

Unitarian Universalist Community of Casper

Does the Arc of the Moral Universe Bend Toward Justice, and if so, how?

Laura Gossman, 1/15/2017

Introduction:

During our service on this weekend a year ago, we shared the wise words of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Often Dr. King stated that (despite great risks to himself and his family) he found meaning in what he did, and he kept his hope alive because he believed that “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” At the time I said: “UU’s may wonder if that’s really true, but our covenant is to live “AS IF” it is true.”

I found out later that Dr. King borrowed that idea from Theodore Parker, a 19th century Unitarian abolitionist minister, who in 1853 said:

“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. And from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice.”

I just assumed that both meant that a divine power, God, was bending the Arc toward justice, and I wasn’t sure that I could buy that. But it stayed in my mind....

And then I read an article by Jeff Lockwood in the August 2016 issue of UU World. Jeff is a member of UU Laramie, is a published writer and philosophy professor at U of Wyo. He has spoken to UU Casper before. Because of budget cuts, the philosophy department will be shut down in 2018. His article was about free speech vs. political power exercised to suppress it, and he ended with Rev. Parker’s sentiment on the arc of the moral universe bending toward justice. But then he said

“For my part, I do not pretend to grasp the sociopolitical universe; my eye reaches only to 2018 these days. I cannot extrapolate the fate of fossil fuels or free speech. But I am sure that the arc does not bend on its own.”

The arc does not bend on its own? Hummmm.... If it doesn’t bend on its own, who or what bends it, and how?

My most recent exploration on this topic is a 2015 book titled “The Moral Arc,” written by Michael Shermer. Shermer is a science historian, publisher of Skeptic magazine, writes articles for Scientific American, and has written several books on science, including the science of why we believe what we believe.

Shermer also keyed in on this idea of the arc of the moral universe, and begins his book with excerpts (including that phrase) from Dr. King’s speech on March 25, 1965, in front of the Montgomery court house at the completion of the voting rights march from Selma, AL. Shermer followed with Rev. Parker’s original writing from 1853. Shermer and I were obsessed with the same words: I tumbled it around in my mind for awhile, while Shermer wrote a 541 page book about it, complete with 500+ footnotes.

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Shermer states “my aim is to show that the Revs Parker and King were right—that the arc of the moral universe does indeed bend toward justice.” He sets forth amazing evidence of this that we’ll talk about, and concludes that we humans are far more moral now than ever in human history – that we have greatly expanded the “moral sphere” (or the things we feel are worth caring about) to include ever more people, and even animals. Imagine: expanding from caring about yourself, to your family, then more distant family, then your in-group, strangers and other groups, species, other mammal species, all sentient beings, the biosphere!

But that’s not all: Shermer writes

“For tens of millennia moral regress best described our species, and hundreds of millions of people suffered as a result. But then something happened half a millennium ago. The Scientific Revolution led to the Age of Reason and the Enlightenment, and that changed everything.”

That was when the arc started bending toward justice.

Shermer provides evidence that most moral improvement has been through the growth of (not religious) but secular forces, the most important being science and reason. And the arc bends also toward not only justice, but also toward truth and freedom – mainly through moving to more secular governments and politics, law and jurisprudence, moral reasoning and ethical analysis.

Shermer writes that people say to him “no way, our world is a mess!” but he explains that our brains have evolved to remember the immediate now, and our lifetimes are too short for us to see long term trends, and our media reports only negative news, but fail to point out that these events are still rare: if they were common they wouldn’t be news! We don’t get good news, for example we don’t hear that crime rates are at an all time low. “We will never see a headline that reads ‘ANOTHER YEAR WITHOUT NUCLEAR WAR.’”

Shermer wants to study what we have been doing right: and sites Steven Pinker’s book ***The Better Angels of our Nature*** (Erich Frankland talked to us a few years ago about this book that provided proof of dramatically reduced rates of war and violence) – Pinker said “Instead of asking Why is there War, ask Why is there peace?”

