

**Tenth Part:**  
**The Law of Human Progress**

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**Chapter 39**

**The Cause of Human Progress**

IF OUR CONCLUSIONS ARE CORRECT, they will fall under a larger generalization. We may rephrase our question, then, from a broader perspective:

*What is the law of human progress?*

Whether humans gradually developed from animals is not the question here. Inference cannot proceed from the unknown to the known. However humans may have originated, we can know our species only as we find it now. There is no trace of humans in any lower state than that of primitive people still found today. No vestige remains of what bridged the chasm between humans and animals.

Between the lowest savage and the highest animal, there is an irreconcilable difference. It is not a difference of degree, but of kind. Many of the characteristics, actions, and emotions of humans are seen in lower animals. But no matter how low on the scale of humanity, no person has ever been found without the one characteristic of which animals show not the slightest trace. It is something clearly

recognizable, yet almost undefinable. Something that gives humans the power of improvement—that makes us the progressive animal.

The beaver builds a dam, the bird a nest—but always on the same models. Human dwellings pass from rude huts to magnificent mansions. A dog can, to a certain extent, connect cause and effect, and learn some tricks. But this capacity has not increased in all the ages it has been domesticated. Today's dog is no smarter than the dogs of ancient savages.

We know of no animal that uses clothes, cooks food, makes tools or weapons, breeds other animals to eat, or has an articulate language. Humans lacking these skills have never been found. In fact, human physical ability is so inferior that there is virtually no place we could exist without those skills. Humans everywhere, and at all times we know of, have exhibited this faculty—to supplement what nature has done for us by what we do for ourselves.

But the degree varies greatly. Between the steamship and a canoe, there is an enormous difference. These variations cannot be attributed to differences in original capacity. The most advanced today were savages within historic times. We also see wide differences between peoples of the same stock. Neither can they be accounted for by differences in physical environment. In many cases, the cradles of learning are now occupied by barbarians. Yet great cities rise in a few years over the hunting grounds of wild tribes.

These differences are evidently connected with social development. Beyond perhaps the simplest rudiments, it becomes possible for humans to improve only as we live with other people. We improve as we learn to cooperate in society. All these improvements in human powers and con-

ditions we summarize in the term “civilization.”

But what is the law of this improvement? Which social arrangements favor it and which do not? Different communities have arrived at different stages of civilization. Can some common principle explain this?

The prevailing belief is that civilizations progress by development or evolution. That is, by the survival of the fittest and hereditary transmission of acquired qualities. This explanation of progress is, I think, very much like the view naturally taken by the wealthy regarding the unequal distribution of wealth. There is plenty of money to be made by those who have the will and ability, they say; ignorance, idleness, or wastefulness creates the difference between rich and poor.

So the common explanation of differences among civilizations is one of differences in capacity. The more civilized races are superior races. Common Englishmen felt they had a naturally superiority over frog-eating Frenchmen. American opinion attributed their country’s success in invention and material comfort to “Yankee ingenuity.”

In the beginning of this inquiry, we examined—and disproved—certain economic theories that supported common opinion. This view saw capitalists as paying wages, while competition reduced wages. Just as Malthusian theory supported existing prejudices, seeing progress as gradual race improvement harmonizes with common opinion. It gives coherence and a scientific formula to opinions already prevailing. Its phenomenal spread since Darwin\* has not been so much conquest as assimilation.

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\* Charles Darwin (1809-1882), British naturalist. He published *The Origin of Species* in 1859.

So this view now dominates thought: The struggle for existence, in proportion to its intensity, spurs people to new efforts and inventions. The capacity for improvement is established by hereditary transmission, and spread as the most improved (i.e., best adapted) individuals survive to propagate. Similarly, the best adapted tribe, nation, or race survives in the struggle between social groups. This theory is now used to explain the differences in the relative progress of societies, as well as the differences between humans and animals. These phenomena are now explained as confidently and as widely by this theory as, a short while ago, they were explained by special creation and divine intervention.

