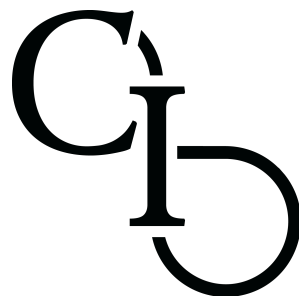


Civilization

Module 1

Hallmarks and Enemies

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Hallmarks and Enemies

There's a difference between right and wrong, better and worse, progress and stasis, truth and falsehood. Everyone *says* that these dichotomies are obvious, but few take them seriously.

For instance, if some ideas are more moral than others, it follows that some *cultures* are more moral than others. Similarly, some societies really do make progress, while others flounder. Some ideas really do contain more truth than others. Some choices really are better than others. Unfortunately, these facts are denied, avoided, ridiculed, and suppressed across the West. Never mind how this came to be—it is a civilizational problem, not only for the West, but for all of humanity.

Denying the truth of Western superiority means never investigating *why* the West makes so much more progress than the rest of humanity. It means failing to discover the institutions, principles, and values that underlie the progress that the West has made. It means taking for granted the necessary ingredients for how a society can transform from a worse one to a better one. It means putting those very ingredients at risk in the West, and it means placing them farther out of reach for the non-West than they need to be.

Accepting the truth of Western superiority, on the other hand, leaves one wondering: *Why?* Why is the West the greatest civilization that the world has ever seen? What are the attributes that distinguish the West from the rest? Once we identify those, we have a much deeper understanding of which elements of the West to preserve, which to change, and which to abolish. And this understanding not only helps us improve our own society—with the recipe for progress in hand, we can, if we so choose, spread them to every other society on the planet. Everybody wins.

To discover the attributes of the West that explain why it makes progress, one must first appreciate the facts that *errors are inevitable*, and that *mankind was born into ignorance and poverty*. Only in light of these facts does it make sense that progress of any kind demands an explanation. (As it happens, so many of those who either take the West for granted or deny its superiority literally do not know these facts.)

If errors are inevitable, then any *particular* error cannot be what distinguishes all other civilizations from the West. The distinguishing factor cannot be, for example, that the West's suite of scientific theories at a given moment is more advanced than that of the non-Western world. Nor can the distinguishing factor be that the West has more secure property rights than the non-Western world at a given moment.

On the contrary, if a stagnant society happened to have a deeper scientific worldview and more secure property rights than the West at any given moment, then we should expect the West to catch up to, and eventually outpace, the stagnant society. Because errors are inevitable, the stagnant society's scientific theories and system of property rights will have flaws, gaps, and inconsistencies that have yet to be accounted for. But if the society lacks—or has lost—the ingredients necessary to make progress *at that point in time*, then all of those shortcomings will be frozen in place. The West, on the other hand, is capable of resolving errors in its scientific theories and system of property rights, allowing it to improve upon both until they have far outstripped those of the stagnant society.

The distinguishing characteristic of the West, then, is that it *corrects errors far better than any historical or contemporary culture*. More generally, societies are characterized by the degree to which their various institutions are capable or incapable of correcting errors.

The means of error correction, whether within a single mind, the society's culture, a private organization, or a political institution, are necessarily capable of resolving a wide class of errors (potentially all possible errors, though not always). That is, the means of error correction catalyze *processes* that can resolve, improve, or ameliorate a lot more than just a single erroneous idea, action, movement, or position.

This is why judging a given society by its errors at a given moment in time is less fundamental, less important than judging that society by its means of correcting errors at that point in time. (This has enormous ramifications for the field of history.)

Each of the West's means of error correction themselves have different attributes, as each evolved to solve a particular problem (or collection of problems). The institution of science has peer review, an openness to novel hypotheses, and a university system that (at its best) facilitates both. The institution of political democracy fosters the removal of leaders and policies in favor of an alternative that (some) citizens think will better solve the problems of the day. The institution of cultural norms like freedom of expression, freedom of lifestyle, and freedom of life trajectory facilitate individuals making their

own mistakes, learning from them, and changing their minds and choices accordingly. The institution of the market facilitates the allocation and reallocation of scarce resources, as entrepreneurs and consumers alike continuously sell and buy, respectively.

During this course, we will highlight these *hallmarks of civilization* and explain their significance in terms of error correction and the growth of wealth and knowledge, and in light of our best theories of epistemology, personhood, and economics (see our other Courses for a detailed elaboration of those subjects). Some hallmarks that we will investigate include, but are not limited to:

1. *Optimism*: knowing that problems are soluble prevents us from giving up on trying to make progress in any part of the human project.
2. *Traditions of criticism*: because all knowledge grows via conjecture and criticism, a society that wants to make continuous progress requires institutions that foster peaceful and productive argument. Moreover, these institutions must survive the overturning of their participants' worse ideas with better ideas.
3. *Freedom of speech*: because the growth of knowledge is unpredictable, there is no predetermined path to discovery. We must therefore be tolerant of speech that we find bizarre, offensive, ignorant, or irritating—you never know which apparently bad idea uttered by one person will lead to a new and good idea thought of by another person.
4. *Integration of foreigners*: the institutions that make up the West are primarily composed of ideas that anyone can learn, though the crucial task of integrating those who, say, flee a static society into the West is nontrivial and indeed vital. For every such integration, the West waxes and its foreign enemies wane.
5. *Integration of children*: the institution of the family solves several problems, one of which is how to integrate new people with virtually no knowledge (namely, children) into the society as autonomous citizens eager to participate in the dynamic society's wealth- and knowledge-generating institutions.
6. *Individualism*: it is the individual—not the tribe, not the family, not the society—who has the capacity to explain the world, to understand it, to suffer, to be happy, to make choices, to create knowledge.

