



The Influence of Enlightenment Ideas on Human Progress and Well-Being

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Abstract

The notion of progress has been part of a common understanding for several centuries, as a result of enlightenment culture and, in a broader sense, of modernity. History proves that the forms of society, its organization and dynamics have changed over the centuries. During the last two decades, transformations have been more radical and accelerated, generating restructuring in all aspects of life, related to the idea of progress. Evaluating progress requires determining what needs to be improved. On the other hand, the definition of progress depends on an "image of man" and the continuous processing of this image, which is a prerequisite for the identification of those values that allow the expression of a judgment of progress. The multidimensional analysis of the concept of progress is the aim of this scientific paper. On the other hand, the theme of progress is connected with that of enlightenment. The Enlightenment changed the way of thinking about education, religion, justice, brought respect for others, diversity as a value, while critical reason was valued as an instrument of analysis and knowledge of the world... What is left today of that revolution of thought? What are irreversible changes? What Enlightenment values are still common and relevant today? The meaning, essence and values of enlightenment are more current than ever in the journey of contemporary society towards progress. The paper aims to analyze this coexistence, in a critical and emancipatory approach, in a social and cultural context. The Enlightenment principle, according to which we can use reason and solidarity in the function of human development, may seem a common, mundane and outdated concept. But in fact, this paper will present the opinion that this is not the case. Today more than ever the principles and ideals of science, humanity and progress need to be vigorously defended. We take their gifts for granted; newborns who will live more than eight decades; grocery stores overflowing with food, potable water available at the snap of fingers, and garbage disappearing at the same rate; drugs that destroy a painful infection; boys who are no longer sent to war; girls who can walk the streets without fear of any danger, critics of powerful rulers who are not sent to prison or killed because of their criticism; in the pocket of a shirt you can find all the information about the world and culture. All these are human achievements and not rights born from the universe. From the experience of those who have the misfortune to live in some underdeveloped parts of the world, war, shortages of vital things, disease, ignorance and death threats are normal components of existence. We are aware that countries can slip back into these primitive conditions, and while this risk exists to our detriment, we seriously ignore the successful achievements of the Enlightenment. Enlightenment principles are related to humanism, open society or cosmopolitan or classical liberalism. The ideals of the Enlightenment are the product of human reason, but they are also in constant war with other components of human nature: loyalty to the herd, respect for authority, magical thinking, the tendency to represent evildoers for misfortunes. In the second decade of the 21st century, there has been a growing trend of some political movements describing their countries as being plunged into a diabolical pessimism due to some malicious factions that only a powerful leader can withstand. , who with his decisiveness can restore the country's glory and make it seriously great. These movements have been fueled by a rhetoric widespread among many fierce opponents, according to which modern institutions have failed and every aspect of life has been permeated by an ever-deepening crisis. Thus, both sides agree with the macabre thesis according to which the destruction of certain institutions will make the world a better place. It is difficult to find a positive point of view that sees from a progressive point of view the problems in the world, which need to be improved by solving those problems in turn. This paper personifies the efforts to reformulate the ideals of the Enlightenment related to the language and concepts of the 21st century. First, a scheme will be designed that aims to facilitate the understanding of the human condition through spirituality and modern science. Who we are, where we come from, what challenges we will face and how we can face them. Not neglecting to build a clear consensus, these ideals have been treated by today's intellectuals with indifference, skepticism, and sometimes even with contempt. According to the theory of this paper, when these ideals are properly evaluated, then we understand that the ideals of the enlightenment are actually noble and capable of evoking emotions and being a source of inspiration; become a motive for living. This paper follows the relative debate about scientific progress also inspired by philosophical progress, in terms of truth, problem solving, knowledge and the process of understanding. Equally important, the paper will describe philosophy and science in a common framework, to understand and appreciate science and human progress.

