



## Are We Getting Better?

A Review of

*The Moral Arc: How Science and Reason Lead Humanity Toward Truth, Justice, and Freedom*

by Michael Shermer

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Reviewed by

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Michael Shermer acknowledges that his book *The Moral Arc: How Science and Reason Lead Humanity Toward Truth, Justice, and Freedom* is the progeny of two intellectual parents. The first, as suggested in the title, is the famous quotation from the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.: “The arc of history is long, but it bends toward justice.” The second source is Steven Pinker’s (2011) *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*. In this book, Pinker argued that violence has been greatly reduced over the course of human history, and he offers explanations for this fact based in evolutionary psychology and sociology.

Inspired by these two sources, Shermer makes a case that is more sweeping than that of either King or Pinker. He argues that history is trending not just toward a more just, less violent human condition, but that it is bending toward greater morality in general. This, he argues, is the product of the rise of science and its concomitant effects on social development. Progress in the moral sphere is an outcome of progress in our intellectual grasp of the world around us. Shermer’s opening lines fully capture his thesis: “The metaphor of the bending moral arc symbolizes what may be the most important and least appreciated trend in human history—moral progress—and its primary cause is one of the most understated sources: scientific rationalism” (p. 11).

This is the starting point of a long (540 page) and fairly bumpy ride through a vast countryside that runs from intellectual history to pop culture and back again. For example, in just the second chapter, on the morality of war, the discussion includes references to Cicero, *Star Trek*, 18th century piracy, *Dr. Strangelove*, Adam Smith, the theory of Mutual Assured Destruction, the Tom Hanks movie *Captain Phillips*, Ronald Reagan, and many of the political leaders of the Cold War era, Kant, game theory, genocide, terrorism, a brief reprise of Pinker’s main thesis, and no fewer than 155 footnotes and citations. I do not fault Shermer for his encyclopedic grasp of his subject, but I do question whether this grab-bag approach to references assists in the development of his central thesis or detracts from it. At times, Shermer seems to lose track of his central argument.

Pinker's earlier thesis rested largely on a somewhat counterintuitive empirical claim: violence as a feature of human society has declined over the millennia. Establishing this claim requires some creative assembly and interpretation of historical data, and much of the ensuing discussion of his book has been about whether the evidence he presents is dispositive. Having proposed the evidential case, Pinker then offers some theories to explain the decline in violence, including the rise of nation states, the expansion of commerce, social mobility, and growing reliance on reason over superstition. Pinker's most important and original contribution is the empirical argument; however, for in his explanatory theory, he has been anticipated by others. Amartya Sen (2011), for example, cites David Hume as the originator of the general thesis that modernization, mobility, and the expansion of trade tend to have pacifying effects on society. Sen quotes Hume as follows:

Again suppose, that several distinct societies maintain a kind of intercourse for mutual convenience and advantage, the boundaries of justice still grow larger, in proportion to the largeness of men's views, and the force of their mutual connexions (sic). History, experience, reason sufficiently instruct us in this natural progress of human sentiments, and in the gradual enlargement of our regards to justice, in proportion as we have become acquainted with the extensive utility of that virtue. (Sen, 2011, para. 4)

Shermer's line of reasoning is similar to this, and he shows how it applies to a variety of specific behaviors that were once thought to be within the bounds of propriety but which now, in the light of our modern sensibilities, seem thoroughly immoral. For example, witch burning was seen in the 17th century as a way of keeping misfortune from overwhelming communities. It was, he argues, based on a utilitarian calculus that destroying one individual suspected of having malevolent powers was justified if it protected many others. The fault in this reasoning lay not so much in the moral argument, but in the unscientific premises on which it was based.

The primary difference between these premodern people and us is, in a word, science. Frankly, they often had not even the slightest clue of what they were doing, operating as they were in an information vacuum, and they had no systematic method to determine the correct course of action, either. The witch theory of causality, and how it was debunked through science, encapsulates the larger trend in the improvement of humanity through the centuries by the gradual replacement of religious supernaturalism with scientific naturalism. (p. 105)

The witchcraft case does, indeed, seem to lend strong support to Shermer's thesis that the growth of knowledge leads to moral progress. But the clarity of this example is not always matched by other cases he cites. In discussing the decline of slavery, for example, he asks, how do we (today) know it is wrong? His answer is that we now appreciate what he calls the principle of interchangeable perspectives: "I would not want to be a slave, therefore I should not be a slave master" (p. 207). As Shermer notes, this was, in fact, the main argument that Lincoln employed in his abolitionist speeches and writings. But this moral argument does not rest on new scientific evidence; it is a straightforward bit of *a priori* reasoning that was as available to people in 1860 (or 60 B.C.E.) as it is today.

The very idea of moral progress is a fairly modern one. Classical ethical theory sought to discover absolute moral values that were invariant over time and culture. But the social upheavals that began with the Enlightenment brought recognition that our "moral

imagination” –a phrase coined by Edmund Burke in 1790—does in fact change as history unfolds. For the early Pragmatists, this observation became the cornerstone of an epistemology that was unmoored from absolute certainty and which led to the Progressive ideology of social theorists such as John Dewey. Inherent in this line of thinking is a belief that our capacity for moral behavior is malleable and must be guided by the best available knowledge, and shaped by the construction of social institutions designed to produce positive outcomes.

As Dewey (1930) appreciated, faith in the capacity of humans to make progress is not the same as a theory about what motivates such progress or how to sustain it: “the idealism of man is easily brought to naught,” he once wrote:

Old things are to pass away and a new heaven and earth are to come into existence.  
[But] obstacles are encountered upon which action dashes itself into an ineffectual spray. (p. 235)

Shermer would have us believe that the march of science alone somehow induces new social customs and values, but this seems unlikely. As the current debate on environmental sustainability reveals, people are often slow to change behavior even in the face of an overwhelming scientific case that they should do so. Knowledge does not by itself provide volition, especially when patterns of behavior are deeply ingrained in social institutions.

In another recent discussion about how moral change happens, Kwame Anthony Appiah (2010) argues that the motivating factor is our sense of honor. In his telling, the end of trans-Atlantic slavery came about not so much out of concern for its victims but because of a rising abhorrence among the powerful about being associated with the practice. Appiah claims that this is a common feature of moral change: “Honor, in the form of individual dignity, powers the global movement for human rights” (p. 195). David Bromwich (2014) made a very similar point: “. . .the pressure for reform comes from a redefinition of self-respect or sympathy with myself. Some contrast between what I am and what I ought to be startles me and leads to self-discontent, which then issues in remedy or redress” (p. 17). These observations provide the core of a psychosocial theory of change that would seem to be a necessary component to a fully developed explanation of Shermer’s moral arc.

Shermer has provided a useful affirmation of faith in human perfectability. In spite of the discouraging headlines we all contend with every day, it just may be that we are making progress toward a more just and more benign society. But without further understanding into the forces of social and individual change, faith in human progress is mere utopianism. Hard work remains if we are to understand how to better harness the forces of history to work in our favor. After all, entropy—the gradual decline into disorder—is also a force of nature and, all too often, of social systems.

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