

HM
101
W58

A THEORY OF
SPIRITUAL PROGRESS

By WILLIAM ALLEN^d WHITE

HM
101
W58

Cornell University Library

BOUGHT WITH THE INCOME
FROM THE
SAGE ENDOWMENT FUND
THE GIFT OF
Henry W. Sage
1891

A.25.8.338

137x1711

N 6 '39
FEB 10 1947

DATE DUE

MAR 29 1947

~~JAN 8 1954 H S~~

~~LIBRARY~~ RLG

Cornell University Library
HM101 .W58

A theory of spiritual progress:



3 1924 030 238 665
olin



Cornell University
Library

The original of this book is in
the Cornell University Library.

There are no known copyright restrictions in
the United States on the use of the text.

<http://www.archive.org/details/cu31924030238665>

A Theory of Spiritual Progress

HM

101

w58

A Theory of Spiritual Progress

An address delivered before the Phi
Beta Kappa Society of Columbia
University in the City of
New York

By WILLIAM ALLEN WHITE

The Gazette Press, Emporia, Kansas



HM
101
W57

A.25833^o

Copyright, November, 1910
by
W. A. WHITE

**This edition is limited to six hundred
copies, of which this copy is**

No. 533

and is signed by the author

¶ How curious it is that those makers of myths who wrote the story of the genesis of life upon this earth set down light as the first created thing. Science has learned little more than this. The ceaseless flow and ebb of life upon the planet, is from light and air and earth and water and grass and animals to man, there in man to glow for a time as a divine light, and then to pass back, broken and spent, to light and earth and air and water and grass, again to resume the upward flow from light to light. From inorganic matter to

organic, from organic matter to consciousness, from consciousness to aspiration, from aspiration to endeavor, from endeavor to a tale that is told, "dust to dust, ashes to ashes"—so go the interchanging cycles. And all the wise men in the world are watching the journey of that mysterious thing called life, as it grows from chlorophyll into history. They are trying to find out what life is.

¶ But life has eluded microscopes, crucibles, test tubes and scales. Scientists seek to corner life in chromosomes, centrosomes

and cytoplasms, but life recedes further into the ether. Then they tell us that matter, inorganic and organic, is only ether in its various forms of motion, and that "ether is the realest thing in the world." But if we ask what is this ether that moves to make life, the wise men may only answer with the children—

Whither she goes
And whither she blows—
Nobody knows.

¶ Two things only will scientists vouchsafe: First that life is, and second that it seems to have direction. It is outward bound, but to an unknown port. In

closing a review of the growth of the theory of evolution—a review which the world's scientific press has praised with enthusiasm—an American scientist, Vernon L. Kellogg,* says:

¶ But an automatic modifying principle which results in determinate or purposive change—that is, in the change needed as an indispensable basis for the upbuilding of the great fabric of species diversity and descent; is not that the very thing provided for by the simple or mechanical impossibility of perfect identity between process and environment in the case of one individual, and process and environment in the case of another? But

*"Darwinism Today," published by Henry Holt & Company.

I do not know. Nor in the present state of our knowledge does any one know, nor will any one know—until we find out. We are ignorant—terribly, immensely ignorant. And our work is to learn.

¶ The Hebrew poet came to the same conclusion thousands of years ago when he asked: "Who by searching shall find out God?"

¶ And yet the further we go into life, whether in the laboratory or in the street, the surer we are of the working of what the scientist calls the "determinate or purposive change" and what the psalmist calls the "way of the

Lord." Between the light where-
with the chlorophyl is made and
and the light that never was on
land or sea, the light of human
aspiration, there thrills a divine
purpose, moving the tide of life
from light to light. "Deep call-
eth unto deep," and the world
problem is to understand the
call. What is this puzzling
complexus of human relations?
Is there a golden thread of tangi-
ble workable faith running
through the snarled scale of
human existence? Doth Job fear
God for nought? Surely if a
"determinate or purposive

change" is needed "as an indispensable basis for the upbuilding of the great fabric of species diversity and descent," it is needed here and now to explain human evolution; to clarify the final form of the first created light that comes down to us from that mute dark age when "the spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters." For here and now we find the divine light in man. The upward growth of mankind is hardly disputed. Every link in the chain from the savage to the philanthropist is present. There

are no breaks, no gaps. Changing habits of life have changed our morals. Customs grow stale and new ones replace them. And with our changing habits of life many cruel customs have dropped away; kindly habits have replaced them. Our institutions are continually sloughing off cruelties. Human sacrifice has gone; the torture chamber has gone; the stake has gone; the death penalty is going; child imprisonment is going. Starving through inequities of distribution of the common wealth of the nations is ready to start on its

journey to the junk pile with the rack and the stake and the pilory. Inventions make life easier for man; and hardships in the social system degenerate, atrophy, fall lower and lower in the social scale and finally disappear. The common ways of the common people in civilization are thus made easier than the ways of life in savagery. Through inventions and their use we seem to see in humanity at least one phase of the "way of the Lord," the "determinate or purposive change" that is building up the

"great fabric of species diversity and descent" in humanity.