Keywords: human progress, enlightenment, critical thinking, well-being, knowledge of the world

1. Introduction

Philosophers and natural scientists, artists and political scientists all strongly defended an individual's freedom to reason—free from the influence of politics and religion—and to use that reason in pursuit of a society based on equal rights to all people. Thought was a person's ticket to intellectual and political freedom. Of course, many of the Enlightenment philosophers today would be considered racists, who placed the "civilized" European white man at the pinnacle of society. But the core message of the Enlightenment Project was the need to create a global civilization with moral, shared and universal values that prevailed over monarchical and ecclesiastical powers. The Enlightenment declared war on the excesses of religion and blind nationalism. Adam Smith, for example, advocated patriotism not only as a place of birth, but as part of the larger society of mankind. Immanuel Kant called this "global patriotism". We can identify the influence of these ideas on a 20th century thinker like Albert Einstein, who often advocated the need to abolish international borders. "There is no other salvation for civilization and even for the human race than the establishment of an international government with security based on law," Einstein said in an interview with the New York Times in September 1945, shortly after the end of World War II.

Human life consists of gestures, deeds, behavior, incidents and thousands of other good actions. Apart from involuntary functions such as breathing, every action is an important result of a conscious or unconscious choice and reflects a person's culture and perceptions. Through the eyes of a society or through an individual, for example, internal loss can transform everything into a sign of decline, while for another society or individual, internal victory transforms the same objects into signs of triumph. Such an example shows the meaning and contrast of partiality. Every human behavior is culturally significant and represents several paradigms and epistemological perspectives. A paradigm is an abstract mental picture, an imaginary concept, and a symbolic representation of reality derived from mental reconstruction and deconstruction. The mind collects certain characteristics from reality, rejecting some and keeping others, rearranging them according to priority and corresponding to reality. The paradigm can exaggerate those elements it considers essential and undervalue all others. Each paradigm is epistemological with its own underlying criteria, beliefs, hypotheses, and responses. Bias, the defense of a particular point of view, is associated with the selective human mind and its process of perception. Bias is organically integrated with language and culture and is specific to languages, making language a biased tool. Bias is inevitable and stems from human uniqueness and freedom of choice. Regardless of its limits, human language can achieve successful communication to overcome biases and build epistemological paradigms even though they emerge from a particular cultural experience. Several mechanisms can help us overcome such biases. Knowing that bias is inevitable is the first step in the right direction overcoming it. Our theoretical efforts to uncover biases must encompass the entire theoretical structure of Western philosophy. A more radical, complex and comprehensive view must be based on the assumption that there is no single historical or cultural course. We must be open to different world civilizations and benefit from their cultural and intellectual traditions that can deepen our understanding of humanity, society and nature. While in order to eliminate biases we must form an alternative paradigm that benefits from all previous human experiences, not excluding the West. A proposed alternative paradigm and scientific approach would derive from our indigenous Islamic heritage; to work towards a comprehensive theory; to start from the knowledge that humans occupy a central position in the universe; to include a non-materialist category; operate in a productive (non-aggregative) manner.

2. Using the Public Interest and Understanding Reason through it

Opposing reason is unreasonable. However, this has not stopped a group of irrationalists from favoring feelings over thinking. The Romantic anti-Enlightenment movement was best embodied in Herder's statement: I am not what I think, but what I am, what I feel, how I live. Evaluating progress requires determining what needs to be improved and understanding why. . On the other hand, the definition of progress depends on an "image of man" and the continuous processing of this image, which is a prerequisite for the identification of those values that allow the expression of a judgment of progress. The multidimensional analysis of the concept of progress is the aim of this scientific paper.¹

On the other hand, the theme of progress is connected with that of enlightenment. The Enlightenment changed the way of thinking about education, religion, justice, brought respect for others, diversity as a value, while critical reason was valued as an instrument of analysis and knowledge of the world... What is left today of that revolution of thought? What are irreversible changes? What Enlightenment values are still common and relevant today? The meaning, essence and

¹ *Archivio Foucault - Interventi, colloqui, interviste: Volume I. 1961- 1970. (1996*

values of enlightenment are more current than ever in the journey of contemporary society towards progress. The paper aims to analyze this coexistence, in a critical and emancipatory approach, in a social and cultural context.