Shermer argues that Evidence-based reasoning is the hallmark of science today, and that leads us to determining true cause and effect relationships. “In this sense many apparently immoral beliefs are actually factual errors based on incorrect causal theories.” A prime example of this is the witch burnings in the middle ages. Lacking an explanation for plagues and storms and ruined crops, witches cavorting with the devil were blamed, so burning them was seen as a moral thing to do, and promoted by the religious “moral” institutions of the time! “What was a seemingly moral matter was actually a factual mistake.” Finding the true causes for these events through scientific

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investigation was ultimately what ended the practice. This mix up of facts and values explains a lot about our history.

Shermer mentions Voltaire, one of the great Enlightenment thinkers, who said “Those who can make you believe absurdities can make you commit atrocities.” And Shermer argues that Science and reason are best methods to get people to quit believing in absurdities. “Thus, employing science to determine the conditions that best expand the moral sphere is itself a moral act.”

MORALITY, Shermer defines as “How do we think and act with regards to the survival and flourishing of others.” And he defines “others” not as humans but as all “sentient beings,” or all those who are able to feel and to suffer.

So, in Shermer view, Moral progress is “the improvement in the survival and flourishing of individual sentient beings.” And he is referring to individuals, not groups, since it is individuals who feel and suffer.

Shermer provides evidence that we are born with moral emotions that have evolved to protect us (jealously, love, anger, fear, disgust) and we are born with a moral sense that is then influenced by local culture, customs, and upbringing. Experiments involving babies under a year old indicated an awareness of a sense of fairness and justice. In one experiment babies indicated a preference for a puppet that acted in a helpful manner, and rejected and even punished a puppet acting in a hurtful manner. This moral sense is real, measurable, and we can build a science of morality around it- what are the best conditions to expand the moral sphere and increase moral progress through the tools of reason and science?

Shermer discusses evolutionary elements – studies that show that humans 100,000 years ago were doing “speculative tracking” (drawing and testing hypotheses, “mind reading” – putting themselves into the mind of the animal). This evolved SKILL OF INFERENCE then led to the ***principle of interchangeable perspectives***, or putting yourself in someone else’s shoes.

Evidence of increased ABSTRACT REASONING AND THEREFORE MORAL INTELLIGENCE – A researcher named Flynn showed that IQ scores have been going up over 50-60 years, but not because of increases in concrete knowledge; rather because of improvements in the areas measuring abstract thinking (cognitive reasoning) – which means we are better able to put ourselves in the place of others. And there are studies that link an increase in abstract thinking to an increase in moral intelligence.

Many theories on the cause of this increase in the ability to do abstract thinking: Flynn believes it’s from a bunch of cultural factors: cognitively demanding jobs, leisure (video games!), schooling (problem solving – more whys than whats). Shermer thinks it’s also from spread of scientific thinking, expanded to moral world.

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SHERMER discusses another improvement in ways of thinking: MORE CONTINUOUS THINKING – vs. binary – the idea that good and evil are on a continuum, not categories of mutually exclusive things. Behaviors of selfishness and altruism have a broad range of expression of both. Just because a person acts selfishly does not mean they are not also altruistic. And conditions can ratchet these tendencies up or down. Analyzing moral issues in a binary or either/or manner leads to false conclusions based on exceptions.

Example of moral progress: We are living longer.

- Max life potential – 120 not changed
- Max life span (average, w/o premature deaths from accidents or disease) = 85 to 95 not changed
- Life expectancy (w accidents and disease) increased from 47 years in 1900 in the US to 78.9 years for Americans born in 2010.

Main cause is public health science and technology, flush toilets, sewers, water disposal technologies, clean water, hand washing, antiseptic surgery, vaccinations, pasteurization, road traffic safety, occupational safety, family planning, nutrition and diet etc, plus study of diseases and disease prevention. The way these diseases ARE (is) means we OUGHT to prevent them. People saw what disease and accidents did, and wanted to act morally to make life better for others.

