . ." (440).

In evaluating the progressive and cyclical views of history, Adler comes down to one necessary and important question: Does history obey necessary laws or are we responsible for history's direction? It is all the difference between pessimism and optimism.

#### **What do the Facts Tell us About Progress?**

- Science and technology are advancing. We have greater command of the physical earth and our own bodies.
- Government seems to be moving from despotic forms into the creation of one world government
- Science has advanced faster than has man's wisdom and intelligence to handle it.
- There are serious doubts about man's moral progress. "In the twentieth century human beings seem to be just as inhumane toward other human beings as they were twenty-five hundred years ago" (443). As man "improves his institutions, as he improves his command over nature, he does not improve his heart and soul, that man is as much the beast and brute today, only with more power than he had twenty-five hundred years ago or five thousand years ago" (443).

#### **What factors or conditions are indispensable to progress?**

- A. Progress depends upon tradition. If we did not conserve what has been accomplished in the past, we could not advance from it into the future.
- B. We must overcome the inertia of custom. Custom is the great enemy of progress. John Stuart Mill said, "the despotism of custom is everywhere the standing hindrance to human advancement, being unceasingly antagonistic to . . . progress" (444). People must set for themselves ideals, then exercise their freedom or intelligence, and their powers to do what they can against chance or circumstance"(444).

#### **Human Nature Does not Change**

Does progress in human affairs occur only in the outward conditions of human life in the institutions, the arrangements, . . . or is there progress in human nature itself? Do men get better from century to century, age to age, epoch to epoch?" (445).

In discussing the perfectibility of man, Adler concludes that there is "no clear evidence that man's intelligence has increased (leaving out prehistoric men) . . . And it is certainly doubtful in the facts of history whether there is any improvement in man's moral nature century after century" (445). Men may change their society, arrange their laws and customs, but men themselves cannot change.

What do you think?