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Are Things Getting Better or Worse?

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Some polemicists are radically pessimistic about the consequences of pessimism.

Branko Milanović grew up in [Yugoslavia](#), during the nineteen-sixties and seventies. He became an economist at the World Bank and then a professor at *CUNY*; on his blog, *Globalinequality*, he discusses economics and reminisces about the past. Recently, he published a post about his youth. He had been reading histories of the postwar decades, by Svetlana Alexievich, Tony Judt, and others. Faced with these grim accounts, Milanović felt protective of his past. “However hard I tried,” he wrote, “I just could not see anything in my memories that had to deal with collectivization, killings, political trials, endless bread lines, imprisoned free thinkers,” and so on. Instead, he had mainly good memories—of “long dinners discussing politics,” the “excitement of new books,” “languid sunsets, whole-night concerts, epic soccer games, girls in miniskirts.” He worried that, with the passage of time, it was becoming harder to imagine life under Communism as anything other than a desperate struggle with deprivation and repression. He titled his post “[How I Lost My Past](#).”

Was the past good or bad? Are we on the right track or the wrong one? Is life getting better or worse? These questions are easy to ask—pollsters and politicians love asking them—but surprisingly hard to answer. Most historical and statistical evidence shows that life used to be shorter, sicker, poorer, more dangerous, and less free. Yet many people, like Milanović, have fond memories of bygone years, and wonder if reports of their awfulness have been exaggerated. Others concede that life used to be worse in some ways, but wonder if it wasn’t also better in others—simpler, more predictable, more spiritual. It’s common to appreciate modernity while fearing its destructive potential. (Life expectancy may be higher today, but it will be shorter after the nuclear-climate-bioterror apocalypse.) If being alive now doesn’t feel particularly great, perhaps living in the past might not have felt particularly bad. Maybe human existence in most times and places is a mixed bag.

Last year, the Pew Research Center asked people around the world whether life had been better or worse in their countries fifty years ago. A slim plurality of Americans said they thought life had been better. In 1967, the United States was embroiled in the [Vietnam War](#). Protest marches were taking place around the country, crime was surging, and race riots were breaking out in Detroit, Newark, Milwaukee, and other cities. That spring, a wave of tornadoes injured thousands across the Midwest; members of the Black Panther Party, carrying shotguns and rifles, marched into the California statehouse to protest a racially motivated gun-control law. In June, the Six-Day War broke out. Americans lived in smaller houses, ate worse food, worked more hours, and died, on average, seven years earlier. On the other hand, *NASA* launched several moon probes and Jimi Hendrix’s “Are You Experienced” helped launch the Summer of Love. By an obscure retrospective calculus, the good appears to balance out the bad. Frightening events seem less so in retrospect. Memory is selective, history is partial, and youth is a golden age. For all these reasons, our intuitive comparisons between the past and the present are unreliable. Many Americans living in 1967 might well have thought that life had been better in 1917.

Nor is this just an American inclination. In “[Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress](#),” the cognitive scientist Steven Pinker looks at recent studies and finds that majorities in fourteen countries—Australia, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Great Britain, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Norway, Singapore, Sweden, Thailand, the U.A.E., and the United States—believe that the world is getting worse rather than better. (China is the only large country in which a majority expresses optimism.) “This bleak assessment of the state of the world is wrong,” Pinker writes—and not just a little wrong but “wrong wrong, flat-earth wrong.”

Because our ideas about human progress are so vague, it’s tempting to think they don’t matter. But “Is life

getting better or worse?” may be a dorm-room debate with consequences. It has affected our politics, Pinker says, encouraging voters to elect unproved leaders “with a dark vision of the current moment.” He quotes from Donald Trump’s Inaugural Address, in which the President bemoaned “mothers and children trapped in poverty . . . an education system which leaves our young and beautiful students deprived of all knowledge . . . and the crime, and the gangs, and the drugs.” In fact, poverty, crime, and drug abuse are declining in America, and our educational system, though flawed, is one of the best in the world. Pessimism can be a self-fulfilling prophecy. By believing that the world is getting worse, Pinker argues, we can make it so.

