Philosophy, Progress, and the Coming Millenium

Richard Rorty

The end of a chronological period—whether a century or a millenium—invites speculation about the extent to which progress has occurred during that period: about whether humanity as a whole has become more grown-up, less childish.

As soon as one tries to tell a story of the maturation of humanity as a whole, one realizes is that the very idea of such a story is relatively new. At least in Europe, it is not much older than the eighteenth century—the century which witnessed the first great European narrative of human self-fashioning (Giambattista Vico's), as well as a growing conviction that human beings might be entirely on their own, bereft of guidance from above. Before that period, most people took for granted that human life—with all the familiar violence and cruelty with which it had always been afflicted—would never be very different than it had always been. They also believed that the fate of humanity did not rest in human hands.

The eighteenth was the century of the French Revolution—the event which created our modern political consciousness. The idea that human beings could take charge of history and to create an egalitarian utopia, a world without caste, class or institutionalized cruelty, gained credibility only after the cataclysm of 1789. The combination of an increasingly secular culture and of revolutionary political hope inspired the second great European epic of human
maturation: Hegel's Lectures on the Philosophy of History.

The eighteenth century is often referred to, in Europe, as the age of Enlightenment: the age in which the Europeans broke the spell which religious superstition had cast, ceased to hope that they would be compensated in Heaven for their suffering on earth, and realized that the only paradise for which they could strive was a terrestrial one. Since the Enlightenment, stories of human maturation and of human decline have proliferated in Europe, and have usually been unselfconsciously Eurocentric. Hegel and Marx have offered the most familiar Eurocentric narratives of maturation, and Nietzsche and Heidegger the most familiar Eurocentric narratives of decline.

The former narratives describe themselves as stories of emancipation--of liberation from fetters, of an ascent from slavery to freedom. But "emancipation" is ambiguous. Sometimes it means freedom from hunger, toil, cruelty and humiliation. At other times it means freedom from subjugation to mistaken ideas--emerging from intellectual darkness into intellectual light, a process often described as "becoming more rational." The philosophers who have written such stories tend to assume that human beings will treat each other decently--will cease to be cruel to one another--just in proportion as they replace appearance with reality, a corrupt religion with a pure religion or a false philosophy with a true philosophy. Typically, it is assumed that the possibility of a true philosophy was first glimpsed in Europe in the eighteenth
century—the period when science replaced religion at the center of high culture.

The ambiguity between these two meanings of "emancipation" has caused considerable confusion in recent decades. For the assumption that the European eighteenth century saw both intellectual and political progress has been subjected to extensive criticism. Writers like Michel Foucault have suggested a new view of the European Enlightenment: for Foucault, the eighteenth century was a period in which the fetters that have always bound humanity were reforged, rather than shattered. Intellectuals who think of themselves as "postmodern" often say that we have now seen through the myth of "Enlightenment". Nietzsche, Heidegger and Derrida are supposed to have shown us that the ideas of "Nature" and of "Reason" which dominated eighteenth-century European thought are illusions.

The confusion created by this situation manifests itself in the fact that whereas Nietzsche and Heidegger despised attempts to create an egalitarian utopia, many of the intellectuals who agree with Nietzsche and Heidegger that the rationalism of the Enlightenment is philosophically indefensible— that we no longer have a use for the idea that a world without cruelty would be "more in accord with Nature" or "more rational" than a world ruled by the lash and the knout—nevertheless believe that the Enlightenment saw the beginnings of a movement toward human equality which is still worth fighting and dying for. For philosophers like Derrida, for example, "democracy" is still a near-synonym of the most precious
human ideal: justice. Like the American pragmatist philosopher John Dewey, Derrida has no use for the rationalist tradition which binds Plato together with Kant, but--again like Dewey--his enthusiasm for a world without caste, class, or cruelty remains undiminished.

In this confusing situation, I think the best thing to do is to admit that change in opinion among the intellectuals--the change from a religious to a secular culture, or from a rationalist to a "post-modern" philosophical view--may be largely irrelevant to the creation of the sort of society of which Derrida, Dewey, and most of the rest of us dream. A narrative of emancipation from cruelty, of the development of what the Isreali philosopher Avishai Margalit calls "a decent society"--defined as one in which social institutions do not humiliate--can be spun without much reference to religion or philosophy: to the views people hold about the existence or non-existence of God, or the nature of Truth or of Reason. We should not assume that there is a tight connection between the attainment of decency in human relations and a given world-view.

