

Life Is Not Going Anywhere

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Synopsis

Modern Western culture has taught us to think of history as a journey. The past was worse, the present is a stage of development, and the future ought to be better. When events support this story, we call them progress. When they do not, we either search for another scientific, technological or political solution, or conclude that everything is getting worse.

This essay questions the story rather than taking either side. Change is real. Suffering is real. Scientific discovery is real. Improvements in medicine, sanitation and material comfort are real. Yet "progress" and "decline" are interpretations placed upon change. They depend upon what we measure, where we draw the boundary and how far we choose to look.

A solution can solve a problem without existence itself moving towards a solved condition. Indeed, a deeper possibility remains: perhaps problem and solution, better and worse, past and future are themselves distinctions through which human awareness organises experience.

To say that life is not going anywhere does not mean that nothing changes. Change is continuous. It means that change, by itself, reveals no destination and carries no label announcing progress or decline.

This is therefore neither an argument for optimism nor one for pessimism.

Life does not appear to be progressing or retreating towards anywhere in particular.

Life simply is.

The Western Story

Modern Western culture has given unusual authority to one particular way of understanding history: the belief that humanity is travelling from a worse past towards a better future.

The story runs something like this.

The past was primitive, ignorant, cruel and uncomfortable. Knowledge has brought us forward. Science, education, technology and better political arrangements have improved life. If we continue applying them intelligently, the future should become better still.

There is plenty of evidence for particular improvements.

Anaesthesia works.

Sewage systems work.

Antibiotics work.

Aircraft cross oceans.

A message that once took months to travel can now cross the world in less than a second.

Scientific knowledge accumulates.

The difficulty begins when we make a small and almost invisible leap from:

knowledge can progress

to:

humanity progresses.

They are not the same proposition.

John Gray has argued that modern ideas of progress often retain the structure of older Western religious ideas. History still possesses a direction and a destination; only the language has changed. Providence becomes Progress. Salvation becomes Development. The future takes over some of the work once performed by Heaven (Gray, 2002).

Karl Popper attacked a related belief: that history unfolds according to discoverable patterns from which its future direction can somehow be inferred (Popper, 1957).

Yet the idea remains extraordinarily seductive.

It gives events meaning.

It tells us that we came from somewhere worse and ought to be travelling towards somewhere better.

This creates an awkward problem when life refuses to cooperate.

Two broad reactions appear.

One says:

We need another solution.

More science.

Better technology.

Better government.

Better regulation.

Better education.

Better management.

Better artificial intelligence.

The other says:

Ain't it awful.

Everything is deteriorating.

Society is collapsing.

Young people have lost their way.

Governments have failed.

Technology is destroying us.

The good times have gone.

Optimism and pessimism appear to be opposites.

Yet both contain the same hidden assumption.

Life ought to be going somewhere.

The optimist believes we are getting there.

The pessimist believes we have lost the way.

Perhaps the difficulty lies in imagining history as a journey.

Perhaps there is nowhere to get to.

What Exactly Has Improved?

Suppose I say:

Britain has progressed since 1850.

It sounds like a factual statement.

But progressed in what?

Life expectancy?

Literacy?

Infant mortality?

Domestic comfort?

Political participation?

Freedom from infectious disease?

Access to information?

Housing affordability?

Community?

Working hours?

Mental wellbeing?

Family stability?

Access to nature?

A sense of belonging?

A sense of meaning?

Choose a measure and we can demonstrate progress.

Choose another and we may demonstrate deterioration.

Neither necessarily tells us whether **life itself** has improved.

It tells us what happened to the variable we selected.

This is where systems thinking becomes useful.

Every model requires a boundary.

Something belongs inside the system.

Something else remains outside.

Change the boundary and the problem itself may change (Meadows, 2008).

That sounds obvious.

Yet much of modern civilisation depends upon forgetting it.

The more accomplished we become at measuring things, the easier it becomes to mistake what has been measured for the whole.

Science Needs a Boundary

Consider medical research.

A useful experiment requires precision.

Researchers must decide what they are studying. They decide who belongs in the study and who does not. They specify an intervention. They establish outcomes. They determine how long the subjects will be followed.