For the Enlightenment, the ability to reason constitutes a faculty common to all humans and its norms are universal. For Enlightenment philosophers, the idea of reason is inextricably linked to the public, the public interest and the public argument. Therefore, reason is in some sense necessarily public. According to Kant, the progress of the Enlightenment depends on the freedom of the public use of reason. for all issues that arise. But in what sense is reason public? "By public use of reason I understand the use itself that one carries out, like a researcher in front of a whole audience of readers".²

According to Kant, reason is public in the sense that it knows no better authority than reasonable argument and where its public use must be exercised without coercion. Thus, the public sphere in this perspective is seen as a sphere of critical discourse, where power and legitimacy are subject to the judgment of reason. For Kant, indeed, reason is public by its very essence, since it is universal, and reasons in the realm of politics must be expressed publicly in order to be valued. In this way, the public does not constitute only a plate of listeners. The public use of reason constitutes a dialogue that implies criticism and exchange, as is also lacking from the Enlightenment perspective. The public is connected to reason itself, which Kant understands as a collective and shared activity. Consequently, the essence of reason does not have a dictatorial authority, but constitutes the ground of agreement between free citizens. So, the activity of reason is not solitary and self-addressing (in itself) but dialogic, a discussion between citizens. But the latter constitute a qualified public, an enlightened public of readers who live in a reciprocal relationship because they share the universal reason and the common destiny in the progress towards the good. In fact, this is where Kant's cosmopolitical inspiration lies. For this reason, in order to understand his political philosophy, we must also look at the work *Critique of judgment*, that skill which, as a judgment of taste, corresponds to the *sensus communis*.³ In this work, he states that "the idea of an understanding that we have as common, that is, of an ability to judge that in its contemplation takes into account a priori the way of representation of all others, to preserve in a way assigned judgment itself to the limits of human reason in its totality"⁴

However, the public use of reason cannot be understood without understanding the principle of the citizen's public interest. According to Kant, this principle is presented as the principle of social and political action, disrupting the harmony between morality and politics. Thus, politics can be transformed into morality only through a strong emphasis on the public interest⁵.

In the conception of justice, the connection between reason and public interest constitutes something essential, since public interest is proof that the law must be passed in order to be in accordance with the principle of justice for citizens. Therefore, for Kant, the public use of reason is related not only to individual independence, but also to political legitimacy.

To be legitimized, the law must pass the test of public scrutiny, thus guaranteeing that its restrictions are legitimate for all citizens. This principle of public interest constitutes the starting point for all theories of public legalization of political legitimation, where citizens discuss freely putting into practice the freedom of expression in public. So, basically, reason means "thinking with others", communicating by connecting critical personal reason with the understanding of the world and reality, in a collective of citizens. As a result, the public interest is not only a condition for the prudence of the citizen, but also a condition for the development of society, which Kant relates to the condition for human progress and the rights of citizens.

3. The Perspective of the Subject in Universal History

In the work *Pragmatic Anthropology*, Kant emphasized that "man must be understood "cosmologically", that is, in relation to what he finds and the place he occupies"⁶ thus laying out man's relationship with his own history. Meanwhile, in the work *The Idea of a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose*, he poses the idea of whether a universal history exists and how it can be made possible. According to him, this universal history and the citizen of the world become possible if they are seen not from the point of view of the subject, but by addressing a certain point of view: the universal point of view that the human species must reach. For this reason, it is only the philosophy of history and not just history

² Kant, I., (1987), *Che cos'è l'Illuminismo?*, Roma: Editori Riuniti, f. 21

³ Common sense.

⁴ Kant, I., (1967), *Critica del giudizio*, Roma-Bari: Laterza, f. 150.

⁵ Arendt, H. (1990). *Teoria del giudizio politico*. Genova: Il Melangolo.