The practical effect of this theory is a sort of hopeful fatalism: progress is the result of slow, steady, remorseless forces. War, slavery, tyranny, superstition, famine, and poverty are the impelling causes that drive humans on. They work by eliminating poor types and extending the higher. Advances are fixed by hereditary transmission. The current individual is the result of changes perpetuated through a long series of past individuals. Social organization then takes its form from the individuals of which it is composed. Philosophers may teach that this does not lessen the duty of trying to reform abuses. But as generally understood, the result is fatalism. Why bother, since change can only occur through slow development of man's nature?

Yet we have reached a point where progress seems to be natural to us. We look forward confidently to greater achievements. Some even believe people may someday travel to distant planets. This theory of progression seems so natural to us amid an advancing civilization.

But, without soaring to the stars, if we simply look around the world, we are confronted with an undeniable fact—stagnant civilizations.

The majority of the human race today has no idea of progress. They look to the past as the time of human perfection. We may explain the difference between savage and civilized, saying savages are still so poorly developed that their progress is hardly apparent. But how shall we account for civilizations that progressed so far—and then stopped?

Today's Western civilization is not more advanced than India and China due to a longer period of development. We are not, as it were, adults of nature while they are children. They were civilized when we were savages. They had great cities, powerful governments, art, literature, and commerce when Europeans were living in huts and skin tents.

Yet while we progressed from this savage state to modern civilization, they stood still. If progress is the result of inevitable laws that propel people forward, how shall we account for this? These arrested civilizations stopped when they were superior in many respects to sixteenth century Europe. Moreover, both received the infusion of new ideas from conquering races with different customs and thought.

But it is not simply that current theory fails to account for these arrested civilizations. It is not merely that people have gone so far on the path of progress and then stopped. It is that people have gone so far—and then gone back. It is not merely an isolated case that thus confronts the theory — *it is the universal rule.*

Every civilization the world has ever seen has had its period of vigorous growth; of arrest and stagnation; then, decline and fall. True, our own civilization is more ad-

vanced and moves quicker than any preceding civilization. But so was Roman civilization in its day. That proves nothing about its permanence unless it is better in whatever caused the ultimate failure of its predecessors.

In truth, nothing could be further from explaining the facts of universal history than this theory that civilization is the result of natural selection. It is inconsistent with the fact that civilization has arisen at different times, and in different places, and has progressed at different rates. If improvements were fixed in man's nature, there might be occasional interruption, but in general, progress would be continuous. Advance would lead to advance, and civilization would develop into higher civilization. It is not merely the general rule, but the universal rule, that the reverse is true. The earth is the tomb of the dead empires.

In every case, the more advanced civilization, supposedly modified by heredity, has been succeeded by a fresh race coming from a lower level. The barbarians of one epoch have been the civilized people of the next. It has always been the case that, under the influences of civilization, people at first improve—and later degenerate. Every civilization that has been overwhelmed by barbarians has really perished from internal decay.

The moment this universal fact is recognized, it eliminates the theory of progress by hereditary transmission. Looking over the history of the world, advance does not coincide with heredity for any length of time. In any particular line, regression always seems to follow advance.

Can we say there is a national or race life, as there is an individual life? Does every social group have, as it were, a certain amount of energy to expend before it decays? Analogies are the most dangerous mode of thought. They

may connect similarities, yet disguise or cover up the truth. The aggregate force of a group is the sum of its individual components. A community cannot lose vital power unless the vital powers of its components are lessened. As long as members are constantly reproduced with all the fresh vigor of childhood, a community cannot grow old by loss of its powers as a person does.

Yet within this analogy lurks an obvious truth. The obstacles that finally bring progress to a halt are actually raised by the course of progress itself. The conditions that have destroyed all previous civilizations have been conditions produced by the growth of civilization itself.