

CAN ONE LIVE AFTER AUSCHWITZ?

A Philosophical Reader

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Progress

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For a theoretical account of the category of progress, it is necessary to scrutinize the category so closely that it loses its semblance of obviousness, in both its positive and its negative usages. And yet such proximity also makes the account more difficult. Even more than other concepts, the concept of progress dissolves upon attempts to specify its exact meaning, for instance, what progresses and what does not. Whoever wants to define the concept precisely easily destroys what he is aiming at. The subaltern prudence that refuses to speak of progress before it can distinguish progress in what, of what, and in relation to what displaces the unity of the moments, which within the concept reciprocally elaborate each other, into a mere juxtaposition. By insisting on exactitude where the impossibility of the unambiguous appertains to the subject matter itself, dogmatic epistemology misses its object, sabotages insight, and helps to perpetuate the bad by zealously forbidding reflection upon what, in the age of both utopian and absolutely destructive possibilities, the consciousness of those entangled would like to discover: whether there is progress. Like every philosophical term, "progress" has its equivocations; and as in any such term, these equivocations also register a commonality. What at this time should be understood by the term "progress" one knows vaguely, but precisely: for just this reason one cannot employ the concept roughly enough. To use the term pedantically merely cheats it out of what it promises: an answer to the doubt and the hope that things will finally get better, that people will at

last be able to breathe a sigh of relief. For this reason alone one cannot say precisely what progress should mean to people, because the crisis of the situation is precisely that while everyone feels the crisis, the words bringing resolution are missing. Only those reflections about progress have truth that immerse themselves in progress and yet maintain distance, withdrawing from paralyzing facts and specialized meanings. Today reflections of this kind come to a point in the contemplation of whether humanity¹ is capable of preventing catastrophe. The forms of humanity's own global societal constitution threaten its life, if a self-conscious global subject does not develop and intervene. The possibility of progress, of averting the most extreme, total disaster, has migrated to this global subject alone. Everything else involving progress must crystallize around it. Material needs, which long seemed to mock progress, have been potentially eliminated; thanks to the present state of the technical forces of production no one on the planet need suffer deprivation anymore. Whether there will be further want and oppression—which are the same thing—will be decided solely by the avoidance of catastrophe through the rational establishment of the whole society as humanity. Kant's sketch of a doctrine of progress, indeed, was anchored to the "idea of the human being":^a "The highest purpose of nature—i.e. the development of all natural capacities—can be fulfilled for mankind only in society, and nature intends that man should accomplish this, and indeed all his appointed ends, by his own efforts. This purpose can be fulfilled only in a society which has not only the greatest freedom, and therefore a continual antagonism among its members, but also the most precise specification and preservation of the limits of this freedom in order that it can co-exist with the freedom of others. The highest task which nature has set for mankind must therefore be that of establishing a society in which *freedom under external laws* would be combined to the greatest possible extent with irresistible force, in other words of establishing a perfectly *just civil constitution*. For only through the solution and fulfillment of this task can nature accomplish its other intentions with our species."^b The concept of history, in which progress would have its place,

^a Immanuel Kant, "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose," trans. H. B. Nisbet, in *Political Writings*, ed. Hans Reiss, 2d ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 43, "Second Proposition" (translated as "an idea in [man's] mind").

is emphatic, the Kantian universal or cosmopolitan concept, not one of any particular sphere of life. But the dependence of progress on the totality comes back to bite progress. An awareness of this problem animates Benjamin's polemic against the coupling of progress and humanity in "Theses on the Concept of History," perhaps the most weighty critique of the idea of progress held by those who are reckoned in a crudely political fashion as progressives: "Progress as pictured in the minds of Social Democrats was, first of all, the progress of humanity itself (and not just advances in people's skills and knowledge)."^c As little as humanity *tel quel* progresses by the advertising slogan of the ever new and improved, so little can there be an idea of progress without the idea of humanity; the sense of the Benjamin passage should then also be more a reproach that the Social Democrats confused progress of skills and knowledge with that of humanity, rather than that he wanted to eradicate progress from philosophical reflection. In Benjamin progress obtains legitimation in the doctrine that the idea of the happiness of unborn generations—without which one cannot speak of progress—inalienably includes the idea of redemption.^d This confirms the concentration of progress on the survival of the species: no progress is to be assumed that would imply that humanity in general already existed and therefore could progress. Rather, progress would be the very establishment of humanity in the first place, whose prospect opens up in the face of its extinction. This entails, as Benjamin further teaches, that the concept of universal history cannot be saved; it is plausible only as long as one can believe in the illusion of an already existing humanity, coherent in itself and moving upward as a unity. If humanity remains entrapped by the totality it itself fashions, then, as Kafka said, no progress has taken place at all,² while mere totality nevertheless allows progress to be entertained in thought. This can be elucidated most simply by the definition of humanity as that which excludes absolutely nothing. If humanity were a totality that no longer held within it any limiting principle, then it would also be free of the coercion that subjects all its members to such a principle and thereby would no longer be a totality: no forced unity. The passage

^b Ibid., pp. 45–46.

^c Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968), p. 260, thesis 13; trans. modified.

^d See *ibid.*, pp. 253–54, thesis 2.

from Schiller's "Ode to Joy," "And who never could, let him steal away / weeping from this league,"³ which in the name of all-encompassing love banishes whoever has not been granted it, unintentionally admits the truth about the bourgeois, at once totalitarian and particular, concept of humanity. In the verse, what the one who is unloved or incapable of love undergoes in the name of the idea of humanity unmasks this idea, no differently from the affirmative violence with which Beethoven's music hammers it home; it is hardly a coincidence that the poem with the word "steal" in the humiliation of the one who is joyless, and to whom therefore joy is once again denied, evokes associations from the spheres of property and criminology. Perpetual antagonism is integral to the concept of totality, as in the politically totalitarian systems; thus the evil mythical festivals in fairy tales are defined by those who are not invited. Only with the decomposition of the principle of totality that establishes limits, even if that principle were merely the commandment to resemble totality, would there be humanity and not its deceptive image.