¶ But something more than invention has been moving humanity forward. Customs have indeed changed. But change has had a purpose that we call growth. It is fair to ask how has this growth been achieved? The "determinate or purposive change" must have some modifying principle. If there is direction there must be a director, who in turn must have a prod. Now, what is the prod that ever keeps mankind going in a given direction? Let us

suppose that sin and evil or whatever we may call life's somber forces that make for pain or unhappiness or sorrow, are infractions of the social code. Whatever else the social code may be—it is the sum of the customs of the people; it has public sentiment behind it; it is more powerful than any human law. Whoever violates public sentiment, whether he refuse to join in the cannibal feast ordained by savagery, or whether he takes railroad rebates condemned by civilization, or wears an orange ribbon on a green day, he feels

the disapproval of his neighbors. That disapproval is a basis for the conviction of sin. It is at least one of the reasons why his conscience pricks him. But customs change; often within the lifetime of one generation they change so fast that a man is ashamed in middle life of the things he did, that were countenanced by society in his youth.

¶ As men widen their sphere of knowledge, they broaden their sensibilities. As the sensibilities of the millions broaden, society redistributes its rewards, changes its code; evils multiply;

sin increases. But it is not the number of evil deeds that grows, it is the public sense of evil that is widening.

¶ Let us suppose that the moral sense of society grows as the sensibilities of the masses increase. These sensibilities affect men's social habits and customs. As we appreciate suffering, we put a ban on those customs that cause suffering. Men with smaller sensibilities than the average in any social group, men who cause suffering, grow unhappy. They feel the grind of public sentiment upon them.

And, following the course of least resistance, such men gradually conform to the ways of society, and thus slowly the prod in the hands of the director of humanity, drives humanity forward. This then, is our theory:

¶ Consciousness is sensibility; in the human creature, either in the mass or in the individual, as time operates upon sensibility, it is increased. As human sensibilities widen, imagination broadens. Suffering cries for help. He that hath ears, hears; cruelty becomes intolerable, as

men become conscious that it exists. Through the sensibilities of humanity, kindness grows. Thus the race moves from the material world into the spiritual. At least we may take this as a theory of spiritual growth.

¶ Whether the inheritance of progress comes to humanity through variation of the social body or through modification of the individual is not important. Indeed, it is not important to question whether or not the inheritance is passed to the individual at all. For it is certain that the inheritance is seen in

the modification of the vast social body of civilization. Progress to some upward ideal of living among men is the surest fact of history. It is more definite than dates or battles or epochs or eras or forms of government. Everything else but the growth of human habits through the widening of human sensibilities toward a more perfect art of living is of secondary importance in history. For men were strong when they held slaves; they wrote wise saws when they made human sacrifices. There was culture even

in Corinth and Sodom, and men were orderly under the government of Rome. They were industrious in the days of the inquisition, and were pious when they burned witches. Yet until men began to be kind, civilization was shifting and uncertain. And only as brotherhood and good will are in the foundation of modern civilization will it endure. Just now the civilized world is trying to establish democracy. It seems to express the yearnings of the race for the elusive ideal of the art of life. Democracy's exponents say that

it is altruism trying to state itself in the social equation. If they are right, democracy will endure. Otherwise men will make short shift of democracy as they have made short shift of theocracy, autocracy and anarchy.

¶ For if there is a golden thread of faith shot through the maze of life, it is faith that the "determinate or purposive change" moving in men—"the way of the Lord,"—is moving toward a social order wherein men may express their good will toward one another at less material sac-

rifice than they expend in expressing good will as things are now. For only one thing has persisted through the changing of political forms during the passing centuries. That is the tendency of men to be kind to one another in their primary relations. The "determinate or purposive change" needed as "an indispensable basis for upbuilding the great fabric" of human society, is the gradually widening good will among men as their sensibilities broaden—from the good will of the family to that of the tribe, from that to

the clan, from that to the state,
from that to the nation.

