

Outgrowing the Past

by Bradford Tuckfield (February 2016)

I recently read an interview with a musician I admire who described a time in his youth when he had been a devout Christian. He is no longer religious at all, or as he described it, he “grew out of religious ideas.” Upon hearing this, I thought of the other things that people often describe growing out of – old clothes, for example, for which one becomes physically too large during childhood, or youthful bad manners, for which one’s nature becomes too civil during early adulthood. Is religiosity or belief in God something that becomes too “small” for us, like the clothes we wore as children? Is it a feature of immaturity or ignorance that we should progress past?

Of course, individual progress does exist – people change, improve, and take positive steps in life every day. Similarly, some beliefs truly are the type that must be outgrown: Santa Claus, the tooth fairy, free lunches, successful socialist regimes, and unicorns are prominent examples. This musician is not alone in his belief that Christianity is one of these childish beliefs, and he can surely be forgiven for his apparently sincere disbelief.

Whether individuals can progress over time, however, is not the same as whether the human race can. Many atheists today believe that the whole human race can and should outgrow and put aside all religious belief and other supposedly benighted ideas. But can our whole species truly put aside and outgrow something as fundamental as religion? And even if religion were as regrettable and morally abominable as they claim, can a whole species so quickly put aside its moral weaknesses like a growing child?

A few years ago, Bill Gates was asked about why he supported a change in the policy of the Boy Scouts of America towards homosexual troop leaders. His simple answer was “Because it’s 2013,” an answer which drew both laughter and applause. Gates believes that the human race does or should grow out of its old beliefs and put them aside like a child puts aside old clothes. By the year 2013, his statement implies, the morally “growing” human race was much too morally “large” for the old clothes of animus against homosexuality. In political discussions, it is common to hear opinions like this one that presuppose the existence and

exigency of human progress over time.

For a technology mogul like Bill Gates, this belief is understandable. If there is one field where humans have made clear forward progress over the centuries, it is technology. If we imagine an analogous interview about technology, this becomes clear. "Why are you selling inexpensive laptops with 16 gigabytes of RAM?" we might imagine someone asking Gates. "Because it's 2016," he might answer, and this is perfectly reasonable. After all, 16 gigabyte technology is clearly an advance over fewer than 16 gigabytes, but in past years such computing power was not available (or at least not as affordable) since the human race had not yet reached our current level of technological progress. We may easily imagine that future years will bring even more progress in technology, so that in 2017 or later, some greater computing power will be affordable. For much of the past (and hopefully for the future), we have always been growing out of our old, small technological capabilities.

Besides technology, however, there are few or perhaps no human endeavors that have experienced unequivocal forward progress, and many fields by their nature cannot really progress at all. Imagine similar exchanges about other fields. "Why are English speakers no longer using the beautiful Shakespearean English of centuries ago?" "Because it's 2016, we have grown out of such beautiful language." Or "Why are people no longer building great Gothic cathedrals like Europeans did centuries ago?" "Because it's 2016, we have grown out of such great architecture." Or "Why are people divorcing more often and having more illegitimate children compared to past eras?" "Because it's 2016, we have outgrown monogamy and fidelity to lifelong commitments." Or "Why is government deeply indebted and highly inefficient throughout the West?" "Because it's 2016, we have outgrown government efficiency and fiscal balance."

Language, art, and architecture (in my opinion) have declined in recent years as technology has progressed. Other things have simply fluctuated. Governments around the world pass through periods of freedom and prosperity, then tyranny, misery and decline, then spasms of revolution or disruption, then start the centuries-long cycle again. Our work habits have gone from doing work mostly in the home on our own time (as in agrarian societies), to universally commuting and working on another's schedule (as in twentieth-century corporate culture), and now are swinging back to unscheduled work in and around home (with internet telecommuting and the rise of contractor-based companies like Uber).

Some believe that morality must be constant and absolute, the same across all times and places. If so, morality would not be a matter of progress, decline, or fluctuation, but rather stasis. If an act was moral and ethical in 2013, it would have been moral in 2012 or in 2014, or indeed at any other time.

Cultural standards, if not morals, are certainly a matter of fluctuation. They change back and forth non-linearly and in several directions over time. Many reports indicate, for example, that among the ancient Greeks, homosexual sex was practiced and broadly accepted. Would the ancient Greeks have justified their acceptance of homosexual sex by citing the year? Or would anti-homosexual moralists in later centuries, taking the ancient Greeks as their point of comparison, have justified an anti-homosexual taboo in the name of progress by citing their own year, advanced as it was compared to the ancients? If there is "progress" in attitudes towards homosexuality, it cannot be unidirectional because attitudes have gone back and forth between two extremes over the centuries. Because of this back-and-forth, we cannot say that later attitudes are better or worse than earlier ones only by virtue of being later. To do so only makes sense when one has a simplistic and unhistorical notion of social change.

