Mohandas K. Gandhi
Economic and Moral Progress
(1916)

Though Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869–1948) never held a political or religious office, he was the most potent political force in modern India and a spiritual leader—known as “Mahatma,” meaning “great soul”—to hundreds of millions of people around the world. His charismatic leadership, shrewd political instincts, and commitment to nonviolent civil disobedience created one of the most successful liberation movements in history and influenced subsequent civil rights movements in the United States, South Africa, Tibet, and Burma.

Gandhi was born in the Indian state of Gujarat, where his father was an important Indian official in the British-controlled government. After studying law in England, he joined an Indian company in South Africa, whose population then included many Indian immigrants. In South Africa, Gandhi confronted the legally sanctioned discrimination that would later develop into the doctrine of apartheid (Afrikaans for “separateness”). Between 1894 and 1914, he developed a philosophy of nonviolent resistance—for which he coined the term satyagraha, from the Sanskrit for “truth” and “persistence”—and trained his followers to allow themselves to be punished by the unjust government without using violence to retaliate. His methods were extremely successful, largely because they generated support for his cause around the world and forced the South African government to negotiate with him or face international condemnation.

In 1914, Gandhi returned to India with an international reputation as a skilled mediator and a powerful spokesman for justice. He was soon swept up in the Indian struggle for independence from Great Britain, which had occupied India as its colony since 1858. Using the techniques that he had developed in South Africa, Gandhi led boycotts against British goods, demonstrations against colonial authority, and highly public acts of civil disobedience against unjust laws of the British Empire. In one particularly successful campaign, he led his followers in a march to the coastal village of Dandi to make salt by hand, in direct defiance of the British salt monopoly. More than sixty thousand of Gandhi’s followers were arrested, but the demonstrations focused so much world attention on India that the British government decided to negotiate with Gandhi for the release of all political prisoners in the country.

In 1947, the British government granted India its independence. As part of the agreement, India was divided into two countries: Pakistan, which would be Muslim, and India, which would be Hindu. Only a few months later, Gandhi was assassinated by a Hindu extremist who resented Gandhi for forcing the Indian government to make economic concessions to Pakistan.
Gandhi did not often write for publication. However, various collections of his letters, speeches, and newspaper articles have been published since his death, giving key insights into his motivations and character. The speech included here was originally given at the December 22, 1916, meeting of the Muir Central College Economics Society, in Allahabad, India, where Gandhi had been invited to address a group of scholars and students on the topic of "economic progress."

Because Gandhi’s audience for these remarks included both Hindus and Christians, he argues from the authority of both religions’ scriptural traditions. The majority of these references are to the New Testament—the sacred text of India’s colonizers—suggesting a strong desire to appeal to Christians on their own rhetorical ground.

When I accepted Mr. Kapildeva Malaviya’s invitation to speak to you upon the subject of this evening, I was painfully conscious of my limitations. You are an economic society. You have chosen distinguished specialists for the subjects included in your syllabus for this year and the next. I seem to be the only speaker ill-fitted for the task set before him. Frankly and truly, I know very little of economics, as you naturally understand them. Only the other day, sitting at an evening meal, a civilian friend deluged me with a series of questions on my crankisms. As he proceeded in this cross-examination, I being a willing victim, he found no difficulty in discovering my gross ignorance of the matters. I appeared to him to be handling with a cocksureness worthy only of a man who knows not that he knows not. To his horror and even indignation, I suppose, he found that I had not even read books on economics by such well-known authorities as Mill, Marshall, Adam Smith and a host of such other authors. In despair, he ended by advising me to read these works before experimenting in matters economic at the expense of the public. He little knew that I was a sinner past redemption.

My experiments continue at the expense of trusting friends. For, there comes to us moments in life when about some things we need no proof from without. A little voice within us tells us, ‘You are on the right track, move neither to your left nor right, but keep to the straight and narrow way.’ With such help we march forward slowly indeed, but surely and steadily. That is my position. It may be satisfactory enough for me, but it can in no way answer the requirements of a society such as yours. Still it was no use my struggling against Mr. Kapildeva Malaviya. I knew that he was intent upon having me to engage your attention for one of your evenings. Perhaps you will treat my intrusion as a welcome diver-

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1. Mr. Kapildeva Malaviya’s: Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya (1861–1946) was a well-known Indian scholar, journalist, and independence advocate and the founder of the Banaras Hindu University.