¶ Thus it may be reasonably asserted that the impelling current in the tide of human customs and habits now moving human affairs is kindness of men to men. Our modern civilization is not measured by its commerce, not by its politics, not by its religion, not by its literature. These are by-products of our habits of good will. Modern commerce is vast, because on the whole it is honest. Governments are strong, because they are based so largely upon common con-

sent and so little upon force. Religion is useful only as it teaches habits of kindness, and modern literature is permanent only as it impresses altruistic ideas definitely upon the masses. If the realest thing in the material world is ether, perhaps the realest thing in the spiritual world is the habit of kindness. It may be that the simile will go further. They say that all the material manifestations of the world, the earth, the waters of the earth, the sky above, the lightning, the whirlwind, the trees, the grass, these bodies of

ours and the "many inventions" of men, are merely forms of motion in the ether. May it not be true that all that is worthy and permanent in our human relations, whether in the home or in the state, is but the spirit of kindness, urging us forward to some perfection in the art of life, to an undreamed of ideal in our human relations? The physical cycle from light and water and earth and air through organized vegetable masses reduced for combustion in animals to be returned to light and water and earth and air again—

that is a narrow cycle. May there not be a broader cycle? Where light and water and earth and air in their ceaseless round upon this globe become transmuted into human aspirations, when this corruption puts on incorruption, has not a larger cycle begun? May not the cycle of the ether widen as it joins the cycle of the spirit? The one may be said to resemble the revolutions of the earth upon its axis, moving forward in a cycle of material evolution. Is there not also an ellipse beyond the narrow material cycle whose first curves men are just

beginning to discern—a spiritual ellipse that will have its turning in some unknown eternity that we may not fathom even in our dreams?

¶ Such questions must remain purely speculative. For after all, the world is not a chocolate éclair; there is meanness in it; there is injustice in it and inhumanity in it. The training that comes to the race as it combats meanness, goes through injustice and encounters inhumanity, is necessary training. The selfish forces of life have their place in life. War has played its part in

evolution; it has taught us much; so has pestilence, so has famine, so has lust, so has hunger. "There must needs be offense: but woe to him through whom offenses come." And millions of men and women in this part of the world that we call civilized, are bound so closely to the rack of harsh experience that they cannot see the essential nobility of their own lives—lives that in dull anguish and misery still find room for a thousand daily kindnesses; lives that still are filled, even the most sordid of these lives, with sacrifices

and with loyalty to unworthy causes. And this sacrificial loyalty is the fruit of a greater faith than their lips or hearts could confess. God knows these lives are hard and bitter. God knows that the world is full of such lives. Yet God knows also that from the grimy, sodden-witted lives of the millions helping their kind in instinctive folk charity born from the common sensibility of civilized men, springs the seed of human progress. Therein lies much of our ultimate hope of whatever millennium may come.

¶ There is a practical side to whatever spiritual truth we may find. For as modern civilized society is organized, at least two fundamental spiritual facts are obvious: First, that the current of modern progress in the various organized activities of men is impelled more largely than ever before by good will; and, secondly, that so far as the individual man is kind he is happy, even if he is not materially prosperous. Consider the first proposition, that in public activities men are largely impelled by motives of good will. Is not the

whole tendency of modern politics toward helping the man up from below? What are public schools but aids to the prostrate to rise? What is universal suffrage but an endeavor to arm the weak against the aggressions of the strong? What are all these attempts to purify our modern politics, to purge the parties by direct nominations, to establish the referendum in cities, to abolish corporate campaign contributions, to give to the people the right of recall upon public officers and the right to initiate legislation? To be sure they are

the weapons of modern democracy. Certainly they are found not merely in America, but all over civilization. But fundamentally and chiefly they are instruments which the advocates of democracy believe will lift the weak man into a better heritage than he enjoys. What is this movement for old age pensions, for workingmen's compensation laws, for employers' liability laws, for welfare work in the great industries, profit sharing, workingmen's clubs, labor unions, institutional churches, parks and playgrounds, free li-

braries and factory sanitation, but a part of the large tendency of the world's strong men to make brothers of the weak so they may grow strong and wise. These ameliorating influences have come into the world because men's sensibilities have so widened that a righteous man is ashamed to ignore his neighbor's suffering or his neighbor's wrongs.

¶ The public activities of men along altruistic lines cover orders, lodges, associations, covenants, organizations—are as many as the sands of the sea. And so generally has good will monop-

olized the parliamentary form, that men meeting for purely selfish ends today have to make their meetings secret and hide their purposes.