7. *Egalitarianism*: there is only one kind of individual—any person is as capable of making progress, experiencing any physically possible qualia, and generating knowledge as any other. It is in this sense that egalitarianism is true. People are not equal in terms of skill, interest, genes, phenotype, wealth, opportunity, nor life experience. But people are equal with respect to their ability to generate new knowledge and continuously solve the endless stream of problems that defines their lives. Indeed, knowledge creation is the most egalitarian enterprise in existence.
8. *Private property*: institutions of robust private property rights allow individuals to coordinate their pursuits in a world of scarce resources and different ends.

Now, if errors are inevitable, then we should not expect any institution to be perfect. On the contrary, it is the West and only the West that is currently capable of improving all of them.

All of the aforementioned error correcting institutions have evolved over centuries, some over millennia. And all of them exist primarily as shared ideas across people's minds—if enough people thought that they did not, in fact, correct errors and thus gave up on them, the institutions would disappear in time. On the contrary, if people can explain how and why they really *are* capable of resolving errors, then they will want to retain (and improve upon) them.

In other words, societies that are *optimistic* that errors can be corrected will want to employ and improve upon their means of correcting errors. Societies that are *pessimistic* about the prospects of correcting their errors will allow their means of correcting errors to languish and eventually go extinct.

But choosing between optimism and pessimism is not a matter of taste, mood, or disposition. As David Deutsch argues in *The Beginning of Infinity*, optimism is a physical fact—all errors are, in principle, correctable. It is just a matter of creating the right knowledge of how to do so.

Just as there are hallmarks of civilization—those institutions that foster the growth of wealth and knowledge—there are *enemies* of civilization. These enemies are not fundamentally individual people but rather certain *ideas* whose effect is to decelerate or even reverse the growth of wealth and knowledge. Moreover, some of these enemies are *domestic*, while others are *external* to the West. In this course, we will investigate some of

these ideological foes against progress. Some of the domestic enemies we will explore are:

1. *Socialism*: advocates for centralized institutions, like States, to take the means of production away from citizens against their will. Socialists falsely assume that States can allocate wealth in the form of consumer goods and services better than the private sector can. But in the absence of free markets, States cannot determine prices and so literally cannot discover how resources can be best allocated. Socialism therefore curbs the growth of wealth.
2. *Environmentalism*: sometimes known as the so-called degrowth movement, advocates that humanity minimize its impact on the environment by having fewer children, consuming less energy, and releasing less carbon into the atmosphere. But there is nothing moral about slowing down growth for the sake of the planet, or of rebalancing our relationship with Nature. Growth is not some abstract thing that greedy capitalists have made a deity of. Growth means more wealth for people in the form of life-saving and life-enhancing technologies, from shelter to protect us from the violent forces of the Earth to mass food production that has brought starvation to an all-time low.
3. *Scientism*: the false idea that scientific knowledge trumps all other kinds of knowledge, that science alone can give us answers to all of our questions. But moral, economic, political, and philosophical problems can't be answered by science alone. Knowledge about what one ought to want in life, knowledge about the tradeoffs involved in our decisions, knowledge about the intended and unintended consequences of governmental policy, knowledge about legal precedent, and knowledge about what our political institutions are capable of doing—none of this could possibly be found in a science textbook.
4. *Moral relativism*: the idea that there is no difference between right and wrong, good and evil is not open to the possibility that one party is in the right, the other in the wrong. It is not open to the idea that one society is open and dynamic, the other closed and static. It is not open to the notion that one country cherishes life while the other worships death. Nor is relativism fair—the relativist does static societies no favors by denying that they could become as prosperous as dynamic ones should they choose to do so. In his own little way, the relativist traps evil

under the weight of its own suppressive culture when he could have cleansed it with the light of better ideas. And the relativist distorts the self-confidence of dynamic, progressive societies by muddying their understanding of why they're so successful in the first place, mitigating their ability to make even further progress and spread the right ideas to static societies.

5. *Dogmatism*: refers to an idea that is considered, implicitly or explicitly, uncriticizable. The final truth. Known with certainty. Never to be changed. Because all of our ideas contain errors, dogmatism always prevents us from improving on the ideas locked in dogma's cage. Couple that with the fact that any error, no matter how small, could result in the eventual extinction of the human race, and we have good reason to rid our society of all dogmatic elements.
6. *Doomerism*: the idea that humanity has no shot at continuing to make progress, or that our extinction is just around the corner, or that we are uniquely vulnerable to being wiped out today, or that we are just one innovation away from guaranteeing our decline. This attitude neutralizes the human spirit—after all, if humanity doesn't stand a chance, why bother trying in the first place?
7. *Isolationism*: the idea that Western governments should not militarily intervene in other countries. But, for one thing, war or lesser military interventions are sometimes the best option amongst the politically available alternatives. For another, the static societies in this world are a genuine threat to dynamic societies that constitute the West. Their hostility to us is not a function of blowback or grievance or anything that the West has done or is currently doing. On the contrary, the very existence of a dynamic society poses an existential threat to their own. Isolationism, like moral relativism, results in a crippled West and an emboldened foreign enemy—a bane to the institutions that foster progress, a boon to those who hate it.

Although enemies both domestic and foreign are *wrong*, there are subtle yet crucial differences between them that shed light on how we ought to combat each of them. To appreciate these differences, we must first compare how memes spread in dynamic societies such as the West with how they spread in static societies such as those outside of the West. In the next module, we will investigate the fundamental distinction between these two classes of societies and the memes that compose them.



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