

## **Moral Arc of Justice**

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Ed Correia gave such a great talk last week, I thought I would do a “Part II” of his discussion.

As Ed said, Scientists agree that the world was formed about 14.5 billion years ago. Life on earth started forming and, about 4.5 million years ago, our first ancestors came on the scene. The oldest recognizable human remains are about 160,000 year old.

And, I strongly suspect that’s when the trouble began. You can well imagine that there were lots of arguments over “possessions” like food, clothing, shelter, and a mate.

Pretty soon, I’m sure, people started finding it necessary to come up with laws, or customs, to govern social behavior.

As someone once said, “if people were perfect, we wouldn’t need laws”.

But, how successful have those laws been in keeping order for societies? I think overall they’ve worked pretty well.

There have been many wars fought and I think most of them are fought over resources. As a country’s population gets bigger they want, and need, more resources. The rulers of a society want more control so they try to take control away from others. One favorite technique seems to be to de-humanize the “other”.

These “others” are not as good, smart, or worthy as your group is so your group deserves to be in control of all the resources which usually means they get the lions share of those resources.

Sometimes when we look at all the wars that have been fought in the past we are dumbfounded by the number of deaths, both soldiers and civilian, which have resulted from these wars. Our tolerance of death and destruction is, quite frankly, frightening.

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For instance, here are a sampling of some statistics from some wars in which Americans have been involved:

Conquest of the Americas - Up to 137 million  
Revolutionary war - 50 thousand Americans and about 60 British  
Civil war - 800 thousand  
WW I - 20 million  
WW II - 40 to 60 million  
Korean War - 1.2 million  
Viet Nam War - 800 thousand all the up to 3.8 million  
Iraq War (first one) - 1 million  
Afghanistan/Iraq - more than 1 million, and climbing

All the wars, for which numbers can be calculated, have claimed anywhere from 300 - 700 million people.

It would seem that humans do indeed have a great capacity for killing and maiming each other.

But, there's hope for our world. Many people feel that humans aren't totally lost to their lust for possessions at the expense of others lives.

All through history humans have been slowly, very slowly, maybe sometimes, too slowly become more civilized.

There are 5 Quotes are woven into the current Oval office rug.

- "The Only Thing We Have to Fear is Fear Itself" – President Franklin D. Roosevelt
- "Government of the People, By the People, For the People" – President Abraham Lincoln
- "No Problem of Human Destiny is Beyond Human Beings" – President John F. Kennedy
- "The Welfare of Each of Us is Dependent Fundamentally Upon the Welfare of All of Us" – President Theodore Roosevelt
- "The Arc of the Moral Universe is Long, But it Bends Towards Justice" - Martin Luther King Jr.

Let's take a look at that last quote. This quote, that has been attributed to Martin Luther King, Jr., really originated with the Unitarian minister Theodore Parker who said similar words in 1853.

**Theodore Parker** (August 24, 1810 – May 10, 1860) was an American Transcendentalist and reforming minister of the Unitarian church. A reformer and abolitionist, his words and popular quotations would later inspire speeches by Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King, Jr.

I found the sermon Reverend Parker gave that contained the original words as part of a collection of 10 sermons he gave called "Ten sermons of religion". The original statement he said go like this:

"I do not pretend to understand the moral universe. The arc is a long one. My eye reaches but little ways. I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight; I can divine it by conscience. But from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice."

Mahatma Gandhi would later say something similar, he said:

"When I despair, I remember that all through history the way of truth and love have always won. There have been tyrants and murderers, and for a time, they can seem invincible, but in the end, they always fall. Think of it--always."

Evil is eventually overcome. There's an old proverb that says it nicely: "The mills of the Gods grind slow, but they grind to powder".

Let's think about an arc for a minute. If civilizations just stayed cruel and unjust, on an X, Y axes, the line of social progress wouldn't be an arc, it might be a straight line at a 45 degree angle. If civilizations constantly became more loving and just, the line might be more like a straight horizontal line. But we know, from our own experience, that while civilizations seem to, over time, constantly become more civilized, there are setbacks along the way. Sometimes, HUGE setbacks....I'm thinking of all the wars I mentioned earlier and now the current "explosion" of terrorist acts taking place in many parts of the world.

