

The Faith in Progress

by Andy Carlson

“We must maintain a faith in progress.” Huh? What are the words “faith” and “progress” even doing together in the same sentence? Most of us here would identify ourselves as progressives. Given that, haven’t we already made our choice for Reason, over Faith? It was back in medieval times that the battle between Faith and Reason first broke out. Faith had been the dominant force in western society for over a thousand years, and it essentially meant believing that which cannot be seen, relying for our most important knowledge on what we have been told, ultimately by the Bible. Around the thirteenth century, a few plucky theologians began arguing that we can discover some of the truths of religion simply by thinking about things, using our inborn powers of reasoning. Throughout the medieval period, however, these advocates for Reason remained the minority. While most champions of Faith came to acknowledge, somewhat grudgingly, that Reason might be able to complement Faith, perhaps filling in a few gaps in our knowledge, Faith remained the ultimate source of our knowledge of how the world works; Faith remained the place to turn for truth.

When the Scientific Revolution erupted in the seventeenth century, a whole new approach to learning washed over the western intellectual scene. Feeling their way towards what would become the modern scientific method, natural philosophers such as Descartes and Galileo began *their* search for truth, not with what they had been told, but with what they could see, with empirical evidence. They then applied their powers of reasoning to this evidence, attempting to discern the laws of nature that must underlie the physical phenomena they observed; Galileo’s law of falling bodies was one of the first such laws identified. As this approach to learning took hold, the human understanding of nature suddenly shot forward exponentially; the scientists of the seventeenth century learned more about nature in a hundred years than faith-based thinkers had learned over the previous fifteen hundred.

In the eighteenth century, the period now known as the Enlightenment, philosophers of began reflecting on the tremendous progress suddenly being made in the sciences, and they generalized beyond the scientific realm to craft an entire worldview based on the notion of progress. Since the birth of Christianity nearly two millennia before, the dominant story shaping the western worldview had been one of decline. Human beings were created into a perfect paradise, but Adam and Eve screwed things up by sinning, and the world has been going downhill ever since, sinking ever deeper into sin, until one day it will be completely destroyed, with only a few of the righteous being pulled from the wreckage. The thinkers of the Enlightenment, inspired by the progress of the sciences, turned this declinist narrative on its head. They began telling the story of a creature who is born, not into either paradise nor sin, but mere ignorance. What we do have, however, is the power to use a combination of our senses and our minds to gradually climb, both individually and collectively, from intellectual darkness into light, or Enlightenment. Now that modern science was providing a giant boost in this climb, people could start using their improved understanding of nature—including human nature—to craft a world that better served human ends. For some, this meant developing new technologies that began pulling millions of people out of the dire poverty in which the vast majority of humankind had lived to this point. For others, it meant designing new modes of political organization by which we might govern ourselves, rather being subject to the commands of some feudal lord or king.

If the Enlightenment therefore established that human beings are progressive to their very core, always looking for the next stretch of hill to climb, as modern science continued to advance through the 19th and 20th centuries, scientists began to realize that we are not the only ones climbing this hill. On the contrary, the whole story of nature, as modern science tells it, turns out to be a story of progress. To risk an over-generalization, I think we could say that progress, in its broadest sense, involves a movement from the simple to the more complex. And this is what the universe has been doing for the last thirteen

billion odd years. Immediately after the Big Bang, astrophysicists tell us, the whole universe was nothing but a soup of undifferentiated energy racing apart from itself, blown apart by the initial conflagration. As the universe then expanded and cooled, this energy began to coalesce into particles like electrons and protons. A bit more cooling, and these particles started coming together to form such light atoms as hydrogen and helium. Gravity then began pulling these atoms together into giant gas clouds, many of which continued to collapse until they formed stars. Burning with the unimaginable heat of nuclear fusion, these stars began to manufacture heavier, more complex atoms within them such as oxygen and carbon, until finally these stars exploded, strewing the heavier elements they had forged across the universe. As the resulting debris clouds later coalesced into second- and third-generation stars, many of these stars were accompanied by solid matter, which gravity drew together to form asteroids, comets, and sometimes planets.

