

The Biggest Questions in Life – Part 5: Is Humanity Progressing?

Is humanity progressing? Study any year in history, and you will discover a brutal war being fought somewhere. Humans have always found a reason to hate each other. Tragically, oppression, intolerance, subjugation, extermination, invasion, and suppression are all an integral part of the human experience.

So, why don't we learn from the past?

First, it is not human nature to learn from other's past. For whatever reason, people largely need to experience something before learning and understanding it. Even then, that may not preclude them from making similar mistakes again.

In matters of friendship and romance, we often pursue new people who are similar to those we just rejected because of a bad experience. A young girl in love with the wrong type of boy will often pursue him, no matter how much we dissuade her. Experience matters, but it is not always determinate.

If a generation never endured hunger or poverty, then they will not truly understand hunger or poverty. This will be demonstrated in their eating and spending habits. During times of bounty, people will more easily discard food. My older relatives (most of whom are gone now) remembered the scarcity of the depression, and stressed to my cousins to eat all the food on their plates. We also witness this on a macro level in economics. During economic booms, people never believe that a recession is right around the corner. During a recession, many refuse to believe that the economy will ever improve. The economic and business cycles persist, yet, people seldom learn from them or anticipate them.

There is another reason that we are not progressing as a species. We do not always educate our children properly about the past. We should be taught history in an attempt to understand human nature, and to explain our cultural and moral traditions and beliefs, not to remember specific dates. Also, people differ in their interpretation of history. Most of us cannot even agree on the meaning of some significant event that happened within the past week. How then can we learn from an event that occurred centuries ago?

It is common today to dismiss the past, and even feel superior to those who lived before us. We believe we are smarter, more knowledgeable, and wiser than our ancestors. We believe that we are

immune from the fate that has befallen others – that science and technology have somehow changed human emotions. Yet human emotions never change. Love, compassion, cruelty, ambition, sacrifice, and generosity exist today as they have always existed. Only a fool believes otherwise.

Why isn't humanity progressing? Because, humanity encompasses everyone, and is not an individual. While wise people have always existed, there are generally more young people at any period in history. Since none of us are born with knowledge, experience, wisdom, values, or morals, we must have both the yearning to learn, and the desire to acquire them from others. Sadly, such desire is not always prominent in human nature. Consequently, individuals may progress, grow, and acquire wisdom. However, humanity is perpetually starting over.

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