⁶ Kant, I., (1995), *Scritti di storia, politica e diritto*, Roma-Bari: Laterza, f. 20.

that can represent the citizen from a cosmopolitan and universal perspective. For this purpose, philosophy turns to the "principle of finality" that Kant analyzes in a special way in his work *Critique of Judgment*. For him, a system of history must be characterized by a collective unity in a qualitative and not a quantitative sense. So what defines a universal history is the essence of the collectivity as a free citizen of a qualitative collective entity and not simply as a number.⁷

By this it is meant that the unfolding of the idea of law in the history of human actions as part of a cosmopolitan society can only be understood through a final universal goal of history: the fulfillment of the destiny of the human species. But in this regard, individuals do not behave as rational citizens of the world (according to a predetermined plan) nor in their totality, simply instinctively. As a result, Kant admits that it is necessary to guess that "nature does not behave without a plan, without a final goal even in the game of human freedom".⁸

So we must find out what this final goal of nature is even though we are on a special horizon: that of human freedom. Regarding the latter, the final goal is that of conjecture that human history moves through a progression, towards the ever-greater freedom of citizens.

However, the development of science or technology cannot serve as a measure of progress, as a point must be found that is continuous and not random and that can belong to all citizens. But no external measure enjoys this requirement, and to determine progress, it is necessary to be the measure of man himself.

But the question that arises in the meantime is: in what way can the multitude of citizens form a unity? Regarding the individual, there is only morality, that is, self-awareness independent of the conditions of time and space. So, only through morality can we talk about a unity of citizens or free individuals of the human kind. Kant writes that the human species constitutes the human species as a multitude of persons who are close to each other and who feel that they are "destined to build, through mutual interaction through laws created by themselves, but as a whole progressive towards a cosmopolitan society (cosmopolitismus), which, as an unattainable idea in itself, does not constitute a constructive principle... but only a regulating principle of the need to continue towards it, as the destiny of the human species, justified by a natural tendency in such a sense". This means that the free acceptance of a final principle, the one that builds cosmopolitan society, transforms a multitude of individuals into a whole, precisely that of the human species where human abilities are developed.⁹ For this reason, the human species does not mean a given entity, but an idea to be realized that is realized step by step.

4. Conclusions

Man, conceived as a citizen in the cosmopolitical dimension, but also as an exerciser of public reason, constitutes a very special entity. Both of these situations are interrelated to make possible the realization of a finality of human good in the world: that of permanent peace. In this way, the idea of the citizen must be thought radically in a universal dimension that is supported by some such principles and structures. All these conditions make it possible to determine this condition. As a result, for Kant, a morality based on universal principles and extending to all the borders of the world (not within a state), a universal history with the individual as a citizen of the world, a certain form of government (republic), a right on a cosmopolitical scale, an organization between states (federation of states) and a perfect civil society are seen as necessary elements for the realization of the final goal of good in the world: that of permanent peace. This paper personifies the efforts to reformulate the ideals of the Enlightenment related to the language and concepts of the 21st century. First, a scheme will be designed that aims to facilitate the understanding of the human condition through spirituality and modern science. Who we are, where we come from, what challenges we will face and how we can face them. Not neglecting to build a clear consensus, these ideals have been treated by today's intellectuals with indifference, skepticism, and sometimes even with contempt. According to the theory of this paper, when these ideals are properly evaluated, then we understand that the ideals of the Enlightenment are actually noble and capable of evoking emotions and being a source of inspiration; become a motive for living.

This paper follows the relative debate about scientific progress also inspired by philosophical progress, in terms of truth, problem solving, knowledge and the process of understanding. Equally important, the paper will describe philosophy and science in a common framework, to understand and appreciate science and human progress.

⁷ *In every knowledge of an object there is a unity of the concept, as far as it is thought only the unity of the understanding of the manifold of knowledge*, Kant, I., (1989), *La critica della ragion pura*, Milan: Bompiani, p. 155.

⁸ Kant, I., (1989), *La critica della ragion pura*, Milano: Bompiani, f. 29

⁹ *A general cosmopolitical order "as the only condition in which nature can fully develop its readiness in humanity"*, Kant, I., (1995), *Scritti di storia, politica e diritto*, Roma-Bari: Laterza, p. 39.

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