Let's look at the evidence on homicide rates, based on studies by archaeologists and historians:

- prehistoric rates of violent death 1000 per 100,000 (OUR VIEW OF H/G TIMES AS PEACEFUL, COOPERATIVE, GENTLE IS NOT CORRECT – MUCH MORE VIOLENT DEATH THAN WE THINK)
- middle ages 100 per 100,000
- now 1 per 100,000 in London, 5 per 100,000 in US.

In discussing the time of the Scientific Revolution that led to the Age of Reason and the Enlightenment, Shermer explains that RELIGIOUS SUPERNATURALISM HAS BEEN SLOWLY AND GRADUALLY REPLACED WITH SCIENTIFIC NATURALISM.

EVERYONE in the pre-scientific world was superstitious and believed in magic per historian Keith Thomas. Life was unstable and harsh, there was no financial security, no banks, fires destroyed homes regularly, rates of disease were high. Then with the Scientific Revolution:

Astronomy replaced astrology
Chemistry succeeded alchemy
Probability theory displace luck and fortune
Insurance attenuated anxiety,

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Banks replaced mattresses for savings
City planning reduced fire risk
Social hygiene and germ theory dislodged disease,

The next step was the Shift from physical sciences to moral sciences – 2 intellectual revolutions: 1) Scientific Revolution - Copernicus On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres, Isaac Newton Principia Mathematica 1687, and 2) The age of Reason and the Enlightenment, from approx. 1687 to 1795 (Newton to the French Revolution).

Enlightenment thinkers French, Scottish had great influence on the framers of the US Constitution; Jefferson, Franklin, John Adams, Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, George Washington and others – they were all considered to be products of the Enlightenment and promoters of its philosophy of science and reason as the bases of a moral social order.

Evidence of morality of democracies: Researchers site evidence that democracy + economic interdependence+ membership in international community equals more peace, and evidence that no two democracies ever fight. The McDonalds peace theory states that no two trading partners will fight. There are exceptions/arguments, but no two democracies are alike, and its important to remember to do historical analysis in terms on a continuum, not a binary either/or analysis – then we can perceive nuances in the cause and effect relationships at work in the messiness of the real world.

Evidence of Progress in decline of War research shows progress in 2nd ½ of 20th century to 2010: – rate of people who die in battle has collapsed since WWII, and Political violence has also declined. Simon Fraser U study supported this “declinist” hypothesis of war concluded **“there are ample grounds for cautious optimism but absolutely none for complacency.”**

About Democracy: The Founders of our country thought of social governance as a problem to be solved rather than as power to be grabbed. Democracy was a method, not an ideology. Since no one knew the best way, they decided to set up system that allows experimentation: try, experiment, test, and then improve using science and reason. Jefferson said it required a free press, open access to knowledge, and freedom of its citizens to see and to think for themselves.

Shermer points out that in the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson’s draft language: truths “sacred and undeniable” was changed by Franklin to “self-evident,” drawing more from scientific determinism (Newton) and analytic empiricism. This changed the truth of equality and endowment with inalienable rights **from assertion of religion to assertion of rationality.**

Shermer illustrates we can measure the success of democracy with open borders and free trade and a dictatorship with closed borders and next to no trade: South and North Korea –

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- Country split in 1945, and each about the same in GDP, very homogeneous
- Both About the same until 1970s when SK implemented economic measures to grow economy, NK turned into a dictatorship.
- By 2013 South Korea far ahead of North Korea by every measure of prosperity and health – SK's are even physically taller than NK's because of better nutrition

What's the point? Shermer argues that we can make scientific case for liberal democracy, market economics, and international transparency as a means of increasing prosperity, health, and happiness.

RELIGION?

Shermer argues that religion is not the source of moral progress, and has in fact hampered moral progress. Evidence shows that religions have lagged behind social progress (e.g. slavery, LGBT rights), religions are tribal and xenophobic by nature, serving to regulate moral rules within the community but not seeking to embrace humanity outside their circle (except maybe to convert...)