It’s also possible to take this reasoning to an extreme—to become radically pessimistic about the consequences of pessimism. In “[Suicide of the West](#),” the conservative intellectual Jonah Goldberg argues that progressive activists—deluded by wokeness into the false belief that Western civilization has made the world worse—are systematically dismantling the institutions fundamental to an enlightened society, such as individualism, capitalism, and free speech. (“Sometimes ingratitude is enough to destroy a civilization,” Goldberg writes.) On the left, a parallel attitude holds sway. Progressives fear the stereotypical paranoid conservative—a nativist, arsenal-assembling prepper whose world view has been formed by [Fox News](#), the [N.R.A.](#), and “The Walking Dead.” Militant progressives and pre-apocalyptic conservatives have an outsized presence in our imaginations; they are the bogeymen in narratives about our mounting nihilism. We’ve come to fear each other’s fear.

With “Enlightenment Now,” Pinker hopes to return us to reality. In the course of five hundred pages, he presents statistics and charts showing that, despite our dark imaginings, life has been getting better in pretty much every way. Around the globe, improved health care has dramatically reduced infant and maternal mortality, and children are now better fed, better educated, and less abused. Workers make more money, are injured less frequently, and retire earlier. In the United States, fewer people are poor, while elsewhere in the world, and especially in Asia, billions fewer live in extreme poverty, defined as an income of less than a dollar and ninety cents per day. Statistics show that the world is growing less polluted and has more parks and protected wilderness. “Carbon intensity”—the amount of carbon released per dollar of G.D.P.—has also been falling almost everywhere, a sign that we may be capable of addressing our two biggest challenges, poverty and climate change, simultaneously.

Pinker cites statistics showing that, globally, there are now fewer victims of murder, war, rape, and genocide. (In his previous book, “[The Better Angels of Our Nature](#),” he attributed this development to a range of causes, such as democratization, pacifism, and better policing.) Life expectancy has been rising, and—thanks to regulations and design improvements—accidental deaths (car crashes, lightning strikes) are also in steep decline. Despite what we’re often told, students today report being less lonely than in the past, and, although Americans feel overscheduled, studies show that men and women alike have substantially more leisure time than their parents did (ten and six hours more per week, respectively).

“Enlightenment Now” seems designed to reassure both Republicans, who worry about increasing drug use and terrorism, and Democrats, who see racism and sexism as the crises of our time. Despite fears of resurgent racism, the number of hate crimes in America has been falling for decades, while analyses of Internet searches, which reveal searchers’ hidden interests, indicate that racist, sexist, and homophobic attitudes are also in retreat. What Pinker calls “emancipative values”—tolerance, feminism, and so on—are becoming more common even in old-fashioned societies. (Young people in the Middle East now hold social views comparable to the ones held by young Western Europeans in the nineteen-sixties.) Although there’s been a recent surge in drug overdoses in the U.S., most of those who die belong to “the druggy Baby Boomer cohort . . . born between 1953 and 1963.” Drug and alcohol use among teen-agers—with the exception of cannabis and vaping—is at its lowest level since 1976.

Pinker’s message is simple: progress is real, meaningful, and widespread. The mystery is why we have so much trouble acknowledging it. Pinker mentions various sources of pessimism—the “progressophobia” of liberal-arts professors, for instance—but directs most of his opprobrium toward the news media, which focus almost

entirely on of-the-moment crises and systematically underreport positive, long-term trends. (Citing the German economist Max Roser, Pinker argues that a truly evenhanded newspaper “could have run the headline *NUMBER OF PEOPLE IN EXTREME POVERTY FELL BY 137,000 SINCE YESTERDAY* every day for the last twenty-five years.”) He consults the work of Kalev Leetaru, a data scientist who uses “sentiment mining,” a word-analysis technique, to track the mood of the news; Leetaru finds that, globally, journalism has grown substantially more negative.