Historically the conception of humanity was already implicit in the middle Stoa's theorem of the universal state, which objectively at least amounted to progress, no matter how strange its idea otherwise might have been to pre-Christian antiquity. The fact that this Stoic theorem immediately reconciled itself with the founding of Rome's imperial claims betrays something of what the concept of progress underwent through its identification with increasing "skills and knowledge." Existing humanity is substituted for the unborn generations, and history immediately becomes salvation history. That was the prototype for the idea of progress until Hegel and Marx. In the Augustinian *civitas dei* this idea is connected to redemption by Christ, as historically successful redemption; only an already redeemed humanity can be seen as though, after it had been chosen and by dint of the grace it had been vouchsafed, it were moving in the continuum of time toward the heavenly kingdom. Perhaps it was the unfortunate fate of later thinking about progress that it inherited from Augustine the immanent teleology and the conception of humanity as the subject of all progress, while Christian soteriology faded into speculations about the philosophy of history. In this way the idea of progress was taken up into the *civitas terrena*, its Augustinian counterpart. Even in the dualistic Kant, the *civitas terrena* should progress according to its own principle, its "nature." Within such enlightenment, however, which first of all puts progress

toward humanity in people's own hands and thereby concretizes the idea of progress as one to be realized, lurks the conformist confirmation of what merely exists. It receives the aura of redemption after redemption has failed to appear and evil has persisted undiminished. This incalculably far-ranging modification of the concept of progress could not have been avoided. Just as the emphatic claim of successful redemption became a protest in the face of post-Christian history, so, inversely, in the Augustinian theologoumenon of an immanent movement of the species toward the blessed state there already lay the motive of irresistible secularization. The temporality of progress itself, its simple concept, links it to the empirical world; yet without such a temporality the heinous aspects of the way of the world would first truly be immortalized in thought, the Creation itself would become the work of a Gnostic demon. In Augustine one can recognize the inner constellation of the ideas of progress, redemption, and the immanent course of history, which should not dissolve into one another, lest they reciprocally destroy each other. If progress is equated with redemption as transcendental intervention *per se*, then it forfeits, along with the temporal dimension, its intelligible meaning and evaporates into a historical theology. But if progress is mediatized into history, then the idolization of history threatens and with it, in the reflection of the concept as in the reality, the absurdity that it is progress itself that inhibits progress. Expedient expositions of an immanent-transcendent concept of progress pass sentence on themselves by their very nomenclature.

The greatness of the Augustinian doctrine was its for-the-first-time. It contains all the abysses of the idea of progress and strives to master them theoretically. The structure of his doctrine unabatedly expresses the antinomian character of progress. Already in Augustine, as then again at the height of secular philosophy of history since Kant, there is an antagonism at the center of this historical movement that would be progress since it is directed toward the kingdom of heaven; the movement is the struggle between the earthly and the heavenly. All thought about progress since then has received its draft from the weight of the historically mounting disaster. While redemption in Augustine forms the *telos* of history, the history neither leads directly to redemption, nor is redemption completely unmediated by history. Redemption is embedded in history by the divine world plan but is opposed to it after the Fall. Augustine realized that redemption and history can exist neither without each other nor within each other but

only in tension, the accumulated energy of which finally desires nothing less than the sublation of the historical world itself. For the sake of nothing less than this, however, can the idea of progress still be thought in the age of catastrophe. Progress should be no more ontologized, unreflectedly ascribed to Being, than should decline, though indeed the latter seems to be the preference of recent philosophy. Too little of what is good has power in the world for progress to be expressed in a predicative judgment about the world, but there can be no good, not a trace of it, without progress. If, according to a mystical doctrine, all innerworldly events down to the most insignificant happenstance are of momentous consequence for the life of the absolute itself, then certainly something similar is true for progress. Every individual trait in the nexus of deception is nonetheless relevant to its possible end. Good is what wrenches itself free, finds a language, opens its eyes. In its condition of wresting free, it is interwoven in history that, without being organized unequivocally toward reconciliation, in the course of its movement allows the possibility of redemption to flash up.

According to conventional thought, the moments in which the concept of progress has its life are partly philosophical and partly societal. Without society the notion of progress would be completely empty; all its elements are abstracted from society. If society had not passed from a hunting and gathering horde to agriculture, from slavery to the formal freedom of subjects, from the fear of demons to reason, from deprivation to provisions against epidemics and famine and to the overall improvement of living conditions, if one thus sought *more philosophico* to keep the idea of progress pure, say, to spin it out of the essence of time, then it would not have any content at all. But once the meaning of a concept necessitates moving to facticity, this movement cannot be stopped arbitrarily. The idea of reconciliation itself—the transcendent *telos* of all progress, measured by finite criteria—cannot be broken loose from the immanent process of enlightenment that removes fear and, by erecting the human being as an answer to human beings' questions, wins the concept of humanitarianism that alone rises above the immanence of the world. Nonetheless, progress is not tantamount to society, is not identical with it; indeed, like society, progress is at times its own opposite. Philosophy in general, as long as it was at all useful, was also a doctrine of society, except that ever since it consigned itself without demur to societal power, philosophy has professedly had to isolate itself from society; the purity into which philosophy re-