One of the things Reverend Parker did in this particular sermon was to compare progress of civilizations to the progress of a person's life.

Who thinks they are better able to make decisions today than they were when they were 2 years old or 20 years old... We become more knowledgeable, and compassionate regarding other peoples' situations as we move through our own lives, because we have

experienced life's ups and downs. So, we know life can be tough sometimes. So, we give others a bit more slack. We are less critical in our judgements of others' lives.

Anyone who has children, or know young children has experienced a child's indignation when they first start to become aware of the injustices in life. They can't believe these injustices are allowed to exist! Why doesn't someone fix the problem? This situation is unacceptable!

As adults we are also painfully aware of these inequities and would love to "FIX" them so the world could be a utopia for everyone. However, as adults we also know that not everyone's definition of "utopia" is the same. So, inequities continue to exist to the frustration and consternation of everyone.

However, that doesn't mean that we give up completely on our efforts to create a better world. Societies struggle to move forward in their efforts to become a better place to live for all of its citizens.

Reverend Parker said: "Human nature leads us toward a more just world."

He said "Human societies are like children. When they are young they do not understand or obey "laws". They only want what they want and when they want it. As they get older they start to obey "laws" only because they are forced to. As they become teenagers they understand the "laws" but only want to obey the ones that don't infringe too much on their wants. As they get older and become responsible adults they see the benefits of laws and are always looking for ways to build upon the existing laws to make their world a better place to live for them and others in their communities."

Our own constitution is a good example of how this "arc" works. It was put into operation on March 4, 1789. 27 amendments have since been added to our Constitution that clarify or rectify issues that were not covered properly in the original document. The first ten were introduced 6 months later, on September 25th 1789, for ratification and quickly ratified on December 15, 1791. The last amendment was introduced for ratification on September 25, 1789 but not ratified until May 7th, 1992!

An April 2014 issue of the Atlantic Magazine Article "Playing with Plato" said "Every generation needs its own Plato or Socrates to help make their philosophical observations relevant for the current generation. For instance, 18th century philosophy for how to fight a war using muskets needs to be updated in order to consider the proper use of drones. Or, a generation that grew up with no cars needs to be updated to consider travel by jet planes and space travel." But, an observation such as "an unexamined life

is not worth living,” as uttered by Socrates at his trial for impiety and corrupting youth, are as relevant today as they were in 400 B.C.

Whether you believe in God or not the fact that whole civilizations have been built around the belief in a God means that we need to take this concept into consideration when we look back on our history and try to understand it.

What holds us back can also help us move forward down this arc of justice. Church dogma, Constitutions, Political Platforms can all be used for good and bad. They can all be created and changed but, like today’s reading, the longer they stay in place, the harder they are to change.

Societies tend to change in leaps. Situations that, once were acceptable, can eventually become unbearable but it takes a lot of effort to change, so big changes tend to come in convulsions. A lot of little changes can add up until something big must change. Progress can be a messy affair...

Somewhere around 300 A.D. some concepts were put into play that started dramatically changing the conceptual thoughts about how societies ought to conduct themselves.

Some of these thoughts, like original sin seem, on the surface to be a minor concept. However, it defined the way churches dealt with people and made people dependent on the “church” for their salvation.

However, later religious thought distanced itself from those concepts and said...we are created in God’s image so, how could we be born into sin. How can it be preordained if I’m going to heaven or hell regardless of how I live my life. Original sin is a terrible concept. Like a recent speaker, Susan Mosely, said we should believe in “original blessing” not original sin. The whole concept of original sin places us at a disadvantage that some religions won’t ever let us overcome and insist we constantly need some outside source to help contain our desire to sin.

If you believe that some mysterious force created our universe then it’s easy to think there is also a reason it was created and, by extension, maybe why we were created. So, we exist for a reason if, for no other reason, than to procreate so we can continue our species. That means we need to live long enough to bear children and raise, those children, until they are old enough to care of themselves. That also means we have to live in a co-operative, nurturing society. That would imply that human nature needs to be more good than bad.

If we, as a human race, have a balance between good and bad that leans, even in the slightest, towards good, then the arc of the universe does indeed lean towards justice.