2. Crankisms: eccentricities.

3. Mill, Marshall, Adam Smith: John Stuart Mill (1806–1873), Alfred Marshall (1842–1924), and Adam Smith (1723–1790) were important British economists and social theorists.
sion from the trodden path. An occasional fast after a series of sumptuous feasts is often a necessity. And as with the body, so, I imagine, is the case with the reason.

Before I take you to the field of my experiences and experiments, it is perhaps best to have a mutual understanding about the title of this evening’s address: Does economic progress clash with real progress? By economic progress, I take it, we mean material advancement without limit and by real progress we mean moral progress, which again is the same thing as progress of the permanent element in us. The subject may therefore be stated thus: ‘Does not moral progress increase in the same proportion as material progress?’ I know that this is a wider proposition than the one before us. But I venture to think that we always mean the larger one even when we lay down the smaller. For we know enough of science to realise that there is no such thing as perfect rest or repose in this visible universe of ours. If therefore material progress does not clash with moral progress, it must necessarily advance the latter. Nor can we be satisfied with the clumsy way in which sometimes those who cannot defend the larger proposition put their case. They seem to be obsessed with the concrete case of thirty millions of India stated by the late Sir William Wilson Hunter\(^4\) to be living on one meal a day. They say that before we can think or talk of their moral welfare, we must satisfy their daily wants. With these, they say, material progress spells moral progress. And then is taken a sudden jump: what is true of thirty millions is true of the universe. They forget that hard cases make bad law. I need hardly say to you how ludicrously absurd this deduction would be. No one has ever suggested that grinding pauperism can lead to anything else than moral degradation. Every human being has a right to live and therefore to find the wherewithal to feed himself and where necessary to clothe and house himself. But, for this very simple performance, we need no assistance from economists or their laws.

‘Take no thought for the morrow’\(^5\) is an injunction which finds an echo in almost all the religious scriptures of the world. In well-ordered society, the securing of one’s livelihood should be and is found to be the easiest thing in the world. Indeed, the test of orderliness in a country is not the number of millionaires it owns, but the absence of starvation among its masses. The only statement that has to be examined is whether it can be laid down as a law of universal application that material advancement means moral progress.

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4. Sir William Wilson Hunter: member (1840–1900) of the British civil service in India and the author of a number of popular books about India for Western audiences.

5. ‘Take no thought for the morrow’: from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount: “Therefore take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed? (For after all these things do the Gentiles seek) for your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things. But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you. Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof” (Matthew 6:31–34).
Now let us take a few illustrations. Rome suffered a moral fall when it attained high material affluence. So did Egypt and so perhaps most countries of which we have any historic record. The descendants, kinsmen of the royal and divine Krishna, too, fell when they were rolling in riches. We do not deny to the Rockefellers and the Carnegies possession of an ordinary measure of morality but we gladly judge them indulgently. I mean that we do not even expect them to satisfy the highest standard of morality. With them material gain has not necessarily meant moral gain. In South Africa, where I had the privilege of associating with thousands of our countrymen on most intimate terms, I observed almost invariably that the greater the possession of riches, the greater was their moral turpitude. Our rich men, to say the least, did not advance the moral struggle of passive resistance as did the poor. The rich men’s sense of self-respect was not so much injured as that of the poorest. If I were not afraid of treading on dangerous ground, I would even come nearer home and show you that possession of riches has been a hindrance to real growth. I venture to think that the scriptures of the world are far safer and sounder treatises on laws of economics than many of the modern textbooks.

The question we are asking ourselves this evening is not a new one. It was addressed to Jesus two thousand years ago. St. Mark has vividly described the scene. Jesus is in his solemn mood; he is earnest. He talks of eternity. He knows the world about him. He is himself the greatest economist of his time. He succeeded in economising time and space—he transcended them. It is to him at his best that one comes running, kneels down, and asks: ‘Good Master, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?’ And Jesus said unto him: ‘Why callest thou me good? There is none good but one, that is God. Thou knowest the commandments. Do not commit adultery, Do not kill, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Defraud not, Honour thy father and mother.’ And he answered and said unto him: ‘Master, all these have I observed from my youth.’ Then Jesus beholding him, loved him and said unto him: ‘One thing thou lackest. Go thy way, sell whatever thou hast and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven—come take up the cross and follow me.’ And he was sad at that saying and went away grieved—for he had great possessions. And Jesus looked round about and said unto his disciples: ‘How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the kingdom of God.’ And the disciples were astonished at his words. But Jesus answereth again and saith unto them: ‘Children, how hard it is for them that trust in riches to enter into the kingdom of God. It is eas-

6. The Rockefellers and the Carnegies: John D. Rockefeller (1839-1937) and Andrew Carnegie (1835-1919) were wealthy American industrialists. *Krishna*: According to Hindu scripture, Krishna is an incarnation of the god Vishnu. He is Arjuna’s chariot driver in the *Mahābhārata* and speaks almost all of the text of the *Bhagavad Gītā*.

