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*What in me is dark
Illumine, what is low raise and support;
That to the height of this great argument
I may assert eternal Providence
And justify the ways of God to men.*

—MILTON.

CHAPTER 1

THE CURRENT THEORY OF HUMAN PROGRESS —ITS INSUFFICIENCY

If the conclusions at which we have arrived are correct, they will fall under a larger generalization.

Let us, therefore, recommence our inquiry from a higher standpoint, whence we may survey a wider field.

What is the law of human progress?

This is a question which, were it not for what has gone before, I should hesitate to review in the brief space I can now devote to it, as it involves, directly or indirectly, some of the very highest problems with which the human mind can engage. But it is a question which naturally comes up. Are or are not the conclusions to which we have come consistent with the great law under which human development goes on?

What is that law? We must find the answer to our question; for the current philosophy, though it clearly recognizes the existence of such a law, gives no more satisfactory account of it than the current political economy does of the persistence of want amid advancing wealth.

Let us, as far as possible, keep to the firm ground of facts. Whether man was or was not gradually developed from an animal, it is not necessary to inquire. However intimate may be the connection between questions which relate to man as we know him and questions which relate to his genesis, it is only from the former upon the latter that light can be thrown. Inference cannot proceed from the unknown to the

The question naturally comes up: *What is the law of human progress?* And are our conclusions consistent with that law?

We need not inquire whether man evolved from an animal.

known. It is only from facts of which we are cognizant that we can infer what has preceded cognizance.

However he may have originated, all we know of man is as man, just as he is now.

However man may have originated, all we know of him is as man—just as he is now to be found. There is no record or trace of him in any lower condition than that in which savages are still to be met. By whatever bridge he may have crossed the wide chasm which now separates him from the brutes, there remain of it no vestiges. Between the lowest savages of whom we know and the highest animals, there is an irreconcilable difference—a difference not merely of degree, but of kind. Many of the characteristics, actions, and emotions of man are exhibited by the lower animals; but man, no matter how low in the scale of humanity, has never yet been found destitute of one thing of which no animal shows the slightest trace, a clearly recognizable but almost undefinable something, which gives him the power of improvement—which makes him the progressive animal.

Man is the progressive animal.

Although other animals can to some extent make things and learn, their capacity to do so has not increased over time. Only man uses clothes, cooks, makes tools or weapons, breeds animals for food, and has articulate language. And man everywhere does these things,

The beaver builds a dam, and the bird a nest, and the bee a cell; but while beavers' dams, and birds' nests, and bees' cells are always constructed on the same model, the house of the man passes from the rude hut of leaves and branches to the magnificent mansion replete with modern conveniences. The dog can to a certain extent connect cause and effect, and may be taught some tricks; but his capacity in these respects has not been a whit increased during all the ages he has been the associate of improving man, and the dog of civilization is not a whit more accomplished or intelligent than the dog of the wandering savage. We know of no animal that uses clothes, that cooks its food, that makes itself tools or weapons, that breeds other animals that it wishes to eat, or that has an articulate language. But men who do not do such things have never yet been found, or heard of, except in fable. That is to say, man, wherever we know him, exhibits

this power—of supplementing what nature has done for him by what he does for himself; and, in fact, so inferior is the physical endowment of man, that there is no part of the world, save perhaps some of the small islands of the Pacific, where without this faculty he could maintain an existence.

Man everywhere and at all times exhibits this faculty—everywhere and at all times of which we have knowledge he has made some use of it. But the degree in which this has been done greatly varies. Between the rude canoe and the steamship; between the boomerang and the repeating rifle; between the roughly carved wooden idol and the breathing marble of Grecian art; between savage knowledge and modern science; between the wild Indian and the white settler; between the Hottentot woman and the belle of polished society, there is an enormous difference.