In particular, we should not think that any particular European, or any particular Asian, intellectual tradition is clearly more favorable to the development of a decent society than any other. It may be that the difference between Confucianism and Christianity, or between scientistic rationalism and post-modernism, is just froth on the surface, when compared to the difference between a society in which there are untouchable castes and one in which there are not, or with the difference between a society in which some people
have a thousand times as much money as others and one in which income
differences are relatively slight. It may be that a decent society
can be constructed without paying much attention to either religion
or philosophy.

If that is so, then speculation about the coming millenium,
and our chances of making further progress, is not a matter for
professors of philosophy like myself, but for economists, political
analysts and demographers. The story of human maturation toward an
egalitarian, decent, society should be seperated from the question
of whether European, or Asian, thought has progressed over the
centuries, and from the question of whether either continent's
thought is more "advanced" than the other's.

The whole idea of "advanced thought" can perhaps be set aside. We would do well to abandon the idea that there is some final
world-view to which the world's civilizations are destined to
converge. A decent, utopian, global society might contain dozens
of world-views--some centering on religion, some on science, and
still others on art. These world-views might have nothing in common
except the conviction that humiliation and cruelty are terrible
evils, which men and women of good will can join together and overcome.

The big question about the coming century, and about the coming
millenium, is not what the intellectuals will be talking about when
it ends, nor about which religions and philosophies will have
survived, but whether the gradual diminution of the oppression of
the weak by the strong which has marked the twentieth century will
continue. For all the horrors of the past century, there is less systematic, institutionalized, cruelty and humiliation at its close than at is beginning. Imperialism of every sort--from that of Great Britain to that of the USSR, from straightforward military occupation to subtle economic domination--seems to be on the wane. Capitalism has, in most countries, been forced to partially de-commodify labor; this has been accomplished by state intervention to set wages, hours, pensions, and working conditions. Women are finally being allowed, in most of the world, to own property, get divorced, vote, and become educated. It is no longer permissible, in a steadily increasing number of human societies, to humiliate people because of the color of their skin, or because of their ethnic origin. Decency has been on the rise for almost a hundred years. We have been becoming more grown up: less like schoolyard bullies.

But economic and demographic pressures may quite possibly, and quite independently of any changes in religious or philosophical outlook, put the bullies back in control. Nobody knows whether the older industrialized democracies of Europe and North America, or the newly industrialized nations of Asia, will be able to hold on to the standard of living they presently enjoy, given the globalization of the labor market. Nobody knows whether, if that standard falls dramatically, democratic institutions will endure in those countries.

Nor does anybody know whether the so-called "population bomb" may not already have exploded: whether the planet can sustain the
seven billion human beings who will shortly inhabit it. Nobody knows whether some presently unforeseen technological development will provoke ecological disaster. Nobody knows whether some mad tyrant in Kazakhstan or North Korea or Zaire will not decide to finance nuclear terrorism. Everything is, as the millenium comes, very fragile--far more fragile than it was in the eighteenth century. "Things," as Emerson said, "are in the saddle, and ride mankind.

We are constantly told that we can still save ourselves, still continue the process of maturation, if only we experience a "spiritual renewal". I suspect that this is whistling in the dark. What it will take to get us through the next century, and to make the next millenium one of continued progress toward a decent society, is practical ingenuity. We shall have to be very clever and ingenious to deal with the new global economy, and with the magnificent opportunities for exploitation which it offers to the super-rich and the kleptocratic tyrants. We shall have to be very imaginative and innovative in our attempts to put a brake on population growth. We shall have to be very quick and resolute in dealing with nuclear and ecological threats. Neither a new religion nor a new philosophy will be of much help. All that will help is public awareness and discussion of concrete, immediate, dangers, and leaders with enough imagination and courage to propose radical new solutions to be debated by the newly literate populations of the world's democracies.
Dear Chaibong Hahm,

Here's the piece for Chosun Daily. It's longer than you wanted, but I thought that it might work better if you edited it down than if I did. Feel free to make any changes you think would improve the piece.

Best wishes for the holidays--

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