At least one of these planets—although probably many more—turned out to be just the right temperature to allow water to exist in a liquid state, and it had just the right mix of elements to encourage certain more complex, carbon-based molecules to develop. Over the next couple of billion years, these organic molecules shuffled together to form amino acids, which in turn came together to form proteins. Finally, some of these proteins began to organize themselves into primitive, single-celled organisms. Over the next few hundred million years, the forces of evolution worked to craft multicellular organisms, which branched into a staggering array of species, including one line that ran—roughly—fish, then amphibians, then mammals, and finally primates. One particular species of primate, distinguished by its slow speed, lack of sharp teeth or claws, and poor sense of sight and smell, yet possessing an unusually large brain, began figuring out how to outfox its environment—to think its way around its own physical limitations and thereby thrive when other species, unable to adapt to changing environmental conditions, died out. These earliest of humans tended to congregate in small tribal

bands, better able to survive by working together than by going it alone. So doing, they developed a strong instinct for trusting and protecting fellow tribal members, along with an innate distrust, or even hostility, towards those who stood outside the tribe, and thus posed a potential threat. At the same time, people developed a strong sense of devotion to the alpha male who asserted control over the tribe, subjecting others to his whims, yet thereby organizing the tribe and providing it with necessary leadership in its battles against nature and other tribes. Over time, these nomadic bands of hunter-gatherers began settling down and forming larger and larger communities, first villages, then towns and city-states, then finally kingdoms, nation-states, and empires. These societies were much larger and more complex than the first tribal bands, yet most were still governed by a single alpha male, the king, even if a broad hierarchy of lords and vassals had spread out beneath him.

This social arrangement went virtually unquestioned until about the time of the Scientific Revolution, when a few scientifically-minded political philosophers struck upon a radical new idea: If nature is governed by certain universal laws, like the law of falling bodies, which apply equally to every single body in nature, whether the largest galaxy or the tiniest atom, then perhaps humankind should govern itself according to laws that do not apply differently, depending on whether you are born a king or a serf, but rather apply equally and universally, to all people. This idea was batted around European intellectual circles for a hundred years or so, until suddenly there arose an opportunity to test it out in practice. A group of English subjects, living in the New World, had thrown off the rule of the English crown, and they decided to try grounding their new nation on the proposition that all men are created equal. As goes without saying, the young United States did not immediately succeed in establishing a social order that fully realized its founding ideal of universalism. At first, it really was just men who were treated equally, not all people. More specifically, it was straight, white, Christian men whose “universal” rights were recognized; other groups were driven from their lands or enslaved. Nevertheless, the system

of government the Founding Fathers devised contained both the institutional mechanisms and the moral impetus that would drive it towards ever greater universalism, and over the past two hundred-odd years, the United States—as well as an increasing number of other countries around the world—has been slowly moving towards a social order that includes more and more people within the sphere of those whose fundamental rights, and inherent worth and dignity, are recognized. This work is not yet done; the climb is not yet finished. But the journey is underway, and it is one leg of the same upwards climb that the universe, itself, has been making over the past 13 billion years.

So, granting that progressives maintain the universe is fundamentally moving forwards and upwards, rather than going downhill, why do we need a *faith* in progress? Don't we have *evidence*, painstakingly gathered by astrophysicists and evolutionary biologists, historians and sociologists, that progress is the way of the world? And doesn't the very success of these disciplines, bringing us everything from relativity theory to democratic institutions to iPhones, mean that Reason has won the battle between Faith and Reason? So shouldn't we continue to orient our lives around evidence, the scientific method, Reason, rather than returning to a medieval glorification of Faith? Well, yes, but...

I believe we still need faith. In fact, I would argue that those of us who identify ourselves as progressives may need faith even more than those who call themselves the faithful, for at least two reasons. First, when we do turn to the evidence that both science and history provide, what we find is that progress is a tough slog. It is not a smooth, steady stroll upwards. On the contrary, as the universe gropes its way forward, it does so largely through a process of trial and error. And there are usually many more failures than successes. Just think about how evolution works. For every genetic mutation that provides an individual with an evolutionary advantage, thereby helping it to survive and pass this new trait along to its offspring, there will be a hundred mutations that prove disastrous, killing the individuals who bear them. Even in an advanced realm like science, for every Einstein who puts forward a successful theory

such as relativity, there will be a thousand others whose names we never know, because their theories did not pan out. The same thing is true in the social and political realms. Just think about how many thousands of years it took people to come up with the idea of universal rights. And just think, since this time, how long, frustrating, and often bloody the struggle for civil rights and human rights has been. This is not an accident. It rather reflects a larger, tragic fact of the universe, one that we many not like, but which we must accept: If progress is way of the world, progress is slow. Often painfully slow. And progress rarely takes a smooth, straight path. More often, progress takes a twisted, torturous road, and even under the best of circumstances, for every two steps down this road, there will be at least one step back.