Religion is rigid, because:

- The foundation of the belief of absolute morality grounded in one true god. Leads to belief that anyone who disagrees has “strayed” and is therefore unprotected by our moral obligations
- That unlike science, religion has no systematic process and no empirical method to use to determine validity of its claims, much less right and wrong, and
- The morality of the Bible is not one that works for most people, so doctrines derived from it can't be a catalyst for moral evolution.
 - Descriptions of and instructions about slavery (and certainly no statements calling it wrong!)
 - Penalty of death (Exodus and Leviticus) for many actions, like cursing the Lord, worshiping another god, witchcraft and wizardry, female loss of virginity before marriage, homosexuality, working on the Sabbath
 - Instructions on how to sell your daughter
 - Story of Abraham and Isaac – a beautiful test of faith vs. as sadistic loyalty test to order a father to kill his son. The answer s/b no!
 - No where is there renunciations of the death sentences or other ludicrous laws, and in fact Jesus said he did not come to destroy the law (Matthew 5:17-30). And Jesus introduced the concept of “thought crime” – just thinking about doing the crime is a crime (Matthew 9:27-29).

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Shermer states “The problem with any religious moral code that is set in stone is just that – it is set in stone. Anything that can never be changed has within its DNA the seeds of its own extinction. ”

Evidence of Progress in Freedom: Abolition of slavery: began in Iceland 1117, little progress until 1775, then exploded until now illegal everywhere, although still goes on via sex trafficking and slave labor.

Evidence of Progress in women’s rights:

- voting rights: US women 72 year battle achieved with passing of the 19th Amendment in 1920. In countries that allow citizens to vote, first allowed women to vote in Australia in 1902 to Saudi Arabia in 2015. Vatican City still allows men but not women to vote.
- Now more young women than young men in the US with 4 year college degrees, and the wage gap has closed significantly. For younger Americans – ages 24 to 34, women make 93% of men’s wages. But in Wyoming, we have a little more work to do: in 2014, Wyoming had the third worst wage gap in the country at 69 cents on the dollar (Wyoming Women’s Foundation).
- Incidents of rape and sexual assault in the US dropped from 5 per 1000 in 1995 to 2.1 per 1000 in 2010. Note 78% involves an offender who was a family member, intimate partner, friend or acquaintance. So 1.6 /1000 by someone they know, .5/1000 by a stranger (five one-hundredths of 1 percent).
- Reproductive rights: Throughout human history, evidence of widespread infanticide – back to ancient Greece and Rome. Traditional solutions to infanticide and abortion: orphanages and adoption agencies. Ultimate solution supported by science is in education and contraception (especially more effective means of contraception being developed). A study of South Korea examined contraception and abortion from 1960 to 2000, and found that as SK granted women the right to use contraception and it became more affordable and effective, abortion rates plummeted.

Progress in Gay Rights - Science tells us that gender preference is primarily determined by our genetics, prenatal biology, and embryological hormone development: approximately 1% to 5% are attracted exclusively to the same sex, and these preferences emerge at a very early age. Science has taught us that human sexuality is a spectrum, with each of us at some point on that spectrum.

Evidence shows significant progress in support of same-sex marriage, and younger generations much more supportive than older, and the religiously unaffiliated much more supportive than those who identify as religious (no news here). Not just

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generational change: also interchangeable perspectives, use of reason, and knowledge of science.

Of course, some governments are still highly repressive: Russia, Uganda, India – mostly religious arguments, threat to the institution of marriage.

Evidence of Progress on poverty: One economist's analysis is that the rate of worldwide poverty has dropped from 84% in 1820 to 21% in 2010, and is projected to reach zero by 2100.

Evidence of Progress in Animal Rights – upward trends in vegetarianism, science on unhealthiness of meat diets, consumes demanding humane raising/slaughter practices. How far will progress in animal rights go?

Evidence of progress in criminal justice - We've learned about the problem of mass incarceration and systemic discrimination in policing, so there is still a long way to go, but over the long term there has been judicial progress:

- Now only 2 European countries that still have the death penalty (down from 50 in 1925), but actual prisoners put to death in Europe fell to zero before the year 2000
- US executions and death sentences have dropped dramatically in the last 40 years.
- Science has helped criminal justice fairness with DNA analysis – organizations have been formed which use DNA evidence to exonerate wrongfully convicted people.
- Shermer discusses a trend to complement retributive justice with Restorative Justice programs in appropriate cases, especially juvenile (started in New Zealand with legislation in 1989) – that focus on making things right for the victim and keeping the wrong doer integrated into the community. I've read about programs in Colorado, and there will be a conference here on March 15th.