The power of bad news is magnified, Pinker writes, by a mental habit that psychologists call the “availability heuristic”: because people tend to estimate the probability of an event by means of “the ease with which instances come to mind,” they get the impression that mass shootings are more common than medical breakthroughs. We’re also guilty of “the sin of ingratitude.” We like to complain, and we don’t know much about the heroic problem-solvers of the past. “How much thought have you given lately to Karl Landsteiner?” Pinker asks. “Karl who? He only saved a billion lives by his discovery of blood groups.”

Even as “Enlightenment Now” celebrates our ingenuity, it suggests that there’s something bratty about humankind: we just don’t want to admit how good we have it. In “[It’s Better Than It Looks: Reasons for Optimism in an Age of Fear](#),” the journalist Gregg Easterbrook offers a wider-ranging account of our pessimism. In his view, it’s the result of various demographic, cultural, and political trends. The country is aging, and older people tend to be nostalgic and grumpy. Reaganism made “ritualized denunciation” of the government routine, encouraging cynicism among conservatives; among liberals, a focus on marginalized groups has led to the competitive articulation of suffering, creating a culture of “majority victimhood,” in which every group trumpets its grievances. “Claims for liability and compensation have increased,” Easterbrook notes, reflecting the rise of a punitive society obsessed with the assignment of blame; fewer people attend worship services, where they might hear messages of hope or have uplifting interactions with neighbors. Thanks to cable news, talk radio, and social media, “society has opinionized,” and it’s now “expected that all will possess strong views”; this has fed the rise of “catastrophism,” or the continual overstatement of what’s wrong. (“Everything is terrible” is a stronger view than “Things are pretty decent.”) Finally, technology has changed. Easterbrook cites psychological research suggesting that the physical proximity of our smartphones gives them uncanny power to influence our moods. It’s one thing to see an alarming headline on a TV across the room, and another to feel it vibrating in your pocket.

Perhaps we’ve come to see history itself as one bad news cycle after another. The word “history” used to evoke “traditions to be respected, legacies to be transmitted, knowledge to be elaborated, or deaths to be commemorated,” the French historiographer Henry Rousso points out, in “[The Latest Catastrophe: History, the Present, the Contemporary](#).” After the traumas of the twentieth century, however, we began to define our historical era by “the most lethal moments of the near past”—the conflicts, wars, and atrocities that “have had the most difficulty ‘passing away.’ ” We “delimit the contemporary era” by referring to “the ends of wars or sometimes the beginnings of wars: the end of World War I, the end of World War II, the end of the Cold War.” (In America, we talk about the Vietnam era and the generation born after 9/11.) “Since 1945, all contemporary history begins with ‘the latest catastrophe,’ ” Rousso concludes. We see the past in terms of crises, and imagine the future that way, too.

Pessimism may even answer to our spiritual needs. The philosopher Charles Taylor, in his book “[A Secular Age](#),” from 2007, argued that modern life is characterized by a sense of individual spiritual obligation. In pre-Reformation Europe, ordinary people were held to lower spiritual standards than monks, priests, and nuns, and a member of the laity might live an imperfect, worldly life and still be saved, as long as he supported, through prayer or alms, the work of the “virtuosi.” Such a system, Taylor writes, “involved accepting that masses of people were not going to live up to the demands of perfection.” Eventually, Protestantism intervened, making individuals responsible for their own salvation. In the new way of life that emerged, religion was democratized, and each person was charged with spiritual self-stewardship. Part of this shift involved a political credo. In Taylor’s précis: “We are all responsible for each other, and for society as a whole.”

Today, we tend to conceive the credo of social responsibility as an ethical idea, justifiable on secular grounds.