The varying degrees in which this faculty is used cannot be ascribed to differences in original capacity—the most highly improved peoples of the present day were savages within historic times, and we meet with the widest differences between peoples of the same stock. Nor can they be wholly ascribed to differences in physical environment—the cradles of learning and the arts are now in many cases tenanted by barbarians, and within a few years great cities rise on the hunting grounds of wild tribes. All these differences are evidently connected with social development. Beyond perhaps the veriest rudiments, it becomes possible for man to improve only as he lives with his fellows. All these improvements, therefore, in man's powers and conditions we summarize in the term civilization. Men improve as they become civilized, or learn to co-operate in society.

What is the law of this improvement? By what common principle can we explain the different stages of civilization at

supplementing what nature has done for him by what he does for himself.

But the extent to which he uses this faculty varies greatly among societies.

These differences aren't due to difference in original capacity, nor entirely to differences in physical environment. Evidently, the differences are connected with social development. Beyond the rudiments, man can improve only as he lives with his fellows. We therefore use the term "civilization" to summarize these improvements in man's powers and conditions.

By what principle can we explain the different stages of civilization?

Which social adjustments favor the progress of civilization, and which retard it?

The prevailing belief now is that the progress of civilization is an evolution, based on survival of the fittest and hereditary transmission of acquired qualities.

The common explanation of differences of civilization is of differences in capacity. The civilized races are the superior races.

which different communities have arrived? In what consists essentially the progress of civilization, so that we may say of varying social adjustments, this favors it, and that does not; or explain why an institution or condition which may at one time advance it may at another time retard it?

The prevailing belief now is, that the progress of civilization is a development or evolution, in the course of which man's powers are increased and his qualities improved by the operation of causes similar to those which are relied upon as explaining the genesis of species viz., the survival of the fittest and the hereditary transmission of acquired qualities.

That civilization is an evolution—that it is, in the language of Herbert Spencer, a progress from an indefinite, incoherent homogeneity to a definite, coherent heterogeneity—there is no doubt; but to say this is not to explain or identify the causes which forward or retard it. How far the sweeping generalizations of Spencer, which seek to account for all phenomena under terms of matter and force, may, properly understood, include all these causes, I am unable to say; but, as scientifically expounded, the development philosophy has either not yet definitely met this question, or has given birth, or rather coherency, to an opinion which does not accord with the facts.

The vulgar explanation of progress is, I think, very much like the view naturally taken by the money-maker of the causes of the unequal distribution of wealth. His theory, if he has one, usually is, that there is plenty of money to be made by those who have will and ability, and that it is ignorance, or idleness, or extravagance, that makes the difference between the rich and the poor. And so the common explanation of differences of civilization is of differences in capacity. The civilized races are the superior races, and advance in civilization is according to this superiority—just as English victories

were, in common English opinion, due to the natural superiority of Englishmen to frog-eating Frenchmen; and popular government, active invention, and greater average comfort are, or were until lately, in common American opinion, due to the greater "smartness of the Yankee Nation."

Now, just as the politico-economic doctrines which in the beginning of this inquiry we met and disproved, harmonize with the common opinion of men who see capitalists paying wages and competition reducing wages; just as the Malthusian theory harmonized with existing prejudices both of the rich and the poor; so does the explanation of progress as a gradual race improvement harmonize with the vulgar opinion which accounts by race differences for differences in civilization. It has given coherence and a scientific formula to opinions which already prevailed. Its wonderful spread since the time Darwin first startled the world with his "Origin of Species" has not been so much a conquest as an assimilation.

The view which now dominates the world of thought is this: That the struggle for existence, just in proportion as it becomes intense, impels men to new efforts and inventions. That this improvement and capacity for improvement is fixed by hereditary transmission, and extended by the tendency of the best adapted individual, or most improved individual, to survive and propagate among individuals, and of the best adapted, or most improved tribe, nation, or race to survive in the struggle between social aggregates. On this theory the differences between man and the animals, and differences in the relative progress of men, are now explained as confidently, and all but as generally, as a little while ago they were explained upon the theory of special creation and divine interposition.

