

# MORAL PROGRESS

## *The Evolution of Ethics*



With the advent of the human mind, evolution shifted into the fast lane. Chemical evolution was incredibly slow, taking trillions of years to create the primordial earth. Then, biological evolution took over and the pace picked up. In only a few million years upright apes were created. Now, noological evolution—mental or spiritual development—has left our chemical, biological, physical bodies in the dust. We are now in the era of moral evolution and things are happening so fast that we are continually confused. We can't tell for sure if the changes are good or bad. Thus, the question arises: are we making moral progress?

Morality aside, it's obvious that human mind-power has changed the world in ways that Mother Nature never imagined. In about 10,000 years, human ingenuity has learned and exploited many of the arcane secrets of nature. Our mastery of the environment has gradually climbed from the pitiful dirt-scratching of rudimentary agriculture to the soul-shaking power of genetic engineering. So, in terms of greater complexity and control, mankind has certainly made progress in art and technology.

Yet many thoughtful people wish that morality could progress in step with artistry. Some pessimists deny that moral progress is even possible without supernatural help. In one sense it's true that morality is a static quality. Qualities, like good and bad, are hard to quantify in terms of progress from A to Z or 1 to 10. Some see them as absolutely separated entities with no in-between, no gray areas. Either you have it or you don't. But, in another sense, even qualities are relative.

Morality, as a characteristic of human nature, is no different now than for the first human beings. People are moral creatures because they have the ability to tell right from wrong. Unlike animals, we are conscious of good and evil as abstract concepts. We are not limited to mere consciousness of what is; we can envision what

should be. Not only can we imagine a situation other than what exists, we believe that we have the power to change our destinies, to choose good rather than evil outcomes. As moral beings, all men are created equal.

Moral behavior, on the other hand, is definitely not an absolute, fixed quality of humanity. It is more a matter of measuring up to some kind of standard. The only problem with this quantitative concept of morality is how to define the standard. If we had some kind of absolute law of good and evil, perhaps we could measure progress in terms of the average percentage of good moral choices made by an individual or by the aggregate of humanity. Our relative position could be compared to the one-and-only yard-stick.

Some religions and philosophies deny that there is any final standard. But others teach that God's moral laws have been written down in ancient authoritative books. So those with access to the scriptures can have no excuse for immoral behavior. These people think that the Torah/Bible/Koran offers the moral absolutes that we need to govern our behavior and to measure our moral progress. Yet they are also the ones who typically reject the notion of moral progress along with the concept of biological evolution.

The Good Book is an excellent idea, in principle. However, an open-minded person will find that, in practice, the moral precepts of the scriptures are so general that they are subject to many interpretations. For example, the command, "Thou shalt not kill", sounds about as absolute as you can get. But what about Holy War, self-defense, abortion, euthanasia, or animal food? Even the Holy Books are contradictory or ambiguous on such contextually sensitive moral questions. So after all, we seem to be left with no choice but to exercise some human judgment and personal opinions.



Moral ambiguity notwithstanding, it is my opinion that a certain degree of moral progress has been made in the last 10,000 years. The Bible, as a historical record of some of the highest human thoughts, demonstrates the very thing I'm talking about. The general moral conception of God is a good indicator of the moral quality of a society. A review of the Old and New Testaments will reveal the evolution of god-concepts ranging from primitive tribal god, to ruthless barbarian Baal, to majestic national God, to a universal Father in heaven.

Each step of divine evolution illustrates another refinement of moral understanding. And each step is accompanied by increasingly civilized behavior. It seems that as civilization increases in technological power and social complexity it is forced to upgrade its god-concept to cover new moral dilemmas. Morality is a social contract, and like secular laws, moral laws must be continually adjusted to cope with new situations. History shows that humanity has gradually expanded the circle of moral concern---those who we call neighbors---"us" versus "them".

Moral progress roughly parallels social complexity and technological power. This may sound counter-intuitive, but remember that I'm speaking from a global and historical perspective, not from the view of a perplexed participant in the day-to-day ups-and-downs of existence. In these latter days, we feel inundated with immorality because modern communications brings worldwide evil into our living rooms. Earlier societies only had to deal with relatively simple local problems.

Another reason such hypothetical progress is not immediately obvious is that the world has yet to agree on one moral standard. Technology has boomed in the age of Science because the whole world has adopted the scientific method and mathematics as universal standards. However, morality is too closely bound-up with cul-

ture and heritage. It has not yet achieved the trans-cultural status of science. But I think that, in time, the technological "global village" may gradually evolve into a single moral culture. The multi-cultural upheavals of the United States may be early signs of progress toward a semi-Utopian "United States of Earth" with uniform ethics and laws, if not homogenized beliefs and cultural practices.

We tend to think of Progress as a single, steady upward movement, but in reality, it often follows the one-step-forward-and-two-steps-back method. So, why should moral progress be any different? We are too close to the daily, ratcheting steps of everyday progress to see the overall trends. And even from a higher perspective, we lack the universal ruler by which to gauge it.

Since we don't have the tools to determine exactly how much morality a given society or culture has, we are forced to judge in vague, relative terms. We can only say that one moral position is better or worse than another. In that sense, I think that the general quality of morality in the world is slightly better than in the past. If you don't agree, ask yourself, truthfully, if you would rather live in modern America or ancient Israel. Remember that "murder and mayhem" was a fact of life back then too. But concentrate on your general quality of life, especially the moral quality. Don't you agree that our society, with all of its problems, is morally superior to the societies condemned by the Biblical prophets?

Science and technology have insulated us from many of the physical evils of life. Now we need to work on a moral technology to further isolate us from the social evils of life. We are currently on the threshold of conscious memetic evolution. So, there is still hope for progress in moral discipline. ☺

-----John Earwood 9/04/1993