Still, it remains tied to an inner, devotional imperative. We know that we accomplish little by reading the news, and sense that our infinite, tragic news feeds distort, rather than enhance, our picture of reality. Still, it feels wrong to outsource the work of salvation to [Bill and Melinda Gates](#), and presumptuous to trust too much in the power of good works. Pessimism can be a form of penance, and of spiritual humility in a humanist age.

Pinker urges us to overcome these cultural, psychological, political, and spiritual biases, and to take a more objective view of the world. But human beings are not objective creatures. When social scientists write about life expectancy, educational attainment, nutrition, crime, and the other issues Pinker addresses, they often use the abbreviation Q.O.L., for “quality of life.” They use S.W.B. to refer to “subjective well-being”—the more elusive phenomenon of happiness, fulfillment, or life satisfaction. In “Citizen Kane,” Orson Welles’s media tycoon enjoys high Q.O.L. and low S.W.B. He is healthy, wealthy, and unhappy. The question is whether what befalls individuals might also befall societies. If so, life could be getting much better objectively, on the social scale, without getting all that much better subjectively, on the individual scale.

The most obvious way to tackle this question is to survey people from different societies. The annual [World Happiness Report](#) combines data from Gallup opinion surveys with economic and sociological studies; it finds that, in general, citizens of high-Q.O.L. countries (Finland, Norway, Canada, Germany) report higher levels of S.W.B. than citizens of low-Q.O.L. countries (Venezuela, Chad, Laos, Iraq). Look closely, though, and the story is more nuanced. Although economics shapes S.W.B., so do social and political factors: despite immense economic growth, Chinese citizens are no happier today than they were in 1990 (fraying social ties, created by rural-to-urban migration, may be to blame), while in many Latin-American countries people report higher S.W.B. than their otherwise low Q.O.L. predicts. (Latin-American respondents often cite their strong family bonds as a special source of happiness.)

In the United States, the two measures have diverged. Although per-capita income has more than doubled since 1972, Americans’ S.W.B. has stagnated or even declined. In a contribution to the 2018 World Happiness Report, the economist [Jeffrey Sachs](#) attributes this divergence to a public-health crisis centered on obesity, drug abuse, and depression, and to a growing disillusionment with business and government. From all this data, the picture is one of large-scale predictability and small-scale volatility. Thanks to broad improvements in quality of life, today’s children are likelier to be happier than their grandparents were. But within any shorter span of time—a decade, a generation, an electoral cycle—there’s no guarantee that S.W.B. won’t decline even as Q.O.L. continues to rise.

These metrics may reflect something fundamental about how we experience life. Many psychologists now subscribe to the “set point” theory of happiness, according to which mood is, to some extent, homeostatic: at first, our new cars, houses, or jobs make us happy, but eventually we adapt to them, returning to our “set points” and ending up roughly as happy or unhappy as we were before. Researchers say that we run on “hedonic treadmills”—we chase new sources of happiness as the old ones expire—and that our set points are largely immovable and determined by disposition. Some fundamental changes can affect our happiness in a lasting way—getting married, immigrating to a wealthy country, developing a drug addiction—but many life improvements are impermanent in character. Although food quality may have been worse in 1967, the pleasure of today’s better meals is intrinsically fleeting. More people survive heart attacks than in the past, but the relief of surviving wears off as one returns to the daily grind.

The set-point theory is dispiriting, since it implies limits to how happy progress can make us, but it also suggests that progress is more widespread than we feel it to be. This last conclusion, though, makes sense only if we define “progress” in a certain way. “Imagine Seema, an illiterate woman in a poor country who is village-bound, has lost half her children to disease, and will die at fifty, as do most of the people she knows,” Pinker writes:

Now imagine Sally, an educated person in a rich country who has visited several cities and national parks, has seen her children grow up, and will live to eighty, but is stuck in the lower middle class. It's conceivable that Sally, demoralized by the conspicuous wealth she will never attain, is not particularly happy, and she might even be unhappier than Seema, who is grateful for small mercies. Yet it would be mad to suppose that Sally is not better off.