Michael Oakeshott understood political life as a matter of navigating through these cultural fluctuations rather than pushing towards linear, unidirectional progress. His metaphor for political activity was more apt than the putting aside of childish old clothes. He said "In political activity, men sail a boundless and bottomless sea; there is neither harbour for shelter nor floor for anchorage, neither starting-place nor appointed destination. The enterprise is to keep afloat on an even keel." Political history, according to this metaphor, is not a triumphant progression forward, but rather a tentative and cyclical equilibrium. The year is irrelevant, there is no directionality, and growth is absent. This vision is certainly less exciting than progressive utopian political philosophies. At the same time, it is more likely to lead to stability, preservation, and social order.

To write so much about a throwaway comment by Bill Gates may seem extreme or vindictive. In fact, I have nothing against Mr. Gates and I admire his talent and intelligence. I write not to denounce his short comment, but rather to denounce the dogmatic belief in human progress that underlies it, which is common in the West today.

Though it may seem idealistic and attractive, dogmatic belief in human progress can have an unfortunate corollary: it leads people to thoughtlessly despise past generations of our fellow humans. If we are constantly outgrowing the past, then this moment is the zenith of human morality (until the next moment), and each step one takes in exploring the past is a step further into hideous depravity. Wittgenstein warned against this view, saying that "one age misunderstands another; and a petty age misunderstands all the others in its own ugly way." It is an act of great arrogance to believe that we are the greatest and most moral generation in all of history.

To be sure, the past sometimes seems incomprehensible – it is not far in the past when women didn't vote, when slavery was widespread, when violence was more common, when religious strife was the norm. However, the proper response to these astounding differences between then and now is not unreflective self-congratulation, but rather a serious effort at understanding. There may also have been wonderful things about the past that are partially or fully lost today. It seems to me (though I may be mistaken) that in faraway times, people felt closer to their families and closer to God. Many people report that neighborhoods used to be safer, and that it was more common for people to know their neighbors and feel some kinship or community with them. Besides that, it is hard not to feel some nostalgia for the art and music of bygone eras compared to our own.

The people 100 or 500 years ago or more who lived in that different world were humans like us; they are our brothers and sisters in spirit, and our ancestors in fact. Their hearts were like ours, inclined towards wickedness but striving towards good. There were certainly evils in their times, and many of these evils seem obvious to us now. But it could be that there are just as many evils today to which we are blind, but that which some past generation would have been able to see clearly. By the same token, future generations may hold us in contempt for reasons that would seem absurd to us today. Humility is necessary when we view the past; there is no reason to assume that we are better than our ancestors. Politics at its best can change and improve policies temporarily, but it will never have a lasting effect on the human heart and spirit.

To use yet another metaphor: the past is not old clothes to outgrow, or water under a boat; the past is another country, and they do things differently there. Anyone who has traveled or even just learned about other parts of the world has

been shocked to see some strange custom, to hear some odd belief, or to meet some radically different person in a foreign land. With the right open-hearted attitude, we can overcome these shocks and learn something from people who live elsewhere, and recognize the underlying fraternity between all people that exists despite our occasionally shocking outward differences.

If the past is another land, we should treat it the same as we do a nation other than our own. Christianity, anti-homosexual animus, and many other traditional beliefs are a feature of the recent past (and to a lesser extent the present). If we are respectful and tolerant of the beliefs of residents of other lands, why not be respectful and tolerant of the beliefs of residents of the past? Similarly, if we try to avoid the geographic arrogance that causes people to say that their country is better than all others, why not try to avoid the temporal arrogance that causes people to say that their time is the best?

It seems ironic that those on the left who tend to be the most enthusiastic proponents of multiculturalism and respecting and tolerating other cultures would be so scornful of the past. Why celebrate the customs of every land except the land that precedes us all? A belief in the fundamental similarity of human souls should lead us to understand that the past is not something to scorn or outgrow, but simply another place filled with people like us who we can approach on equal terms.

Of course, we are all here together in the present moment and that cannot be changed. But while Bill Gates and other liberals seem to imagine themselves as ambassadors from the future trying to help the present catch up, I think differently. Like many conservatives, I often feel like a resident of the past with a long-term visa in the present but a nagging desire to go back home. I am fascinated by the past and I find much to admire in it, despite the folly and evil that was there too. There is so much that is wondrous and good in our time, but I cannot help but regret the radical cultural changes of our time that continually push the past ever further away. The past for me is like an old suit, distinguished and finely tailored, though with some unraveling threads and a musty smell; a suit that I can cherish, preserve, ignore, or throw away, but one that I could never outgrow.

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