gressed is the bad conscience of its impurity, its complicity with the world. The concept of progress is philosophical in that it articulates the movement of society while³ contradicting it. Having arisen societally, the concept of progress requires critical confrontation with real society. The aspect of redemption, no matter how secularized, cannot be removed from the concept of progress. The fact that it can be reduced neither to facticity nor to the idea indicates its own contradiction. For the element of enlightenment within it, which terminates in the reconciliation with nature by soothing nature's terror, is kindred to the aspect of the domination of nature.⁴ The model of progress, even if displaced onto the godhead, is the control of external and internal, or human, nature. The oppression exercised by such control, which has its highest form of intellectual reflection in the identity principle of reason, reproduces this antagonism. The more identity is posited by imperious spirit, the more injustice is done to the nonidentical. The injustice is passed on through the resistance of the nonidentical. The resistance in turn reinforces the oppressing principle, while what is oppressed, poisoned, limps along further. Everything within the whole progresses: only the whole itself to this day does not progress. Goethe's "And all pressing, all struggling / Is eternal calm in God the Master"⁵ codifies this experience, and the Hegelian doctrine of the process of world spirit, the absolute dynamic, as a returning into itself or even its game with itself comes very close to the Goethean aphorism. Only one *nota bene* could be added to the sum of its intuition: that this whole stands still in its movement, that it knows nothing beyond itself, for it is not the divine absolute, but rather its opposite rendered unfamiliar by thought. Kant neither bowed to this deception nor absolutized the rupture. When, in the most sublime passage of his philosophy of history, he teaches that the antagonism, the entanglement of progress in myth, in nature's hold upon the domination of nature, in short, in the realm of unfreedom, tends by means of its own law toward the realm of freedom—Hegel's "cunning of reason" later came out of this⁶—then this says nothing less than that the conditions for the possibility of reconciliation are its contradiction and that the conditions for the possibility of freedom are unfreedom.⁷ Kant's doctrine stands at a watershed. It conceptualizes the idea of this reconciliation as immanent in the antagonistic "development" by deriving it from a design nature harbors for human beings. By contrast, the dogmatic-rationalistic rigidity with which such a design is presumed in nature—as

though nature itself were not included in the development and its own concept thereby altered—is the impress of the violence the identity-positing spirit inflicts upon nature. The static quality of the concept of nature is a function of the dynamic concept of reason; the more this concept usurps from the realm of the nonidentical, the more nature becomes a residual *caput mortuum*, and precisely this makes it easier to equip nature with the qualities of eternity that sanctify its ends. The idea of "design" cannot be conceived at all except with the provision that reason is attributed to nature itself. Still, following metaphysical custom, which Kant in this passage uses when speaking of the concept of nature, bringing it close to the transcendent thing-in-itself, nature remains as much a product of spirit as it is in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. If spirit conquered nature, by making itself at every stage equal to nature according to Bacon's program, then at the Kantian stage spirit has projected itself back onto nature, insofar as nature is absolute and not merely constituted, for the sake of a possibility of reconciliation in which, however, the primacy of the subject is not in the least diminished. In the passage where Kant comes closest to the concept of reconciliation, in the thought that the antagonism terminates in its abolition, appears the catchword of a society in which freedom is "bound up with irresistible power."⁸ Yet even the talk of power recalls the dialectic of progress itself. While the perpetual oppression that unleashed progress at the same time always arrested it, this oppression—as the emancipation of consciousness—first made the antagonism and the whole extent of the deception recognizable at all, the prerequisite for settling the antagonism. The progress that the eternal invariant brought forth is that finally progress can begin, at any moment. Should the image of progressing humanity remind one of a giant who, after sleeping from time immemorial, slowly stirs himself awake and then storms forth and tramples everything that gets in his way, nonetheless, his unwieldy awakening is the sole potential for attaining political maturity—that nature's tenacity, into which even progress integrates itself, will not have the final word. For aeons the question of progress made no sense. The question arose only after the dynamic became free, from which the idea of freedom could then be extrapolated. If progress—since Augustine the translation of the natural course of life between birth and death of the individual onto the species as a whole—may be as mythical as the notion of the course the command of fate prescribes to the constellations, then the idea of progress is just as

much inherently antimythological, exploding the circulation to which it belongs. Progress means: to step out of the magic spell, even out of the spell of progress, which is itself nature, in that humanity becomes aware of its own inbred nature and brings to a halt the domination it exacts upon nature and through which domination by nature continues. In this way it could be said that progress occurs where it ends.

This imago of progress is encoded in a concept that all camps today unanimously defame, that of decadence. The artists of *Jugendstil* declared their adherence to it. Certainly the reason for this is not only that they wished to express their own historical situation, which in many ways seemed to them biological morbidity. Their urgency to immortalize their condition in an image was animated by the impulse—and in this they agreed profoundly with the *Lebensphilosophen*—that truth was preserved only in that part of them that appeared to prophesy their own and the world's downfall. Hardly anyone could have expressed this more concisely than Peter Altenberg: "Mistreatment of horses. It will stop only when passersby become so irritable and decadent that they, no longer in control of themselves, mad and desperate in such cases, commit crimes and shoot down the cringing and cowardly coachman. . . . Inability to tolerate the mistreatment of horses is the deed of the decadent neurasthenic man of the future! Until now people have had only enough wretched strength not to have to bother with *other peoples'* affairs of this sort."^e Thus Nietzsche, who condemned pity, collapsed in Turin when he saw a coachman beating his horse. Decadence was the *fata morgana* of this progress that has not yet begun. The ideal, even if it be narrow-minded and willfully obstinate, of a complete, life-renouncing distance from any type of purpose was the reverse image of the false purposefulness of industry, in which everything exists for something else. The irrationalism of *décadence* denounced the unreason of the dominant reason. A separated, arbitrary, privileged happiness is sacred to irrationalism because it alone vouches for what has escaped, while that immediate notion of happiness of the whole—according to the current liberalist formula, the greatest possible happiness for the greatest possible number of people—barter happiness away to the apparatus, the sworn enemy of happiness, whose only goal is self-preservation, even where happiness is proclaimed to be the goal. In just such a spirit the sen-

^e Peter Altenberg, *Auswahl aus seinen Büchern*, ed. Karl Kraus (Vienna: Anton Scholl, 1932), pp. 122ff.

timent dawns on Altenberg that extreme individuation is the placeholder for humanity: "For insofar as an individuality tending in some direction or other has a justification . . . , it should be nothing other than a first, a forerunner in some organic development of the human in general that yet *lies in the natural course of possible development for all human beings!* It is worthless to be '*the only one*,' a miserable trifling of fate with the individual. To be '*the first*' is everything! . . . He knows that the whole of mankind comes behind him! He is merely sent in advance by God! . . . *All* people will one day be wholly fine, wholly delicate, wholly loving. . . . *True* individuality means being alone and *in advance* that which later *everyone, everyone* must become!"^f Humanity can be thought only through this extreme form of differentiation, individuation, not as a comprehensive generic concept.