Pinker is right: Sally is better off. To say so, however, is to acknowledge that we can be better off without feeling that way—working two jobs to pay tuition and save for retirement, Sally still suffers—or worse off without knowing it. Progress is objective and impersonal, at least in part, and can unfold without making us happier. “The goal of progress,” Pinker concludes, “cannot be to increase happiness indefinitely, in the hope that more and more people will become more and more euphoric.” Quality of life is higher today, no matter what you think, and it was lower under Communism, no matter how you feel about those whole-night concerts and epic soccer games. A blissful existence in the Matrix wouldn't count as progress. There's more to life than subjective well-being.

In a book titled “[The Optimism Gap: The I'm OK–They're Not Syndrome and the Myth of American Decline](#),” from 1998, the public-policy reporter David Whitman cited statistics showing that, in nearly every domain of life—crime, pollution, health, income, happiness—Americans were optimistic about themselves but pessimistic about society as a whole. While believing that crime was rising in general, they congratulated themselves for living in neighborhoods that were mostly crime-free; convinced that the economy was getting worse, they remained confident about their own earning potential. Pinker, too, finds that people are afraid for civilization but hopeful about themselves. Certain that those around them are living lives of quiet desperation, they continue to predict increases in their own life satisfaction. But it seems that this optimism gap isn't just inaccurate; it's pretty much backward. The world, as an objective whole, has been getting better. It's our individual experiences of life that are unlikely to improve. We should be optimistic about civilization but neutral about our own future happiness.

A final reason for doubting progress is the future, in all its terrifying potentiality. One of Pinker's most persistent critics is the statistician and risk analyst Nassim Nicholas Taleb, the author of “[The Black Swan](#),” “[Fooled by Randomness](#),” and other explorations of uncertainty. For the past few years, in a relentless barrage of tweets and Facebook posts, Taleb has responded to Pinker's optimism by distinguishing between “thin-tailed” historical trends—picture the trailing ends of a bell curve—which are likely to continue indefinitely, and “fat-tailed” ones, which retain their capacity to surprise. Pinker shows that, during the past century, per-capita deaths from fire have declined by ninety per cent in the United States. In Taleb's view, this is a thin-tailed trend, since it's the result of innovations, such as better materials and building codes, that are unlikely to reverse themselves. By contrast, the decline in deaths from terrorism—far more people were killed by terrorists in the nineteen-sixties and seventies—is a fat-tailed trend; as Taleb writes on Facebook, “one biological event can decimate the population.” Pessimists of the Taleb school argue that we underestimate the number of fat-tailed trends. In a review of “Enlightenment Now,” the theoretical computer scientist Scott Aaronson imagines a hypothetical book, published in 1923, about “the astonishing improvements in the condition of Europe's Jews.” The authors of such a book, Aaronson writes, would have reassured themselves that “an insane number of things would need to go wrong simultaneously” for that progress to be reversed—which, needless to say, is what happened.

Maybe our views about progress depend on our time horizons. Charles C. Mann's “[The Wizard and the Prophet: Two Remarkable Scientists and Their Dueling Visions to Shape Tomorrow's World](#)” tells the stories of two researchers, William Vogt and Norman Borlaug, who occupied opposing sides of the twentieth-century debate about the human population. In Mann's terms, Vogt was a “prophet”: he predicted that, unless global population growth could be slowed, worldwide famine would result. Borlaug was a “wizard,” who argued that innovations in agriculture would make it possible for farmers to feed everyone. In the event, Borlaug was right: the “Green Revolution,” which he spearheaded, dramatically increased crop yields and saved billions of lives. But the deeper debate between the two sides—“Cut back or produce more?”—persists, this time around climate change. Today, pessimistic prophets argue that radical conservation is the only way to avoid a climatic apocalypse, while

optimistic wizards propose innovating our way out of the crisis, perhaps through geoengineering or the creation of new energy sources. Our species seems to face a fork in the road: “If a government persuades its citizenry to spend huge sums revamping offices, stores, and homes with the high-tech insulation and low-water-use plumbing urged by Prophets,” Mann writes, “the same citizenry will resist ponying up for Wizards’ new-design nuclear plants and monster desalination facilities.”

