



Munk Debate on Progress – commentary by Ali Wyne

At the core of this debate are disagreements about the nature of progress and the soundness of inference. In brief, Steven Pinker and Matt Ridley focus primarily on high-level, favorable postwar trends in peace, health, and prosperity. They believe that on account of rapid, far-reaching innovations in “things,” “rules,” and “tools” (Ridley’s breakdown), there is good reason to believe those trends can and will be sustained. Malcom Gladwell counters that one cannot evaluate these phenomena one way or another unless one knows what other trends and events they have caused—and will produce; how is one supposed to conduct such a net assessment? Gladwell is also “deeply suspicious of any attempts to project the future.” Alain de Botton—interestingly, if ambiguously—defines progress as “an increase in wisdom.” He takes an instrumentally dim view of humanity and its prospects, arguing that pessimism about the future is “a vital guarantee of preparedness and anticipation.”

Pinker has arguably done more than any of his contemporaries to stimulate a debate about the trajectory of violence—in all its expressions. In his 2011 opus *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, he concludes that “violence has declined over long stretches of time, and today we may be living in the most peaceable era in our species’ existence.” Pinker [concedes](#) that the number of civil wars has increased in recent years—from four in 2007 to 11 in 2014; he also notes that the implosion of Syria has caused the global rate of battle deaths to increase slightly—from less than 0.5 between 2001 and 2011 to 1.4 last year. But these figures are a far cry from previous levels: there were 26 civil wars in 1992, and the global rate of battle deaths hovered around five in the mid-1980s. Interstate wars and mass killings of unarmed civilians, meanwhile, have fallen dramatically over the past seven decades. Leaving aside both methodological disagreements and the question of whether the postwar trends Pinker documents are aberrant, it would seem to require impressive intellectual acrobatics to deny that humanity is, on balance, becoming less violent.

Ridley, a self-described “rational optimist,” cites the human mind’s “strange asymmetry—we’re very biased in our memories of the past and we’re very biased in our assessment of the future.” The oft-expressed nostalgia for a halcyon past has little (apparent) basis in fact. After all, interstate wars used to be a reality of life, and the prospect of nuclear Armageddon hanged over the world for the second half of the 20th century (in fact, there were multiple occasions during the Cold War when accidents and misunderstandings nearly brought that nightmarish possibility to pass). Nor is it clear why we would look back fondly upon lower life expectancy and higher rates of illiteracy, poverty, malnutrition, and child mortality. Today’s media plays a central role in skewing our perceptions: Ridley observes that “a headline...tomorrow that world infant mortality went down by .0001 percent yesterday is not, presumably, a good idea in news terms, whereas a headline that an airliner crashed yesterday is much more salient.”

As noted earlier, Pinker and Ridley both focus on the big picture. The former notes that “[t]he quantitative data on indicators of human well-being are all pointing in a very consistent, powerful, positive direction—anything from longevity to health to prosperity to peace to democracy.” The latter, similarly, cites “the incredible improvements in human living standards over the last 50 years in particular.” Gladwell rejects these broad strokes, arguing that one cannot classify a phenomenon as a success unless one can establish that its long-term benefits will outweigh the long-term risks it generates and the damage it wreaks. It is, of course, impossible, to make such an assessment; the best one can do is offer a range of a conjectures. Thus, for example, while the dramatic reduction in the rate of poverty in China and India over the past 40 years is an unquestionably favorable outcome, the industrialization that allowed it to occur has poisoned the countries’ air, soil, and water, with consequences that will unfold over generations.

I hasten to note that Gladwell is not a pessimist; in fact, despite his inclusion in this debate, he is agnostic about its central question. One might call him a chastened realist: Gladwell says he has been humbled by the failure of his predictions as well as those of his colleagues. And his caution is warranted: the existence of a trend does not assure its continuation, and progress, however defined, is not guaranteed; it is intrinsically contingent—at least as much upon human intervention as upon unforeseen circumstances. What would be the

consequences for world order of an armed confrontation between the United States and China or an act of nuclear terrorism in a major world capital? What new categories of threats will emerge from the advances we are making in biology, robotics, and cyberspace? The United Nations projects that the world's population will grow by 2.4 billion over the next 35 years; given the scale of environmental devastation we have already wrought on our planet, coupled with the pace at which it is accelerating, what effect will this increase have on our forests and oceans, not to mention the arable land whose output feeds vast swathes of the developing world?

Perhaps the most interesting intervention comes from de Botton. He calls the human being “a profoundly flawed creature” who must become “less violent, more forgiving, and more educable” if the world is to have any enduring hope. There is, sadly, too much evidence to recommend his judgments: consider the methods of torture humans have devised, the unknown millions who have perished in their wars, and the waste they have laid to the resources that permit their survival. And it is the misguided conceit of every generation to regard itself as more enlightened and humane than its predecessors. But I am unprepared to reach as damning an indictment as de Botton, for at least two reasons. First, if we abandon all faith in the possibility of redemption—of ourselves and the world we are tasked with protecting—how can we confront its challenges? Second, while humans have caused great destruction, they have also fed untold billions, cured horrific diseases, and redressed enormous injustices. At the risk of speaking prematurely, we should conclude—or at least hope—that the wisdom of our minds and the passion of our hearts scale with the magnitude of our calling.

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