¶ Consider the second proposition, that man as an individual is happy only as he is kind. Of course it is impossible to say just what man is happy and what man is unhappy. But approval of one's kind probably is one of the things that makes for happiness. Who is surer of public approval than the generous adversary, the chivalrous foe, the kindly competitor? Is

the rich man always praised? Does he not often drain a bitter cup? Is the powerful man sure of public acclaim in his mean use of power? Is the proud man encouraged in his pride? It pays to be decent, is a proverb of the people. That means only that the spiritual is dominant in a material world. The man who is ever looking for the main chance is the final loser of the game. Greed poisons itself and dies. The plutocrat is pulling against the current. Great wealth in and of itself today often is regarded by

society as a handicap to a man or an institution. The good that money will do is limited. The good that a man may do is limited only by his talents. Perhaps Mr. Roosevelt is wrong in some of his tenets. But right or wrong, he has inspired more men to righteousness in public life than a millionaire could call forth with the millions of Wall street. And all the king's horses and all the king's men cannot put America back to the lower ideals of the past century. The gain is permanent because our sensibilities have in-

creased in matters political. And Mr. Roosevelt, who has promoted the progress of his country, manifestly is exultant and happy, while those who have devoted their lives to games of greed before all the world are seeking happiness in mere pleasure and "dig for it more than for hid treasures." Wherever we look in this world with clear eyes, whether we see great movements or great men, we find the cycle of the spiritual enfolding the cycle of the material.

¶ We may as well make up our

minds that to all good intents and for all high purposes this is not a material world. Whoever would achieve any worthy thing must found it upon the common law of kindness known as righteousness. The world's greatest goods are not set in the ether. Its most permanent rewards are not material. We are all working in clay and it is our duty to work well, but our pay should be such stuff as dreams are made of. The fool is he who works in clay and takes his pay in clay, for "the fool said in his heart, there is no

God." The material cycle from light and earth and air and water through grass and beasts back to the elements, is a vain unmeaning repetition. The greater cycle is an eternal journey. In life, man has his choice between the treadmill of the eternal grind, or the path of the eternal journey. It is his only choice in all the scheme of things. For on his choice he builds his character; from his character and not from his environment will come his happiness. In the eternal grind man may pile dollars on dollars by the million.

He may generate great material power; he may have glory, or in the same grind he may work long, lonesome hours for poor pay. It is all the same. The pleasures that come as rewards for material success—the pleasures that come for cash—are apples of Sodom. The poor selfish man is as well paid without them as the rich selfish man is paid with them. Pleasure is not happiness. Nor is poverty misery. Happiness is usefulness; meanness is waste, and misery is more the result of character than of environment. A man

never succeeds in a large sense in working for himself. Only until a man has got out of himself, until his effort is for others, until, in short, he is out of the eternal grind and in the wider spiritual cycle, may a man really achieve. For it is folly to pull against the current—spending strength to no end. Either the fool is right or he is wrong. Either there is a God or there is not. If there is not, whence this “determinate or purposive change” toward higher things in nature and in man; if there is a God, we cannot fool him. So

why treat him as a confederate in our crimes? Why should we expect material rewards for spiritual service? Why envy material success? Why lose faith because the wicked seem to prosper? Why should not those who seek material rewards by selfish methods get them? There is nothing to hinder them. It is none of God's business. They are out of his world. Why do the wicked prosper, asked Job in rebellion. They do not.

¶ They get things and things oppress them. Things curse them. Things corrupt their

children. Things drive away their friends. Things keep them awake nights. Things make men cowards and cheats, and bend them to unholy tasks. It is the crown of follies to believe that those insensible persons whom we choose to call "the wicked" prosper. For the world of the spirit has its own laws. And these laws do not run counter to gravitation and cohesion and the centripetal forces. ¶ Men of flabby faith are jealous of others with goods and chattels. These jealous men desire material rewards for spir-

itual services, and curse God, longing for fleshpots. Then is not their covetousness their punishment? Indeed, is not all sin its own penalty? Does not greed and lust and meanness shrivel the soul so that it may not enjoy the marvelous spectacle of life passing before us? Thus the greedy man may gain the world and lose his own soul. He must lose his own soul if he gains the world, for he moves in the cycle of the ether, and cannot travel in the larger cycle. But nevertheless he may gain the world. There is no law, physical or spir-

itual, against that. He may excite his senses. He may have pleasure. There is no law against that. He may dodge the penalties of the physical world. That is not impossible. ¶ All thieves are not caught; but all are punished. The senses grow dull. Even pleasure vanishes. Pleasure is at best a counterfeit of happiness. It buys nothing in the end, and those who traffic in counterfeits are outlawed from the higher law. That is their penalty. And whoever would add more fire to hell for them, than they have,