Mann thinks the wizard–prophet distinction reflects a fundamental biological reality. If bacteria are left to grow in a petri dish, they’ll multiply quickly, then consume all their resources and die. The same goes for all species adaptive enough to flourish unconstrained. At first, “the world is their petri dish,” Mann writes. “Their populations grow at a terrific rate; they take over large areas, engulfing their environment. . . . Then they hit a barrier. They drown in their own wastes. They starve from lack of food.” A biologist tells Mann that “it is the fate of every successful species to wipe itself out.”

Both wizards and prophets hope that we can break this pattern. Wizards exhort us to “soar beyond natural constraints” using technology. (Think of [Elon Musk](#), with his solar roof tiles and spaceships.) Prophets implore us to reach, through conservation and political reform, a “steady-state accommodation” with nature. (“What the climate needs to avoid collapse is a contraction in humanity’s use of resources,” the activist Naomi Klein [writes](#).) Both sides agree that progress of a general sort isn’t enough: unless we adopt a decisive and coherent survival strategy, we’ll become victims of our own success. “The Wizard and the Prophet” provides an unsettling coda to “Enlightenment Now.” Pinker could be right in the short term but wrong in the long term. Maybe the world is getting better, but not better enough, or in the right ways.

In the Middle Ages, painters used triptychs to sum up the state of the world. On the left, one might see our origins, in the Garden of Eden; in the center, ordinary, terrestrial life; on the right, the torments of Hell. Above it all, Christ floats in Heaven, surrounded by angels: our redemptive future. One longs for a modern equivalent—a data-driven version of Fra Angelico’s “Last Judgment” or Hieronymus Bosch’s “Garden of Earthly Delights” equal to the contradictions of the human situation.

In “[Factfulness: Ten Reasons We’re Wrong About the World—and Why Things Are Better Than You Think](#),” the Swedish global-health statistician Hans Rosling, who wrote the book with his son and daughter-in-law, tries to find such a picture. Most depictions of the world, Rosling thinks, are either too optimistic or too pessimistic; if they don’t succumb to despair, they seem to look too quickly away from suffering. Rosling adopts a mantra —“Bad and better”—to avoid these extremes. “Think of the world as a premature baby in an incubator,” he suggests:

The baby’s health status is extremely bad, and her breathing, heart rate, and other important signs are tracked constantly so that changes for better or worse can quickly be seen. After a week, she is getting a lot better. On all the main measures, she is improving, but she still has to stay in the incubator because her health is still critical. Does it make sense to say that the infant’s situation is improving? Yes. Absolutely. Does it make sense to say it is bad? Yes, absolutely. Does saying “things are improving” imply that everything is fine, and we should all relax and not worry? No, not at all. Is it helpful to have to choose between bad and improving? Definitely not. It’s both. It’s both bad and better. Better, and bad, at the same time. . . . That is how we must think about the current state of the world.

Rosling’s image captures many of the perplexities of our collective situation. We desperately want the baby to survive. We also know that survival doesn’t guarantee happiness. The baby is struggling, and suffering, and will continue to do so; as a result, we’re more likely to be happy for her than she is to be happy for herself. (Pinker, similarly, is happier for us than we are.) It’s possible, moreover, that she’ll be saved only temporarily. No one is ever truly out of the woods.

In the meantime, the baby’s survival depends on the act of diagnosis. Until her ailments are identified, they can’t be cured. Problems and progress are inextricable, and the history of improvement is also the history of problem-discovery. Diagnosis, of course, is an art in itself; it’s possible to misunderstand problems, or to overstate them,

and, in doing so, to make them worse. But a world in which no one complained—in which we only celebrated how good we have it—would be a world that never improved. The spirit of progress is also the spirit of discontent.