An ethics committee considers the proposal and may require further restrictions.

Eventually, under carefully defined conditions, the researchers obtain an answer.

Under these conditions, with this population, using this treatment and measuring these outcomes, this happened.

That can represent excellent science.

Then the research leaves the experimental setting.

Practitioners begin applying it to people.

People bring rather more variables with them.

They bring families, money, habits, fears, relationships, jobs, beliefs, other illnesses, accidents, expectations and histories.

Researchers describe part of this difficulty through the distinction between internal and external validity. An experiment may demonstrate an effect convincingly under controlled conditions while leaving another question open: how reliably does that result travel into ordinary life? (Rothwell, 2005).

Nothing has gone wrong.

The research required a boundary.

Life simply continued beyond it.

The mistake begins when we forget that **we drew the boundary ourselves**.

The Dam Works

A dam provides a more visible example.

A river floods.

Electricity is required.

Agriculture needs irrigation.

Engineers calculate water flows, generating capacity, concrete requirements, geological conditions and construction costs.

A dam provides a solution.

And it really may solve the problem for which it was designed.

It generates electricity.

It controls water.

It irrigates crops.

Yet a river does considerably more than move water past the proposed site of a dam.

It carries sediment.

It supports fish.

It replenishes flood plains.

It affects grazing land, agriculture, wetlands and coastlines.

Communities upstream may move.

Communities far downstream may discover that seasonal flooding upon which their agriculture depended has changed.

The World Commission on Dams documented both the immense benefits created by dams and the considerable social and ecological costs associated with them (World Commission on Dams, 2000).

Again, the point is neither that dams are good nor that dams are bad.

It is that the apparently simple question:

Does the dam work?

has no complete answer until we decide where the question ends.

Does it produce electricity?

Yes.

Does it provide irrigation?

Yes.

Does it alter downstream fisheries?

Perhaps.

Does that affect livelihoods?

Does that change migration?

Does migration alter cities?

Do growing cities then require more electricity and more water?

Follow any chain long enough and a solution becomes part of another condition which somebody, somewhere, may eventually call a problem.

Environmental-impact assessments attempt to make the boundary larger.

That is sensible.

Yet no assessment can make its boundary infinite.

Eventually somebody must say:

Our assessment stops here.

Life does not.

Front and Back

An older tradition of thought approaches the same problem from another direction.

The *Tao Te Ching* repeatedly suggests that distinctions summon their apparent opposites. High acquires meaning because there is low. Easy emerges in relation to difficult. Beauty becomes recognisable alongside ugliness (Laozi, 1963).

A thing has a front because it has a back.

Progress creates backwardness.

Development creates underdevelopment.

Success creates failure.

Normal creates abnormal.

Wealth creates poverty as a comparative category.

This does not mean suffering is imaginary.

Hunger hurts.

Cold exists.

Disease kills.

A child without food experiences something painfully material.

But "poverty" also requires a standard against which circumstances are compared.

A medieval king possessed no electricity, antibiotics, motor car, refrigerator, telephone, central heating, television or flushing lavatory.

Measured against the possessions of a moderately comfortable person today, several aspects of his material life appear astonishingly deprived.

We nevertheless do not classify Edward III as one of medieval England's poor.

The material circumstances existed.

The category is ours.

So is progress.

Artificial Intelligence

Artificial intelligence gives us an almost perfect modern example because discussion about it quickly divides into the familiar alternatives.

One group imagines extraordinary progress.

Another imagines unemployment, social dislocation, environmental damage or eventually machines escaping human control.

Perhaps both give AI too much metaphysical importance.

I use AI regularly.

My writing has improved since I began working with it.

More interestingly, it has revealed weaknesses in writing that I previously thought was perfectly satisfactory.

That is useful.

AI also requires a physical infrastructure.

Computers use electricity.

Semiconductor fabrication consumes materials and demands extraordinary industrial precision.

Data centres require power, land, cooling equipment and electrical infrastructure.

Then efficiency enters the argument.

Surely making AI more efficient means it will consume fewer resources?