7. The scriptural passages quoted in this paragraph and the next are from the tenth chapter of the Gospel of Mark.
ier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God!'

Here you have an eternal rule of life stated in the noblest words the English language is capable of producing. But the disciples nodded disbelief as we do even today: 'But look how the law fails in practice this day. To him they said as we say today: 'And they or we cannot even be reasonably moral.' So they state their case thus. 'And they were astonished out of measure saying among themselves: "Who then can be saved?"' And Jesus looking upon them said: 'With men it is impossible but not with God, for with God all things are possible.' Then Peter began to say unto him: 'Lo, we have left all, and have followed thee.' And Jesus answered and said: 'Verily I say unto you there is no man that has left house or brethren or sisters, or father or mother, or wife or children or lands for my sake and the Gospels, but he shall receive one hundred fold, now in this time houses and brethren and sisters and mothers and children and lands with persecutions and in the world to come eternal life. But many that are first shall be last and the last first.' You have here the result or reward, if you prefer the term, of following the law.

I have not taken the trouble of copying similar passages from the other non-Hindu scriptures and I will not insult you by quoting in support of the law stated by Jesus passages from the writings and sayings of our own sages, passages even stronger if possible than the Biblical extracts I have drawn your attention to. Perhaps the strongest of all the testimonies in favour of the affirmative answer to the question before us are the lives of the greatest teachers of the world. Jesus, Mahomed, Buddha, Nanak, Kabir, Chaitanya, Shankara, Dayanand, Ramkrishnā were men who exercised an immense influence over and moulded the character of thousands of men. The world is the richer for their having lived in it. And they were all men who deliberately embraced poverty as their lot.

I should not have laboured my point as I have done, if I did not believe that, in so far as we have made the modern materialistic craze our goal, in so far are we going downhill in the path of progress. I hold that economic progress in the sense I have put it is antagonistic to real progress. Hence the ancient ideal has been the limitation of activities promoting wealth. This does not put an end to all material ambition. We should still have, as we have always had, in our midst people who make the pursuit of wealth their aim in life. But we have always recognised that it is a fall from the ideal. It is a beautiful thing to know that the wealthiest among us have

8. Nanak... Ramkrishnā: Guru Nanak (1469-1530) founded the Sikh religion in India. Kabir (1440-1518) was an Indian mystic whose teachings were important to Hindus and Muslims. Chaitanya Mahaprabhu (1486-1534) was a devotee of Krishna and a social reformer in the Indian province of Bengal; his teachings form the basis for the International Society of Krishna Consciousness (Hare Krishna) in the West. Adi Shankara (eighth century CE) was a well-known Hindu teacher and philosopher. Dayananda Saraswati (1824-1883) was a Hindu reformer. Bhagavan Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa (1836-1886) was a well-known Hindu teacher.
often felt that to have remained voluntarily poor would have been a higher state for est value. We have to make our choice. Western nations today are groaning under They measure their progress in £ s. d. American wealth has become standard. She will gain American wealth but avoid its methods. I venture to suggest that such an attempt if it were made is foredoomed to failure.

We cannot be wise, temperate and furious in a moment. I would have our leaders teach us to be morally supreme in the world. This land of ours was once, we are told, the abode of the gods. It is not possible to conceive gods inhabiting a land which is made hideous by the smoke and the din of mill chimneys and factories and whose roadways are traversed by rushing engines dragging numerous cars crowded with men mostly who know not what they are after, who are often absent-minded, and whose tempers do not improve by being uncomfortably packed like sardines in boxes and finding themselves in the midst of utter strangers who would oust them if they could and whom they would in their turn oust similarly. I refer to these things because they are held to be symbolical of material progress. But they add not an atom to our happiness. This is what Wallace, the great scientist, has said as his deliberate judgement.