The prohibition against any brushed-in portrait of utopia that the dialectical theories of both Hegel and Marx issued keenly sniffs out any betrayal of utopia. Decadence is the nerve center where the dialectic of progress becomes, as it were, bodily appropriated by consciousness. Whoever rails and rages against decadence inevitably takes up the standpoint of sexual taboo, the violation of which constitutes the antinomian ritual of decadence. In the insistence upon this taboo, for the sake of the unity of nature-dominating ego, there rumbles the voice of deceived, unreflective progress. Yet for that reason progress can be convicted of its own irrationality because it always bewitches the means it uses into the ends it truncates. Of course, the opposing position of decadence remains abstract, and not least of all because of this it incurred the curse of being ridiculous. Decadence mistakes the particularity of happiness, which it must insist upon, for immediate utopia, for realized humanity, whereas decadence itself is disfigured by unfreedom, privilege, and class domination; it indeed owns up to all of these, but also glorifies them. Its wish-image, unfettered erotic availability, would also be perpetual slavery, as in Wilde's *Salomé*.

The explosive tendency of progress is not merely the Other to the movement of a progressing domination of nature, not just its abstract negation; rather, it requires the unfolding of reason through the very domination of nature. Only reason, the principle of societal domination inverted into the subject, would be capable of abolishing this domination. The possibility of wresting free is effectuated by the pressure of negativity. Yet reason, which wants to escape nature, first of all shapes nature into

^f *Ibid.*, pp. 135ff.

what it must fear. The concept of progress is dialectical in a strictly un-metaphorical sense, in that its organon, reason, is one; a nature-dominating level and a reconciling level do not exist separate and disjunct within reason, rather, both share all its determinations. The one moment inverts into its other only in that it literally reflects itself, in that reason applies reason to itself and in its self-restriction emancipates itself from the demon of identity. Kant's incomparable greatness proved itself not least in that he incorruptibly maintained the unity of reason even in its contradictory uses—the nature-dominating, what he called theoretical, causal-mechanical, and the power of judgment snuggling up to nature in reconciliation—and displaced reason's difference strictly onto the self-limitation of nature-dominating reason. A metaphysical interpretation of Kant should not impute a latent ontology to him⁹ but instead read the structure of his entire thought as a dialectic of enlightenment, which the dialectician par excellence, Hegel, does not notice, because in the consciousness of Unitary Reason he erases its limits and thereby falls into the mythical totality he considers to be "reconciled" in the absolute idea. Progress comprehends not merely, as in the Hegelian philosophy of history, the compass of what belongs to dialectic; rather, it is dialectical in its own concept, like the categories of the *Science of Logic*. Absolute domination of nature is absolute submission to nature and yet arches beyond this in self-reflection, myth that demythologizes myth. But the claim of the subject would then no longer be theoretical and also not contemplative. The notion of the domination of pure reason as a being-in-itself, separated from praxis, subjugates even the subject, deforms it into an instrument to be used toward an end. The beneficial self-reflection of reason, however, would be its transition to praxis: reason would see through itself as a moment of praxis and would recognize, instead of mistaking itself for the absolute, that it is a mode of behavior. The antimythological element in progress cannot be conceived without the practical act that reins in the delusion of spirit's autarky. Hence progress can hardly be ascertained by disinterested contemplation.

Those who from time immemorial and with perpetually new phrases want the same thing—that there be no progress—have the most pernicious pretense of all. It is sustained by the false inference that because there has been no progress up until now, there never will be any. It presents the inconsolable return of the same as the message of Being, which must be hearkened to and respected, although Being itself, which has had this mes-

sage put into its mouth, is a cryptogram of myth, the liberation from which would be a moment of freedom. In the translation of historical desperation into a norm that must be adhered to, there echoes that abominable construal of the theological doctrine of original sin, the idea that the corruption of human nature legitimates domination, that radical evil legitimates evil. This conviction wields a catch phrase with which it obscurantistically condemns progress in modern times: the belief in progress. The attitude of those who defame the concept of progress as insipid and positivistic is usually positivistic itself. They explain the way of the world, which repeatedly thwarted progress and which also always was progress, as evidence that the world plan does not tolerate progress and that whoever does not renounce it commits sacrilege. In self-righteous profundity one takes the side of the terrible, slandering the idea of progress according to the schema that whatever human beings fail at is ontologically refused them, and that in the name of their finitude and mortality they have the duty to wholeheartedly appropriate both of these qualities. A sober response to this false reverence would be that while indeed progress from the slingshot to the megaton bomb may well amount to satanic laughter, in the age of the bomb a condition can be envisaged for the first time in which violence might vanish altogether. Nonetheless, a theory of progress must absorb whatever is cogent in the invectives against belief in progress as an antidote to the mythology from which such a theory suffers. Least of all would it befit a doctrine of progress that has been brought to self-consciousness to deny that a shallow doctrine exists simply because derision of the latter belongs to the treasure chamber of ideology. Despite Condorcet, the much-maligned idea of progress of the eighteenth century is less shallow than that of the nineteenth: in Rousseau the doctrine of radical perfectibility is combined with that of the radical corruptness of human nature. As long as the bourgeois class was oppressed, at least in terms of political forms, it took "progress" as its slogan to oppose the prevailing stationary condition: the slogan's pathos was the echo of this situation. Not until the bourgeois class had occupied the decisive positions of power did the concept of progress degenerate into the ideology that ideological profundity then accused the eighteenth century of harboring. The nineteenth century came up against the limit of bourgeois society, which could not fulfill its own reason, its own ideals of freedom, justice, and humane immediacy, without running the risk of its order being abolished. This made

it necessary for society to credit itself, untruthfully, with having achieved what it had failed. This falsity, with which the educated citizens then reproached the belief in progress held by the uneducated or reformist labor leaders, was an expression of bourgeois apologetics. Of course, when the shadows of imperialism descended, the bourgeoisie quickly abandoned that ideology and resorted to the desperate one of counterfeiting the negativity that the belief in progress had disputed away into a metaphysical substance.