What this means is that, optimistic and forward-looking as we progressives may be, we will often find ourselves in the middle of a step back. For progressives, such a step back occurs any time things are moving in the direction opposite to that of progress—any time something complex is breaking down and becoming more simplistic. Just think about getting your news from Sean Hannity rather than Walter Cronkite. In the socio-politico realm, a step back, for progressives, means a step away from the ideal of rights-based universalism, and back in the direction of the hierarchical, privilege-based tribalism from which we came. Many of us feel like our country is in the middle of such a step back right now. I don't need to say much about this; you know what I mean. Not only did we have a political candidate who made statement after statement disparaging groups who fall outside the traditional privileged class of straight, white, Christian, American men, but this political candidate won, thus suggesting a near-majority of our fellow citizens must be at least somewhat sympathetic to his anti-universalistic views. For those of us who insist on trusting the evidence before us, this has been deeply distressing. For what the evidence suggests is that progress *is not* happening, and that it *has not been* happening for some time, in the way we naively assumed. Apparently, many more people than we knew had been

retrenching into a more tribalistic mindset, rather than pushing forwards towards greater universalism. But this suggests that progress may not be the way of the world. And if the reality we face is actually one of regress, or decline, does this mean our dream of continued progress may have been nothing more than a pipe dream from the beginning?

It is times like this, I would suggest, that we need faith. A faith in progress. A faith that, even if we are in the middle of a step back, there will yet again be two steps forward. A faith that progress is still the way of the world. Nor is this a blind faith that requires blind devotion. On the contrary, it is an evidence-based faith, backed by all sorts of data. To renew our faith in progress, therefore, what is required is not that we close our eyes to the evidence before us. Rather, we just need to take a step back from the maddening frustrations of present moment to consider all of the evidence, to glance back at the whole sweep of history—whether American history, human history, or even the history of the universe. This “big picture” we thereby catch a glimpse of can help to remind us that progress really is the way of the world—that twists and turns and bumps and bruises are to be expected along the way, but that for the past 13 billion years, progress has been persevering, and hence we *can* expect progress to reassert itself once again, no matter how troubling things may look today.

Nor is it only for our own mental health that we progressives need faith so badly. Rather, progress itself requires that we maintain our faith. On the traditional Christian view, the world may have been heading down the tubes, but no matter how royally we humans had screwed things up, the faithful still knew that God was still there to uphold the moral universe, and that God is both perfect and patient. With God therefore being able to outlast any periods of human iniquity, believers could remain confident that God’s plan to build a new paradise for the righteous would still get realized in the end. For many of us who identify as progressives, however, we do not have this same sort of God as a backstop. We may realize that progress is not a human invention, but rather something the universe has been doing for

billions of years, and will keep doing, in its own way, even if we humans manage to do something stupid like destroying ourselves in a nuclear war. But we also know that the current leg of the universe's upward journey—the movement of society towards a more universalistic mode of organization—is a uniquely human leg of the trip. The stars and planets did not come up with the idea of universal rights, nor do cows, monkeys or even dolphins practice respect for all. Instituting moral universalism may well be in keeping with the universe's 13 billion-year struggle towards greater complexity, yet this particular leap is a purely human enterprise. And there is no guarantee it will succeed. As we have already seen, progress requires experimentation, and many more experiments fail than succeed. Thus, even if we do not blow ourselves up, it is entirely possible that we could sink back from our brief foray into universalism and permanently settle back into a more tribal mode of existence. There are plenty of signs to suggest this is where our country, and our world, is headed today, from the Brexit vote to the rise of right-wing nationalism in Europe to Trumpism. And this downward slide will just continue if people such as ourselves do not fight back on behalf of universal ideals, just like so many of our predecessors have fought for universal rights over the past centuries, often at great cost to themselves. Yet, we are unlikely to fight for progress if we do not believe we have a chance of success. So we need to believe. We need to keep the faith, even when the evidence immediately before us is not encouraging. You could even say we have a moral duty to remain convinced that, if the arc of the moral universe is long, it nonetheless bends towards justice. This arc may not be as smooth as we would like. The road may twist and turn; it may be bumpy and bloody. But we must continue to believe that, in the long run, this arc, this road will bend towards justice. And in the long run, it will do so, because we believe that it can, and because we keep fighting to make it so. May it be so.