needs the fire for himself.
¶ But in the outer cycle the world's work goes on. Mothers bear and rear their young; men help their brothers. In the great workshops and offices, in the streets, on the farms, in grand houses and in humble dwellings men are working for the joy of achievement, working because the day's work must be done, working in pain and in anguish and still in the joy of service. Theirs is not the material world; theirs is not the material reward. For them, what though the scales do not bal-

ance, and their social service find an inadequate material return. What though they are underpaid in money—the certificate of title for social service. God is paying them in the joy of service and society may keep the change and choke on it. Is the mother's rocker on a meter, that society must pay her? Neither is the brother's hand to be weighed in the market basket. The clock watcher is paid in terms of time; the worker for good will is paid in terms of eternity. And yet, through some inexorable law whose workings

we may not understand, there seems to be a reckoning for society. The social organization so insensible to human rights that it cheats the individual pays toll on its journeys—or perishes.

¶ The trash-heaps of history are piled high with nations that were cruel and unfair to those who did the rough work of their times without fair return. The land that cheats the workers, cheats itself. Indeed and in truth does righteousness exalt a nation.

¶ It may be men will say

that we do not live in primitive times; we have great things to do. But no great achievement ever came without great vision, and great vision does not come for money or power or fame. No work is so great that it needs be done in meanness. Would you dig your isthmian ditch, build your college, lay your railroad, proclaim your God, put up your sky-scraper, frame your law, promote your administration? Then keep it in the outer cycle—in the world of the spirit. Have faith in it; consecrate it with love of humanity

and men will come to help from the ends of the earth with material things to make your dream come true. Nothing is so cheap as stone and iron and leg service. Reformers often lack faith. They repine for money. If Christ had waited until he could earn money by miracles to hire missionaries, where would Christianity be? The plan of salvation needed no financial basis to establish it. It needed a crucifixion. Most reform needs something like that more than money. The reformer must be a crusader for

the spiritual world is no place for the dabbler. Louis XVI without heart or bowels lived at Versailles in the material world; and when his head rolled into the basket it was an addled, trowsled old head in the basket—nothing more. But John Brown's body paid the mortgage on two million souls. The spiritual world offers its heroes little loot and much fighting. It promises long marches, hard bivouacs, keen suffering and, in the end, lonely and perhaps shameful death. Faith has few crowns for her champions. For

one John Brown ten thousand died at Cold Harbor. Yet who would recall them? Who would not trade a storied urn and animated bust for a place in the trenches with the nameless dead of that battlefield?

¶ But the doubter will ask, how does kindness grow? How is good will cultivated among men? Why have we moved up from barbarism? Through what organ has the "determinate or purposive change" worked the way of the Most High? Humanity is a bundle of contradictions. Yet spiritually there is a law of

regression. We tend to spiritual averages. No one is all good nor all bad. There is no race of moral giants, any more than a race of physical giants. Nor are there races of moral dwarfs and moral starvelings. The divine spark is in every soul. In a crisis the meanest man may become a hero. Indeed there is no profession of heroes. The charlatan, the oppressor of the poor, the courtesan, or the thief, has seen the spark of divinity flare up within him in some great crisis, and as it burned it has shown a hero. It

is doubtful whether any human being falls so low that he will not give up even his life upon a grand impulse to save a fellow sufferer in agony. This holy spirit is in every heart. The inheritance of the divine spark is an universal endowment. It is the fundamental claim men have upon one another as brothers. We are equals in the democracy of the holy spirit—in the potential spark of heroism. Great souls are they whose enlightened sensibilities make each day a grand crisis, every neighbor an object of sac-

rifical love. But the fire that burned in Christ's heart, and the fire that burned in the thief's heart who gave his life for a child in the street, are one fire. Christ knew this. He accepted the scarlet woman as sister, and the publican as brother. Over and over the spark is planted in untold billions of hearts as the ages pass; and slowly as our sensibilities widen, our customs change. So comes progress, and the fire glows larger in our common lives. That divine spark is the realest thing we know in the universe—more

real even than the ether. For while we have the mighty round of things upon this globe, from light and air and water and earth up through vegetation to animal life; there comes a place where the narrow material cycle touches a segment of the wider round—where the ether thrills with a human vision. There in that holy of holies, the human consciousness, creation's plan begins anew, and God says, let there be light, and lo, there is light.

BOOKS BY
William Allen White

“The Real Issue”

A Book of Kansas Stories

\$1.00 Net

“The Court of Boyville”

\$1.25 Net

“Stratagems and Spoils”

\$1.25 Net

“In Our Town”

\$1.25 Net

“A Certain Rich Man”

\$1.50 Net

“The Old Order Changeth”

\$1.25 Net

THE MACMILLAN COMPANY, *Publishers*

66 Fifth Avenue

NEW YORK CITY