This explanation of progress as a gradual race improvement harmonizes with the vulgar opinion which attributes differences in civilization to racial differences.

The dominant view now is that as among individuals the best adapted tend to survive and propagate among individuals, so among tribes, nations, and races the best adapted tend to survive.

A sort of hopeful fatalism follows. War, slavery, tyranny, superstition, famine, pestilence, want and misery, all are the impelling causes which drive man on, by eliminating poorer types and extending the higher. Social organization takes its form from the individuals of which it is composed.

The practical outcome of this theory is in a sort of hopeful fatalism, of which current literature is full.¹ In this view, progress is the result of forces which work slowly, steadily, and remorselessly, for the elevation of man. War, slavery, tyranny, superstition, famine, and pestilence, the want and misery which fester in modern civilization, are the impelling causes which drive man on, by eliminating poorer types and extending the higher; and hereditary transmission is the power by which advances are fixed, and past advances made the footing for new advances. The individual is the result of changes thus impressed upon and perpetuated through a long series of past individuals, and the social organization takes its form from the individuals of which it is composed. Thus, while this theory is, as Herbert Spencer says²—“radical to a degree beyond anything which current radicalism conceives,” inasmuch as it looks for changes in the very nature of man; it is at the same time “conservative to a degree beyond anything conceived by current conservatism,” inasmuch as it holds that no change can avail save these slow changes in men's natures. Philosophers may teach that this does not lessen the duty of

¹ In semiscientific or popularized form this may perhaps be seen in best, because frankest, expression in “The Martyrdom of Man,” by Winwood Reade, a writer of singular vividness and power. This book is in reality a history of progress, or, rather, a monograph upon its causes and methods, and will well repay perusal for its vivid pictures, whatever may be thought of the capacity of the author for philosophic generalization. The connection between subject and title may be seen by the conclusion: “I give to universal history a strange but true title— The Martyrdom of Man. In each generation the human race has been tortured that their children might profit by their woes. Our own prosperity is founded on the agonies of the past. Is it therefore unjust that we also should suffer for the benefit of those who are to come?”

² “The Study of Sociology”— Conclusion.

endeavoring to reform abuses, just as the theologians who taught predestinarianism insisted on the duty of all to struggle for salvation; but, as generally apprehended, the result is fatalism—“do what we may, the mills of the gods grind on regardless either of our aid or our hindrance.” I allude to this only to illustrate what I take to be the opinion now rapidly spreading and permeating common thought; not that in the search for truth any regard for its effects should be permitted to bias the mind. But this I take to be the current view of civilization: That it is the result of forces, operating in the way indicated, which slowly change the character, and improve and elevate the powers of man; that the difference between civilized man and savage is of a long race education, which has become permanently fixed in mental organization; and that this improvement tends to go on increasingly, to a higher and higher civilization. We have reached such a point that progress seems to be natural with us, and we look forward confidently to the greater achievements of the coming race—some even holding that the progress of science will finally give men immortality and enable them to make bodily the tour not only of the planets, but of the fixed stars, and at length to manufacture suns and systems for themselves.³

But without soaring to the stars, the moment that this theory of progression, which seems so natural to us amid an advancing civilization, looks around the world, it comes against an enormous fact—the fixed, petrified civilizations. The majority of the human race today have no idea of progress; the majority of the human race today look (as until a few generations ago our own ancestors looked) upon the past as the time of human perfection. The difference between the savage and the civilized man may be explained on the theory

The current view sees the difference between civilized man and savage as a result of a long race education, which slowly changes the character, improves and elevates the powers of man. The improvement tends to go on increasingly, to higher and higher civilization, and we look forward to greater achievements of the coming race.

But this theory does not account for the fixed, petrified civilizations which encompass the majority of the human race today.

³ Winwood Reade, “The Martyrdom of Man.”