Shermer addresses Moral Regress and Pathways to Evil, and discusses Nazi

Germany in depth. There are hundreds of studies on human nature for good or evil. Earlier interpretation nature/nurture was that we are all devoid of free will, all primed to inflict violence for the flimsiest of excuses. Those interpretations have softened to consider the complexity of morality. Now these studies are seen as demonstration that all of us have conflicting moral tendencies that lie deep within. Moral nature includes propensity to be sympathetic, kind and good to our fellow kin and friends, but also to be xenophobic, cruel, and evil to tribal others. The dials for all of these can be adjusted up or down depending on the conditions.

Shermer spend substantial time analyzing the studies about Nazi Germany, and points out that “converting” the German people started small, based on self-righteous morality

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(moral judgment based on factual error), and increased incrementally – a “gradual escalation.” People became “desensitized.”

- First sterilization 1933 32k first year, 73k second year
- Next shift to euthanasia in 1939-physically handicapped children, then handicapped adults
- Got to be so many, started exploring gas as alternative to injections, and began building “gas chambers” around 1940.
- Then the bureaucracy evolved/broadened to support broad base gassing in work camps.

This is not simply a case of good, innocent people following orders of a few bad apples – there was deliberate and extensive long term conditioning: the people accepted the morality of protecting the master race, and became committed to the task. They became desensitized, and they developed deep feelings of loyalty and patriotism. The system also effectively used lavish rewards and severe punishments, and apparently lots of alcohol!

The good news: there has generally been a overall trend since WWII toward a more moral world, primarily from scientific understanding of the causes of evil and rational application of political, economic, and legal forces to drive it down.

To quote Shermer, “More people in more places more of the time have more rights, freedoms, liberties, literacy, education, and prosperity than at any time in the past.”

However, Shermer cautions that all moral progress has been incremental, and that is the best expectation and strategy going forward. Small increments. Fits and starts, Peaks and valleys, forward and back, but over the long run progress will happen: the factors supporting why it is happening and the evidence of what progress has already happened and the trends for the future (THE SCIENCE) are overwhelmingly in support of continued progress. Of course, humans are pretty bad at predicting the future, so I’ll repeat one thought: **there is cause for optimism but none at all for complacency.**

Science and reason may be the primary reason for moral progress, but it can’t bend the arc by itself. It also requires determined people with passion and love, and Governments that pass laws to uphold rights, and religious conscience, and soaring rhetoric of amazing people like Dr. King, and the simple, but clear and strong voices of each and every one of us.

So what can I do to help bend the arc? I can keep learning, questioning, and I can speak up - silence is complicit. Speaking up?? Scary! I’ll need study to be clear about my views, and make sure they’re not based on mistakes of fact. I’ll need to practice what I should say – since I want to speak from love - in ways that build bridges not walls, that respect other’s dignity and inherent worth, but clearly state my views, to speak and act in ways that are effective and do not serve to escalate our already destructive polarity.

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What about religion's role? Well, as we've learned, organized religion doesn't have the greatest record in bending the arc toward justice, but what about Unitarian Universalism? Well, we look to many sources of wisdom, including religious and secular sources, we embrace learning and science and reason. Add the guidance and balance of our values and our principles (from recognizing the inherent worth and dignity of every person, to search for truth and meaning, to supporting democratic principles, to recognizing our part in the interdependent web of all existence) - these all work toward moral progress; toward improving the survival and flourishing of individual sentient beings. And UU's focus on "deeds" not "creeds," ... that it's what we **do** in our lives that saves us? This is all exactly what's needed to help bend the arc of the moral universe toward justice, and truth, and freedom.

I'm glad I'm here, and part of this dynamic and progressive faith. I'm optimistic and hopeful. I hope you all feel a little of that too. Thank you.