Whoever rubs his hands with humility and satisfaction while remembering the sinking of the Titanic, because the iceberg supposedly dealt the first blow to the idea of progress, forgets or suppresses the fact that this accident, which, incidentally, was by no means fateful, occasioned measures that in the following half century protected sea voyages from unplanned natural catastrophes. Part of the dialectic of progress is that historical setbacks, which themselves are instigated by the principle of progress—what could be more progressive than the race for the blue ribbon?—also provide the condition needed for humanity to find the means to avert them in the future. The nexus of deception surrounding progress reaches beyond itself. It is mediated to that order in which the category of progress would first gain its justification, in that the devastation wrought by progress can be made good again, if at all, only by its own forces, never by the restoration of the preceding conditions that were its victim. The progress of the domination of nature, which, in Benjamin's simile, proceeds in the reverse direction of that true progress that would have its *telos* in redemption, nevertheless is not entirely without hope.¹⁰ Both concepts of progress communicate with each other, not only in averting the ultimate disaster, but rather in every actual form of easing the persistent suffering.

The belief in interiority is felt to be a corrective to the belief in progress. But not this interiority, not the ability of human beings to improve, guarantees progress. Already in Augustine the notion of progress—he could not yet use the word—is as ambivalent as the dogma of a successful redemption in the face of an unredeemed world demands it to be. On the one hand, progress is historical according to the six epochs of the world that correspond to the periodization of human life; on the other hand, progress is not of this world but internal, in Augustine's language, mystical. *Civitas terrena* and *civitas dei* are held to be invisible realms, and no one can say who among the living belongs to the one or the other; that decision is made by the secret election to grace, the same divine will that

moves history in accordance with its plan. Yet already in Augustine, according to the insight of Karl Heinz Haag, the interiorization of progress allows the world to be assigned to the powers that be, and therefore, as with Luther later, Christianity is to be commended because it preserves the political state.¹¹ Platonic transcendence, which in Augustine is fused with the Christian idea of salvation history, makes it possible to cede the this-worldly to the principle against which progress is conceived and to allow, only on the Day of Judgment and in spite of all philosophy of history, the abrupt restoration of undisturbed creation. This ideological mark has remained to this day engraved on the interiorization of progress. As opposed to this mark, interiority itself, as a historical product, is a function of progress or of its contrary. The constitutive qualities of human beings make up merely one aspect in innerworldly progress and nowadays certainly not the primary one. The argument claiming that there is no progress because none occurs within interiority is false, because it feigns an immediately humane society, in its historical process, whose law is based on what human beings themselves are. But it is the essence of historical objectivity that whatever is made by human beings, their institutions in the broadest sense, evolves independently of its creators and becomes second nature. That false conclusion then permits the thesis of the constancy of human nature, whether it be extolled or deplored. Innerworldly progress has its mythical aspect, as Hegel and Marx recognized, in that it occurs above the heads of subjects and forms them in its own image; it is foolish to deny progress just because it cannot completely manage its objects, the subjects. In order to halt what Schopenhauer called the wheel that unrolls itself, surely that human potential is needed that is not entirely absorbed by the necessity of historical movement.¹² The idea that progress offers a way out is blocked today because the subjective aspects of spontaneity are beginning to atrophy in the historical process. To desperately posit an isolated, allegedly ontological concept of the subjectively spontaneous against societal omnipotence, as the French existentialists do, is too optimistic, even as an expression of despair; one cannot conceive of a versatile spontaneity outside of its entwinement with society. It would be illusory and idealistic to hope that spontaneity would be enough here and now. One cherishes such hope solely in a historical hour in which no support for hope is in sight. Existentialist decisionism is merely the reflex reaction to the seamless totality of the world spirit. Nevertheless, this totality itself is also semblance. The rigidified institutions, the relations of production, are

not Being as such, but even in their omnipotence they are man-made and revocable. In their relationship to the subjects from which they originate and which they enclose, they remain thoroughly antagonistic. Not only does the whole demand its own modification in order not to perish, but by virtue of its antagonistic essence it is also impossible for it to extort that complete identity with human beings that is relished in negative utopias. For this reason innerworldly progress, adversary of the other progress, at the same time remains open to the possibility of this other, no matter how little it is able to incorporate this possibility within its own law.

Yet it can be plausibly asserted that things do not proceed with as much vim and vigor in the intellectual spheres—art, especially law, politics, anthropology—as in the material forces of production. Hegel himself, and Jochmann more extremely, expressed this about art; the idea of non-synchrony in the movement of superstructure and substructure was then formulated as a principle by Marx in the proposition that the superstructure revolutionizes itself more slowly than the substructure.¹³ Apparently no one was astonished that spirit, fleeting and mobile, should be thought stationary in contrast to the *rudis indigestaque moles* of what, even in the context of society, is not named “material” for nothing. Analogously, psychoanalysis teaches that the unconscious, from which even consciousness and the objective forms of spirit are fed, supposedly is ahistorical. Certainly that which itself is subsumed in a brutal classification under the concept of culture and which contains within itself even subjective consciousness raises a perennial objection to the ever-sameness of what merely exists. But it perennially finds its objection futile. The ever-sameness of the whole, human beings’ dependence upon vital necessities, the material conditions of their self-preservation, hides, as it were, behind its own dynamic, the growing increase of alleged societal wealth, and ideology benefits from this. However, it can easily be proved to spirit, which would like to transcend this situation and which is the actual dynamic principle, that it has failed, and this pleases ideology no less. Reality produces the semblance of developing upward and remains *au fond* what it was. Spirit, which, to the extent that it is not a part of the apparatus, seeks innovation, in its hopelessly repeated attempts only knocks its head in, as when an insect flying toward the light collides with a windowpane. Spirit is not what it enthrones itself as, the Other, the transcendent in its purity, but rather is also a piece of natural history. Because natural history has appeared in society as a dynamic since the time of the Eleatics and Plato, spirit imagines that