If human progress is the result of general and continuous causes, how shall we account for civilizations that progressed so far and then stopped? The Hindoos and the Chinese were civilized when we were savages. Why have they not progressed further, while we have?

that the former is as yet so imperfectly developed that his progress is hardly apparent; but how, upon the theory that human progress is the result of general and continuous causes, shall we account for the civilizations that had progressed so far and then stopped? It cannot be said of the Hindoo and of the Chinaman, as it may be said of the savage, that our superiority is the result of a longer education; that we are, as it were, the grown men of nature, while they are the children. The Hindoos and the Chinese were civilized when we were savages. They had great cities, highly organized and powerful governments, literatures, philosophies, polished manners, considerable division of labor, large commerce, and elaborate arts, when our ancestors were wandering barbarians, living in huts and skin tents, not a whit further advanced than the American Indians. While we have progressed from this savage state to nineteenth century civilization, they have stood still. If progress be the result of fixed laws, inevitable and eternal, which impel men forward, how shall we account for this?

One of the best popular expounders of the development philosophy, Walter Bagehot ("Physics and Politics"), admits the force of this objection, and endeavors in this way to explain it: That the first thing necessary to civilize man is to tame him; to induce him to live in association with his fellows in subordination to law; and hence a body or "cake" of laws and customs grows up, being intensified and extended by natural selection, the tribe or nation thus bound together having an advantage over those who are not. That this cake of custom and law finally becomes too thick and hard to permit further progress, which can go on only as circumstances occur which introduce discussion, and thus permit the freedom and mobility necessary to improvement.

This explanation, which Mr. Bagehot offers, as he says, with some misgivings, is I think at the expense of the general

In any group, says one advocate of the current view, a body of laws and customs grows up and helps the group function. But this "cake" of custom and law finally becomes so thick and hard as to prevent progress.

theory. But it is not worth while speaking of that, for it, manifestly, does not explain the facts.

The hardening tendency of which Mr. Bagehot speaks would show itself at a very early period of development, and his illustrations of it are nearly all drawn from savage or semisavage life. Whereas, these arrested civilizations had gone a long distance before they stopped. There must have been a time when they were very far advanced as compared with the savage state, and were yet plastic, free, and advancing. These arrested civilizations stopped at a point which was hardly in anything inferior and in many respects superior to European civilization of, say, the sixteenth or at any rate the fifteenth century. Up to that point then there must have been discussion, the hailing of what was new, and mental activity of all sorts. They had architects who carried the art of building, necessarily by a series of innovations or improvements, up to a very high point; shipbuilders who in the same way, by innovation after innovation, finally produced as good a vessel as the warships of Henry VIII; inventors who stopped only on the verge of our most important improvements, and from some of whom we can yet learn; engineers who constructed great irrigation works and navigable canals; rival schools of philosophy and conflicting ideas of religion. One great religion, in many respects resembling Christianity, rose in India, displaced the old religion, passed into China, sweeping over that country, and was displaced again in its old seats, just as Christianity was displaced in its first seats. There was life, and active life, and the innovation that begets improvement, long after men had learned to live together. And, moreover, both India and China have received the infusion of new life in conquering races, with different customs and modes of thought.

The most fixed and petrified of all civilizations of which

But this doesn't explain the facts. This hardening tendency would show up at an early period of development; the illustrations of it are nearly all from savage or semi-savage life. But these arrested civilizations had gone a long distance before they stopped. And both India and China received the infusion of new life in conquering races, with different customs and modes of thought.

Even Egypt, the most fixed and petrified of all known civilizations, must once have been full of life and vigor, or the arts and sciences couldn't have been carried to such a pitch. And so it must have been once with all now unprogressive civilizations.

Every civilization has had its period of vigorous growth, then stagnation, and finally decline and fall.

Our own civilization of course is more advanced than any earlier one, but relative to its predecessors the Greco-Roman civilization was similarly advanced.

we know anything was that of Egypt, where even art finally assumed a conventional and inflexible form. But we know that behind this must have been a time of life and vigor—a freshly developing and expanding civilization, such as ours is now—or the arts and sciences could never have been carried to such a pitch. And recent excavations have brought to light from beneath what we before knew of Egypt an earlier Egypt still—in statues and carvings which, instead of a hard and formal type, beam with life and expression, which show art struggling, ardent, natural, and free, the sure indication of an active and expanding life. So it must have been once with all now unprogressive civilizations.