In the earliest records which have come down to us from the past, we find ample indications that general ethical considerations and conceptions, the accepted standard of morality, and the conduct resulting from these were in no degree inferior to those which prevail to-day.

In a series of chapters, he then proceeds to examine the position of the English nation under the advance in wealth it has made. He says:

This rapid growth of wealth and increase of our power over nature put too great a strain upon our crude civilization, on our superficial Christianity, and it was accompanied by various forms of social immorality almost as amazing and unprecedented.

10. £ s. d.: the standard abbreviations for the three major British monetary units: pounds, shillings, pence.
He then shows how factories have risen on the corpses of men, women and children, how as the country has rapidly advanced in riches, it has gone down in morality. He shows this by dealing with insanitation, life-destroying trades, adulteration, bribery and gambling. He shows how, with the advance of wealth, justice has become immoral, deaths from alcoholism and suicide have increased, the average of premature births and congenital defects has increased, and prostitution has become an institution. He concludes his examination by these pregnant remarks:

The proceedings of the divorce courts show other aspects of the result of wealth and leisure, while a friend who had been a good deal in London society assured me that both in country houses and in London various kinds of orgies were occasionally to be met with which would hardly have been surpassed in the period of the most dissolute emperors. Of war, too, I need say nothing. It has always been more or less chronic since the rise of the Roman Empire; but there is now undoubtedly a disinclination for war among all civilized peoples. Yet the vast burden of armaments, taken together with the most pious declarations in favour of peace, must be held to show an almost total absence of morality as a guiding principle among the governing classes.

Under the British aegis, we have learnt much, but it is my firm belief that there is little to gain from Britain in intrinsic morality, that if we are not careful, we shall introduce all the vices that she has been a prey to, owing to the disease of materialism. We can profit by that connection only if we keep our civilization, and our morals, straight, i.e., if instead of boasting of the glorious past, we express the ancient moral glory in our own lives and let our lives bear witness to our past. Then we shall benefit her and ourselves. If we copy her because she provides us with rulers, both they and we shall suffer degradation. We need not be afraid of ideals or of reducing them to practice even to the uttermost. Ours will only then be a truly spiritual nation when we shall show more truth than gold, greater fearlessness than pomp of power and wealth, greater charity than love of self. If we will but clean our houses, our palaces and temples of the attributes of wealth and show in them the attributes of morality, we can offer battle to any combinations of hostile forces without having to carry the burden of a heavy militia. Let us seek first the kingdom of God

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13. Aegis: technically, a shield or breastplate; more commonly, mentorship or guidance.
14. Let us seek first the kingdom of God: an allusion to Matthew 6:33: “But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.”
His righteousness and the irrevocable promise is that everything will be added with us. These are real economics. May you and I treasure them and enforce them in our daily life.

**Understanding the Text**

1. What does Mohandas Gandhi mean by “economic progress”? What does he mean by “moral progress”? How are the two terms interrelated in this speech?

2. Though Gandhi was a Hindu speaking to a largely Hindu audience, his primary religious source for this speech is the New Testament. Why does he emphasize Christian Scriptures? What does this choice say about the ethos (pp. 608–10) he was trying to construct?

3. What is Gandhi’s position on poverty? Does he suggest that moral development requires the renunciation of physical needs? Are extremely poor people morally superior to others? Are wealthy people morally inferior? Explain.

4. What does Gandhi see as “real progress”? Whom does he name as having furthered the real progress of humankind? What traits do these individuals share? What are the “real economics” that he refers to at the end of this speech?

**Making Connections**

1. Compare Gandhi’s position on the connection between wealth and morality with similar discussions in the New Testament (p. 315) and the writings of Mo Tzu (p. 308). How do these texts, taken together, support the idea of a universal (or at least widespread) religious approach to economics?

2. Would Muhammad Yunus (p. 369) support Gandhi’s view that economic progress is at odds with moral progress? How might Gandhi respond to Yunus’s attempts to use a key principle of capitalism (credit) to lift the poorest of the poor out of poverty?

3. Martin Luther King Jr. cited Gandhi as a major influence on his thinking and social activism. How might “Economic and Moral Progress” have informed “Letter from Birmingham City Jail” (p. 202)?

4. Does Gandhi’s distinction between economic and moral progress rely on the same kind of distinction between illusion and reality found in the classic Buddhist text “The Precious Garland” (p. 110)? Explain.