it has the Other, that which is removed from the *civitas terrena* in the immutable self-same, and its forms—logic, above all, which is latently inherent in all that is spiritual—are tailored accordingly. In these forms spirit is seized by something stationary, against which spirit struggles while remaining a part of it. Reality’s spell over spirit prevents spirit from doing what its own concept wants to do when faced with the merely existent: to fly. Because more tender and fleeting, spirit is all the more susceptible to oppression and mutilation. As the placeholder of what progress could be, above and beyond all progress, spirit stands askew to the progress that takes place, and this in turn bestows honor upon the placeholder. Through less than complete complicity with progress, spirit reveals what progress is really up to. However, wherever it can be judged with reason that spirit as being-for-itself progresses, there spirit itself participates in the domination of nature simply because it is not, as it fancies itself to be, *χωρίς*, but rather is entwined with that life process from which it separated itself in conformity with the law of this process. All progress in the cultural spheres is that of the domination of material, of technique. The truth content of spirit, on the contrary, is not indifferent to this. A quartet by Mozart is not simply better made than a symphony of the Mannheim school, but by being better constructed and more consistent it also ranks higher in an emphatic sense. By contrast, it is problematic to determine whether, thanks to the development of perspectival technique, the painting of the high Renaissance truly surpassed so-called primitive painting, whether the best of artworks occur in the incomplete mastery of the material, as a for-the-first-time, something emerging abruptly that vanishes as soon as it becomes a readily available technique. Progress in the mastery of material in art is in no way immediately identical with the progress of art itself. If the gold background had been defended against the use of perspective in the early Renaissance, that would have been not only reactionary but also objectively untrue because contrary to what its own logic demanded; even the complexity of progress unfolds itself only in the course of history. *À la longue* what should persevere and prevail in the afterlife of spiritual creations beyond their momentary progressiveness is their quality, ultimately their truth content, but this only by virtue of a process of progressing consciousness. The notion of the canonical essence of Greek antiquity, which still survived in the dialecticians Hegel and Marx, is not simply an undissolved rudiment of the cultural tradition but in all its dubiousness also the precipitate of a dialectical insight. In order to express its contents, art, and

in the spiritual sphere not only art, must inevitably absorb the increasing domination of nature. However, it thereby also works surreptitiously against what it wants to say and distances itself from what it nonverbally, nonconceptually opposes to the increasing domination of nature. This might help explain why the apparent continuity of so-called intellectual developments often breaks off, indeed often with an appeal—no matter how motivated by misunderstanding—for a return to nature. The blame for this lies with—among other, especially social, aspects—the fact that spirit is terrified by the contradiction in its own development and that it tries—vainly, of course—to rectify this contradiction through recourse to what it has estranged itself from and what it therefore mistakenly believes to be invariant.

The paradox that there is some progress and yet there is none is perhaps nowhere so graphic as in philosophy, where the very idea of progress has its home. No matter how compelling might be the transitions, mediated by critique, from one authentic philosophy to another, nonetheless the assertion that there was progress between them—Plato and Aristotle, Kant and Hegel, or even in a philosophical universal history as a whole—remains dubious. But the cause for this is not the invariance of the alleged philosophical object, that of true Being, whose concept has dissolved irrevocably in the history of philosophy; nor would a merely aesthetic view of philosophy be defensible that places an imposing architecture of thought or even the ominous great thinkers higher than the truth, which in no way coincides with the immanent closure and rigor of these philosophies. It is a completely pharisaical and false verdict to conclude that progress in philosophy leads it away from what the jargon of bad philosophy baptizes as its concern: in this way, need would become the guarantor of truth content. On the contrary, the unavoidable and dubious progress of that which receives its limit from its theme—the limit—is posited by the principle of reason, without which philosophy cannot be thought, because without this principle there can be no thought. One concept after another plunges into the Orcus of the mythical.¹⁴ Philosophy lives in symbiosis with science and cannot break from it without turning into dogmatism and ultimately relapsing into mythology. Yet the content of philosophy should be to express what is neglected or excised by science, by the division of labor, by the forms of reflection entailed by the bustle of self-preservation. For this reason philosophy's progress simultaneously recedes from the necessary goal of its progress; the force of experience that philos-

ophy registers is weakened the more it is honed down by the scientific apparatus. The movement philosophy as a whole performs is the pure self-sameness of its principle. Every time it pays the price of what it would need to conceptually grasp and can grasp only by virtue of self-reflection, through which it relinquishes the standpoint of stubborn immediacy or, in Hegelian terminology, the philosophy of reflection. Philosophical progress is deceitful because the tighter it connects arguments, the more airtight and unassailable its propositions become, the more it becomes identity-thinking. Philosophical progress weaves a net over its objects that, by plugging up the holes of what it is not, impudently thrusts itself in place of its object of inquiry. Indeed, finally it seems, in harmony with the actual retrogressive tendencies of society, that vengeance is exacted on the progress of philosophy for having hardly been progress at all. To assume that there has been progress from Hegel to the logical positivists, who dismiss him as obscure or meaningless, is nothing but funny. Even philosophy is not immune to falling prey to that kind of regression, whether into narrow-minded scientification or into the denial of reason, which certainly is no better than the maliciously derided belief in progress.

In bourgeois society, which created the concept of total progress, the convergence of this concept with the negation of progress originates in this society's principle: exchange. Exchange is the rational form of mythical ever-sameness. In the like-for-like of every act of exchange, the one act revokes the other; the balance of accounts is null. If the exchange was just, then nothing should really have happened, and everything stays the same. At the same time the assertion of progress, which conflicts with this principle, is true to the extent that the doctrine of like-for-like is a lie. From time immemorial, not just since the capitalist appropriation of surplus value in the commodity exchange of labor power for the cost of its reproduction, the societally more powerful contracting party receives more than the other. By means of this injustice, something new occurs in the exchange: the process, which proclaims its own stasis, becomes dynamic. The truth of the expansion feeds on the lie of the equality. Societal acts are supposed to reciprocally sublimate themselves in the overall system and yet do not. Wherever bourgeois society satisfies the concept it cherishes as its own, it knows no progress; wherever it knows progress, it violates its own law, in which this offense already lies, and by means of the inequality immortalizes the injustice progress is supposed to transcend. But this injustice is at once also the condition for possible justice. The fulfillment of the