But it is not merely these arrested civilizations that the current theory of development fails to account for. It is not merely that men have gone so far on the path of progress and then stopped; it is that men have gone far on the path of progress and then gone back. It is not merely an isolated case that thus confronts the theory—it is the universal rule. Every civilization that the world has yet seen has had its period of vigorous growth, of arrest and stagnation; its decline and fall. Of all the civilizations that have arisen and flourished, there remain today but those that have been arrested, and our own, which is not yet as old as were the pyramids when Abraham looked upon them—while behind the pyramids were twenty centuries of recorded history.

That our own civilization has a broader base, is of a more advanced type, moves quicker and soars higher than any preceding civilization is undoubtedly true; but in these respects it is hardly more in advance of the Greco-Roman civilization than that was in advance of Asiatic civilization; and if it were, that would prove nothing as to its permanence and future advance, unless it be shown that it is superior in those things

which caused the ultimate failure of its predecessors. The current theory does not assume this.

In truth, nothing could be further from explaining the facts of universal history than this theory that civilization is the result of a course of natural selection which operates to improve and elevate the powers of man. That civilization has arisen at different times in different places and has progressed at different rates, is not inconsistent with this theory; for that might result from the unequal balancing of impelling and resisting forces; but that progress everywhere commencing, for even among the lowest tribes it is held that there has been some progress, has nowhere been continuous, but has everywhere been brought to a stand or retrogression, is absolutely inconsistent. For if progress operated to fix an improvement in man's nature and thus to produce further progress, though there might be occasional interruption, yet the general rule would be that progress would be continuous—that advance would lead to advance, and civilization develop into higher civilization.

Not merely the general rule, but the universal rule, is the reverse of this. The earth is the tomb of the dead empires, no less than of dead men. Instead of progress fitting men for greater progress, every civilization that was in its own time as vigorous and advancing as ours is now, has of itself come to a stop. Over and over again, art has declined, learning sunk, power waned, population become sparse, until the people who had built great temples and mighty cities, turned rivers and pierced mountains, cultivated the earth like a garden and introduced the utmost refinement into the minute affairs of life, remained but in a remnant of squalid barbarians, who had lost even the memory of what their ancestors had done, and regarded the surviving fragments of their grandeur as the work of genii, or of the mighty race before

If progress operated to fix an improvement in man's nature and thus to produce further progress, then progress would in general be continuous.

But the universal rule is the reverse of this. The earth is the tomb of dead empires. Every civilization that was in its own time as vigorous as ours is now, has waned.

the flood. So true is this, that when we think of the past, it seems like the inexorable law, from which we can no more hope to be exempt than the young man who "feels his life in every limb" can hope to be exempt from the dissolution which is the common fate of all. "Even this, O Rome, must one day be thy fate!" wept Scipio over the ruins of Carthage, and Macaulay's picture of the New Zealander musing upon the broken arch of London Bridge appeals to the imagination of even those who see cities rising in the wilderness and help to lay the foundations of new empire. And so, when we erect a public building we make a hollow in the largest corner stone and carefully seal within it some mementos of our day, looking forward to the time when our works shall be ruins and ourselves forgot.

I think it would be difficult to prove that the overall trend of this pattern, of rising and falling civilizations, is an ascending one, but, regardless, the theory that civilization advances by changes wrought in the nature of man fails to explain the facts. In every case, men under the influences of civilization, though at first improving, afterward degenerate.

