

Technological Advance as a Means to The Alleviation of Human Suffering

By: William Morrisette, MA

To what extent can scientific advancement reduce the incidence of poverty and related human suffering in the world? C.P. Snow believed the answer was “significantly” and to this end he argued that the industrialized nations of the world had a duty and strong self interest in promoting the transfer of technology. As a defense, Snow pointed to the fact that “people in the industrialized countries are getting richer, and those in the non industrialized countries are at best standing still so that the gap between the industrialized countries and the rest is widening every day.” Snow’s contention was that future peace and prosperity for the entire world depended upon industrialized nations actively exporting scientific skill to non industrialized nations in an effort to reduce the gap between the rich and the poor.

It has been 47 years since Snow presented his theory and as Stefan Collini points out in his introduction to [The Two Cultures](#), the passage of time has cast some doubt on the feasibility of Snow’s theory. Collini points to evidence that over the past thirty years cultural practices and social attitudes of those in non industrialized countries have hindered the process. It appears that a case could also be made that over the past thirty years industrialized nations have hit a glass ceiling in relation to their overall ability to reduce poverty within their bounds.¹ If scientific advancement alone was the determinant for the alleviation of human suffering, one would expect modern nations to be further along than is currently the case which begs the question “what other significant determinants might impact the ability of scientific advancement to alleviate human suffering in the world?”

In order to entertain this question further it might be helpful to reduce the context and take a simple example (and one of Snow’s visions for the future) elimination of hunger. We currently have the means to eliminate hunger and malnutrition across the globe. Scientific advancement has provided us with the ability to grow, manufacture and distribute an amount of food sufficient to satisfy the needs of the approximately 6 billion people on the planet yet, every sixty seconds approximately twenty eight children die from hunger or disease related to malnutrition. Furthermore, these twenty eight deaths per minute are not exclusive to non industrialized countries but also exist within the richest nations of the world.² This would appear to support a contention that scientific advancement, in and of itself, cannot eliminate human suffering and that there are additional components.

If we reduce the context further and, instead of a country, consider the most basic component of that country, an individual human being and take the example of hunger and malnutrition we might consider the ability of a single human being to alleviate the hunger/malnutrition of another individual human being. Just as an industrialized country has the means to alleviate hunger and malnutrition in a non industrialized country so to, the average human being, has the means to alleviate the hunger and malnutrition of another human being. The average human being has the knowledge and financial means

to secure adequate food and the resources to deliver that food to a fellow human being yet, the average human being does not follow through and “feed” their fellow man. The average human might contribute every now and then to a charity that battles hunger/malnutrition or might approve of a certain amount of tax contribution to be dedicated to that general cause but the average human being does not commit fully to this end. It is not that the average human being is not sympathetic with those who are suffering, or that they don’t believe it is a worthwhile goal; it is just that they are not willing to commit all of their means to that end. However it came to be, the average human being has identified/prioritized other ends that they apply their means to more fully and at the expense of addressing a fellow individuals hunger. From this we might extend that if the majority of individuals within a country are not willing to dedicate their means significantly to the end of “alleviating human suffering” then it is impossible for a country as a representation of the will of its members to significantly dedicate national means to the end of alleviating another nations suffering.

We began with the question “to what extent can scientific advancement reduce the incidence of poverty and related human suffering in the world?” and from this analysis we might put forth that the answer is “to the extent that human beings prioritize the alleviation of human suffering as a relevant end and apply their will to its actualization.” In 1974 at the World Food Summit, President Kennedy told delegates “we have the means, we have the capacity to eliminate hunger from the face of the earth in our lifetime. We need only the will.”³ Snow’s ultimate vision of “Peace. Food.” and “No more people than the earth can take.” Appears to be a morally just end that is worthy of continued debate. The key may be to abandon an assumption that technological means or moral justness alone will direct human will or to assume that ends other than the alleviation of human suffering, are any less valid.

Footnotes

1. Smeeding, Timothy: Rainwater, Lee; Burtless, Gary; United States Poverty in a Cross National Context, Luxemborg Income Study, Working Paper No. 244, Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, Syracuse University, Syracuse NY, September 2000
2. Andre, Claire and Velasquez, Manuel, Markkula Center for Applied Ethics, World Hunger: A Moral Response, Issues in Ethics, V. 5, N. 1, Spring 1992
3. Bunch, Sandra, Hunger Report Editor, Bread for the World Institute Releases 14th Annual Hunger Report, 2004.