The central long run philosophical problem facing people generally is how to maintain a belief in progress without a belief in Utopia. And I want to argue that that requires a change in our conception of progress.

First let me say something about Utopia. Marx said that religion put Utopia (or the higher stage of communism, which he – revealingly – called 'The Kingdom of Freedom') 'in the sky', and what we have to do is put it on earth. (An idea he took from Feuerbach and the Young Hegelians.) So the Marxist project is nothing less than to establish the Kingdom of Freedom – the Kingdom of Heaven, in fact – on earth, and without divine help. In this sense Marxism is a religious heresy (not just a 'heresy' from a Christian point of view, but from any traditional religious point of view), and not surprisingly so, since Hegel himself was in many ways a Christian heretic. (Consider the sequence: Kant → Hegel → Young Hegelians → Feuerbach → Marx.) I want to argue that Marx got it exactly backwards. The idea of a Kingdom of Freedom (or Heaven) belongs 'in the sky' – as a guiding ideal, not something we can humanly achieve; and putting it 'on earth' necessarily leads to a politics which combines hatred with exaggerated optimism. It is no accident that traditional religion has a realistic moral psychology, and Marxism has a totally unrealistic moral psychology. Marxist moral psychology holds, in fact, that man is plastic in every respect we want him to be plastic and totally implastic in all respects we don't want him to be plastic. E.g., you can never 'condition' people to like capitalism or stop rebelling; but you can get rid of greed and hatred. This is simply wishful thinking; no theory exists at all from which such optimistic predictions would follow with a shred of evidential support. Marx stood the facts 'on their head', to mimic his own phrase.

On the other hand, the decline of religious belief is an obvious fact. Men and women no longer have the kind of transmitted traditional outlook concerning their place in the universe, the significance of their lives and of history, they once did. Lacking that, it would be nice if one could believe in Utopia as asymptotically approachable, even if not
realizable. We can’t, after all, live on a diet of mere pessimism. But I think the price of Utopian beliefs – even ‘asymptotic Utopianism’ – is too high. So what do we do for a notion of progress?

Next point: the traditional notion of progress was deeply scientistic (or technology-istic, at any rate).² Basically, both 19th century liberals and Marxists (and even some conservatives) believed that technology would make possible a Utopian, or anyway a better – and – better, future. The disagreement was over means; revolution or evolution, public ownership or private ownership, but the underlying conception of a peaceful, democratic, abundant society brought about by science and technology was shared.

Marxism, if I am right, was based on an amalgamation of two very disparate elements – a quasi-religious element (the ‘Kingdom’) and a scientistic element. (I’m not denying that Marxism was right about a great many things, – obviously I am in its debt, we all are.)

I want to argue that science and technology do not at all guarantee moral progress. They only enlarge our capacity to do good or evil. (An idea Bell stresses.) This enlarged capacity cannot be denied. But there is no ‘logic of history’ – none we can verify ‘scientifically’ – that guarantees that increased capacity (‘competence’) for good-or-evil will become increased performance of good.

The scientistic conception of progress is, inevitably, morally slack – take care of the technology (and the Revolution) and, inevitably, Progress will take care of itself.

I want to suggest quite a different notion of Progress. Let us think of societies, like people, as having Free Will. That is, let us suppose that, in the long run, our society, any society, can become, not Utopia, not the Kingdom, but more decent. After all people have, at last agreed that chattel slavery ‘doesn’t go’. (That the civilized world felt this way is one reason the American South couldn’t get the foreign support it desperately wanted in the Civil War.) In some countries, at least, there is the beginning of a consensus that capital punishment ‘doesn’t go’. Switzerland — in many ways a conservative, male chauvinist society – has for a long time been one country where war (including civil war) doesn’t go. Suppose we view the building and extending (and preserving – since it can always be reversed) of this kind of consensus as the true model of Progress?