repeatedly broken exchange contract would converge with its abolition; exchange would disappear if truly equal things were exchanged; true progress would not be merely an Other in relation to exchange, but rather exchange that has been brought to itself. Thus thought both Marx and Nietzsche, antipodes of each other; Zarathustra postulates that man will be redeemed from revenge.¹⁵ For revenge is the mythical prototype of exchange; as long as domination persists through exchange, myth will dominate as well. The interlocking of the ever-same and the new in the exchange relation manifests itself in the imagoes of progress under bourgeois industrialism. What seems paradoxical about these imagoes is that something different ever appears at all, that the imagoes grow old, since the ever-sameness of the exchange principle intensifies by virtue of technology into domination by repetition within the sphere of production. The life process itself ossifies in the expression of the ever-same: hence the shock of photographs from the nineteenth century and even the early twentieth century. The absurdity explodes: that something happens where the phenomenon says that nothing more could happen; its attitude becomes terrifying.¹⁶ In this experience of terror, the terror of the system forcibly coalesces into appearance; the more the system expands, the more it hardens into what it has always been. What Benjamin called "dialectics at a standstill" is surely less a Platonizing residue than the attempt to raise such paradoxes to philosophical consciousness. Dialectical images: these are the historically objective archetypes of that antagonistic unity of standstill and movement that defines the most universal bourgeois concept of progress.¹⁷

Hegel as well as Marx bore witness to the fact that even the dialectical view of progress needs correction. The dynamic they taught is conceived, not as a simple dynamic per se, but on the contrary as one unified with its opposite, with something steadfast, in which alone a dynamic first becomes legible at all. Marx, who criticized all notions of the natural growth of society as fetishistic, likewise rejected, against Lassalle's Gotha Program, the absolutization of the dynamic in the doctrine of labor as the single source of societal wealth, and he conceded the possibility of a relapse into barbarism.¹⁸ It may be more than mere coincidence that Hegel, despite his famous definition of history, has no detailed theory of progress and that Marx himself seems to have avoided the word, even in the constantly cited programmatic passage from the preface to *Critique of Political Economy*. The dialectical taboo on concept fetishes, the legacy of the old,

antimythological Enlightenment in its self-reflective phase, extends even to the category that used to soften up reification: progress, which deceives as soon as it—as a single aspect—usurps the whole. The fetishization of progress reinforces its particularity, its restrictedness to techniques.¹⁹ If progress were truly master of the whole, the concept of which bears the marks of its violence, then progress would no longer be totalitarian. Progress is not a conclusive category. It wants to cut short the triumph of radical evil, not to triumph as such itself. A situation is conceivable in which the category would lose its meaning, and yet which is not the situation of universal regression that allies itself with progress today. In this case, progress would transform itself into the resistance to the perpetual danger of relapse. Progress is this resistance at all stages, not the surrender to their steady ascent.

(1964; GS 10.2: 617–38)

Translated by Henry W. Pickford

6. PROGRESS

NOTE: All numbered notes in this chapter are by the translator.

1. Throughout this essay Adorno plays on the double meaning of *Menschheit*, which, like its usual translation, "humanity," can signify an abstract principle as well as the sum of existing human beings (that is, "humanness" on the one hand, "humankind" on the other). In the first "model" of *Negative Dialectics*, in a section entitled "Ontical and Ideal Moments," Adorno explores this ambiguity of *Menschheit* in Kant's moral theory, concluding, "Kant must have noticed the double meaning of the word 'humanity,' as the idea of being human and as the totality of all men; he introduced it into theory in a manner that was dialectically profound, even though playful. His subsequent usage vacillates between ontical manners of speech and others that refer to the idea. . . . He wants neither to cede the idea of humanity to the existing society nor to vaporize it into a phantasm" (Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton [New York: Seabury, 1973], p. 258). In this essay *Menschheit* is consistently translated as "humanity" to preserve the doubleness. By contrast, German *Humanität*, which also occurs in the essay, derives from the Latin *humanitas*, and signifies not the ontic human species but rather the ideal of humane refinement as a mark of civilization; it is translated as "humanitarianism."

2. Here, as in his essay on Kafka in *Prisms* ("Notes on Kafka," Chap. 11 in the present volume; see also *Gesammelte Schriften*, 10.8: 229), Adorno's partial quotation neglects Kafka's emphasis on the mutual implication of progress and belief. Kafka's aphorism is quoted in its entirety by Benjamin in "Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death": "'To believe in progress is not to believe that progress has already taken place. That would be no belief.' Kafka did not consider the age in which he lived as an advance over the beginnings of time. His novels are set in a swamp world. In his works, created things appear at the stage Bachofen has termed the hetaeric stage. The fact that it is now forgotten does not mean that it does not extend into the present. On the contrary: it is actual by virtue of this very oblivion" (Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn [London: Jonathan Cape, 1970], p. 130).

3. "Und wer's nie gekonnt, der stehle weinend sich aus diesem Bund," from Friedrich Schiller's ode "An die Freude" (1786).

4. First published version has: "For the element of enlightenment within it, that of demythologization, which terminates. . . ."

5. "Und alles Drängen, alles Ringen / Ist ewige Ruh in Gott dem Herrn," from "Zahme Xenien VI," translated in *Goethe: Selected Verse*, ed. David Luke (New York: Penguin, 1981), p. 280.

6. "The fact that the subjective purpose, as the power over these processes (in which the *objective* gets used up through mutual friction and sublates itself), keeps itself *outside of them* and *preserves itself* in them is the *cunning* of reason.

"In this sense we can say that, with regard to the world and its process, divine Providence behaves with absolute cunning. God lets men, who have their particular passions and interests, do as they please, and what results is the accomplishment of *his* intentions, which are something other than those whom he employs were directly concerned about" (G. W. F. Hegel, *The Encyclopedia Logic: Part I of the Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences, with the Zusätze*, trans. T. F. Geracts, W. A. Suchting, and H. S. Harris [Indianapolis: Hackett, 1991], p. 284. German: G. W. F. Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften I, Werke* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970), 8: 365 (209 and Zusatz). See also *Wissenschaft der Logik II, Werke*, 6: 452 ("C. Der ausgeführte Zweck") and *Philosophie der Geschichte, Werke*, 12: 49 and 119.

7. I.e., the fifth and sixth theses.

8. See the fifth proposition of Kant's "Idea for a Universal History":

The greatest problem for the human species, the solution of which nature compels him to seek, is that of attaining a civil society which can administer justice universally.