Nor whether this alternate rise and fall of civilization, this retrogression that always follows progression, be, or be not, the rhythmic movement of an ascending line (and I think, though I will not open the question, that it would be much more difficult to prove the affirmative than is generally supposed) makes no difference; for the current theory is in either case disproved. Civilizations have died and made no sign, and hard-won progress has been lost to the race forever; but, even if it be admitted that each wave of progress has made possible a higher wave and each civilization passed the torch to a greater civilization, the theory that civilization advances by changes wrought in the nature of man fails to explain the facts; for in every case it is not the race that has been educated and hereditarily modified by the old civilization that begins the new, but a fresh race coming from a lower level. It is the barbarians of the one epoch who have been the civilized men of the next; to be in their turn succeeded by fresh barbarians. For it has been heretofore always the case that men under the influences of civilization, though at first improving, afterward degenerate.

The civilized man of today is vastly the superior of the uncivilized; but so in the time of its vigor was the civilized man of every dead civilization. But there are such things as the vices, the corruptions, the enervations of civilization, which past a certain point have always heretofore shown themselves. Every civilization that has been overwhelmed by barbarians has really perished from internal decay.

Every civilization that has been overwhelmed by barbarians has really perished from internal decay.

This universal fact, the moment that it is recognized, disposes of the theory that progress is by hereditary transmission. Looking over the history of the world, the line of greatest advance does not coincide for any length of time with any line of heredity. On any particular line of heredity, retrogression seems always to follow advance.

The line of greatest advance does not coincide for any length of time with any line of heredity.

Shall we therefore say that there is a national or race life, as there is an individual life—that every social aggregate has, as it were, a certain amount of energy, the expenditure of which necessitates decay? This is an old and widespread idea, that is yet largely held, and that may be constantly seen cropping out incongruously in the writings of the expounders of the development philosophy. Indeed, I do not see why it may not be stated in terms of matter and of motion so as to bring it clearly within the generalizations of evolution. For considering its individuals as atoms, the growth of society is “an integration of matter and concomitant dissipation of motion; during which the matter passes from an indefinite, incoherent homogeneity to a definite, coherent heterogeneity, and during which the retained motion undergoes a parallel transformation.”⁴ And thus an analogy may be drawn between the life of a society and the life of a solar system upon the nebular hypothesis. As the heat and light of the sun are produced by the aggregation of atoms evolving motion,

Shall we therefore say that there is a national or race life, as there is an individual life?

⁴ Herbert Spencer's definition of Evolution, “First Principles,” p. 396.

which finally ceases when the atoms at length come to a state of equilibrium or rest, and a state of immobility succeeds, which can be broken in again only by the impact of external forces, which reverse the process of evolution, integrating motion and dissipating matter in the form of gas, again to evolve motion by its condensation; so, it may be said, does the aggregation of individuals in a community evolve a force which produces the light and warmth of civilization, but when this process ceases and the individual components are brought into a state of equilibrium, assuming their fixed places, petrification ensues, and the breaking up and diffusion caused by an incursion of barbarians is necessary to the recommencement of the process and a new growth of civilization.

But analogies are the most dangerous modes of thought. They may connect resemblances and yet disguise or cover up the truth. And all such analogies are superficial. While its members are constantly reproduced in all the fresh vigor of childhood, a community cannot grow old, as does a man, by the decay of its powers. While its aggregate force must be the sum of the forces of its individual components, a community cannot lose vital power unless the vital powers of its components are lessened.

Such analogies are superficial. While its members are constantly reproduced in the fresh vigor of childhood, a community cannot grow old, as does a man, by decay of its powers.

But both this theory and the one I have suggested recognize the obvious truth, that what has destroyed all previous civilizations has been the conditions produced by the growth of civilization itself.

Yet in both the common analogy which likens the life power of a nation to that of an individual, and in the one I have supposed, lurks the recognition of an obvious truth—the truth that the obstacles which finally bring progress to a halt are raised by the course of progress; that what has destroyed all previous civilizations has been the conditions produced by the growth of civilization itself.

This is a truth which in the current philosophy is ignored; but it is a truth most pregnant. Any valid theory of human progress must account for it.