The highest purpose of nature—i.e. the development of all natural capacities—can be fulfilled for mankind only in society, and nature intends that man should accomplish this, and indeed all his appointed ends, by his own efforts. This purpose can be fulfilled only in a society which has not only the greatest freedom, and therefore a continual antagonism among its members, but also the most precise specification and preservation of the limits of this freedom in order that it can co-exist with the freedom of others. The highest task which nature has set for mankind must therefore be that of establishing a society in which *freedom under external laws* would be combined to the greatest possible extent with irresistible force, in other words, of establishing a perfectly *just civil constitution*. For only through the solution and fulfillment of this task can nature accomplish its other intentions with our species. Man, who is otherwise so enamoured with unrestrained freedom, is forced to enter this state of restriction by sheer necessity. And this is indeed the most stringent of all forms of necessity, for it is imposed by men upon themselves, in that their inclinations make it impossible for them to exist side by side for long in a state of wild freedom. But once enclosed within a precinct like that of civil union, the same inclinations have the most beneficial effect. In the same way, trees in a forest, by seeking to deprive each other of air and sunlight, compel each other to find these by upward growth, so that they grow beautiful and straight—whereas those which put out branches at will, in freedom and in isolation from others, grow stunted, bent and twisted. All the culture and art which adorn mankind and the finest social order man creates are fruits of his unsociability. For it is compelled by its own nature to discipline itself, and

thus, by enforced art, to develop completely the germs which nature implanted ("Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose," trans. H. B. Nisbet, in Immanuel Kant, *Political Writings*, ed. Hans Reiss, 2d ed. [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991], pp. 45-46).

9. Adorno alludes to Heidegger's *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik* (1929); English: Martin Heidegger, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, trans. J. S. Churchill (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1962).

10. See Walter Benjamin, "Theological-Political Fragment," in his *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Peter Demetz, trans. E. Jephcott (New York: Schocken, 1978), pp. 312-13.

11. Adorno here alludes to a seminar presentation made by one of his students, Karl Heinz Haag, which has been preserved in the Adorno Archive in Frankfurt. Haag later briefly touches on some aspects of this paper in his *Der Fortschritt in der Philosophie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1983), esp. pp. 37-39.

12. See Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. E. F. J. Payne (New York: Dover, 1969), I: 185 (36, on art):

Whilst science, following the restless and unstable stream of the fourfold forms of reasons or grounds and consequents, is with every end it attains again and again directed farther, and can never find an ultimate goal or complete satisfaction, any more than by running we can reach the point where the clouds touch the horizon; art, on the contrary, is everywhere at its goal. For it plucks the object of its contemplation from the stream of the world's course, and holds it isolated before it. This particular thing, which in that stream was an infinitesimal part, becomes for art a representative of the whole, an equivalent of the infinitely many in space and time. It therefore pauses at this particular thing; it stops the wheel of time; for it the relations vanish; its object is only the essential, the Idea. We can therefore define it accurately as *the way of considering things independently of the principle of sufficient reason*, in contrast to the way of considering them which proceeds in exact accordance with this principle, and is the way of science and experience.

And in chapter 41, "On Death and Its Relation to the Indestructibility of Our Inner Nature": "There is no greater contrast than that between the ceaseless, irresistible flight of time carrying its whole content away with it and the rigid immobility of what is actually existing, which is at all times one and the same; and if, from this point of view, we fix our really objective glance on the immediate events of life, the *Nunc stans* becomes clear and visible to us in the center of the wheel of time" (*ibid.*, 2: 481).

13. Adorno surely relies here on the severely abbreviated version of the essay "Die Rückschritte der Poesie" ("The Regression of Poetry"), by Carl Gustav

Jochmann (1789-1830), which Walter Benjamin published with an introduction in *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* 8 (1939/40): 92-114. Benjamin presented what originally appeared as the fourth of five sections constituting Jochmann's anonymous book *Über die Sprache* (Heidelberg: C. F. Winter, 1828). Jochmann makes the distinction between material progress in the natural sciences and the lack of progress in the "spiritual domain": whereas the natural sciences progress in terms of technical ability, knowledge, and the domination of nature, the intellectual "internal development" operates in the opposite direction, as the destruction of reigning prejudices, as the reinvestment of the world with imagination. The investment through fantasy was the chief characteristic of lyric poetry, and Benjamin's excision of this section of Jochmann's text misled Adorno to think that Jochmann had prophesied the end of art (see Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* [Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1972-89], 2.3: 1393; and Theodor W. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, in his *Gesammelte Schriften*, 7: 501).

14. First published version has a slightly different sentence: "it is the Hegelian 'Furie des Verschwindens,' which plunges one concept after another into the Oruc of the mythical."

15. See "On the Tarantulas" and "On Redemption," in Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking, 1966), pp. 99-102, 137-42.

16. First published version: "behavior" instead of "attitude."

17. Adorno here both invokes and corrects Walter Benjamin's theory of the "dialectical image," the cognitive armature of the studies composing his unfinished *Arcades Project* [*Passagenarbeit*]. Benjamin, who Adorno felt was too much under the sway of the surrealists, had suggested that juxtapositions of historical material in "constellations" would release the archaic dream and wish images lodged in the collective unconscious at the threshold to modernity. In a now renowned exchange of letters, Adorno rejected the theory's implied idealism: "If you transpose the dialectical image into consciousness as a 'dream,' then not only has the concept been disenchanting and made more tractable, it has also thereby forfeited precisely the objective interpretive power which could legitimate it in materialistic terms. The fetish character of the commodity is not a fact of consciousness but rather dialectical, in the eminent sense that it produces consciousness" (*Aesthetics and Politics: Debates between Bloch, Lukács, Brecht, Benjamin, Adorno*, ed. Ronald Taylor [London: New Left Books, 1977; Verso, 1980], pp. 140-41). Indeed the present essay can be considered a practical exposition of Adorno's viewpoint.

18. Karl Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Programme: With Appendixes by Marx, Engels, and Lenin* (New York: International Publishers, 1970).

19. First published version: "is one with" instead of "reinforces."