Perhaps.

William Stanley Jevons noticed a related difficulty in the nineteenth century.

Improved steam engines required less coal to perform a given amount of work. Yet greater efficiency made steam power economical in many more situations. Demand expanded.

Greater efficiency therefore did not necessarily lead to lower overall coal consumption (Jevons, 1865).

We now call this Jevons' paradox.

But there is another lesson hidden in Jevons' example.

Jevons was writing in 1865, when coal and steam appeared inseparable from Britain's industrial future. From within that world it was reasonable to imagine increasingly efficient steam engines driving an expanding demand for coal.

And for a time that is what happened.

But the boundary of the argument was also a boundary in time.

Steam did not continue along a single ascending line.

It flourished in some uses and disappeared from others.

Steam-powered cars competed with petrol and electric vehicles before virtually disappearing from the market. Steam ceased to be the ordinary means of propulsion for most ships. Electric motors and internal-combustion engines took over work once performed directly by steam.

Yet steam itself did not vanish.

It changed its place in the system.

A modern nuclear power station still produces electricity by using heat to make steam which turns a turbine. Nuclear-powered ships use steam turbines for propulsion. Some of the most modern machinery in existence therefore still employs a principle familiar to nineteenth-century engineers.

Technologies do not necessarily march forward in an orderly procession, each superior invention pushing an inferior predecessor into history. They overlap, combine, retreat into specialised uses and sometimes return in altered forms (Edgerton, 2006; Smil, 2017).

This matters because Jevons' paradox describes something real without describing something eternal.

Within an expanding steam-and-coal economy, improved efficiency could increase coal consumption.

Extend the boundary another hundred years and the economy itself has changed.

The paradox has not become false.

The world surrounding it has changed.

That is another problem with imagining progress as a line. We look at whatever technology dominates the present and unconsciously extend its trajectory into the future.

The people of the steam age did it with steam.

We may now be doing it with artificial intelligence.

Imagine that the energy required for an AI task falls by ninety per cent.

We might save ninety per cent of the energy.

Or we might discover a hundred new tasks for something that has suddenly become very cheap.

For a time, greater efficiency may therefore bring greater total consumption.

But even this describes only the system as it presently appears.

There is another boundary here.

Jevons tells us what may happen when a particular activity becomes cheaper. He does not tell us how long we shall continue wanting that activity in its present form.

Steam did not disappear because people stopped wanting transport, power or machinery. Its various functions were redistributed. Some passed to electricity or internal combustion. Others remained with steam. What changed was steam's place within a larger system.

Something similar may eventually happen to what we presently call artificial intelligence.

AI is already a name for a collection of different activities: language, prediction, image making, pattern recognition, automation, scientific modelling and many others. These do not necessarily share a single future.

Some may expand.

Some may disappear.

Some may become so ordinary that we cease to call them AI.

Others may be performed by methods that we cannot presently describe.

The demand for what AI does may therefore continue even if the technology through which we presently recognise AI changes beyond recognition.

This is important because Jevons describes what happens when we make something cheaper.

He does not tell us how long we shall continue wanting that particular something.

Perhaps technologies are not always superseded so much as the problems to which they once appeared to be answers cease to be framed in quite the same way.

The people of the steam age could see steam expanding around them and understandably imagine more steam.

We can see AI expanding around us and understandably imagine more AI.

Both observations may be correct within their time.

Neither tells us where life is going.

The interesting question therefore becomes something other than:

Is AI good or bad?

AI is something human beings have created and are incorporating into life.

It produces consequences.

We respond to them.

Those responses produce further consequences.

Some conditions disappear.

Others arise.

Some will subsequently become problems requiring another solution.

There will never be a final screen announcing:

HUMANITY COMPLETED SUCCESSFULLY.

Nineteenth-Century Russia

Rory Sutherland captures another aspect of the problem rather wonderfully when discussing young people moving to London.

"You're not moving to London," he remarks, "you're moving to 19th century Russia."

His point concerns the proportion of a younger worker's income that may disappear in rent to a buy-to-let landlord. In his deliberately comic description, the supposedly liberated modern worker has entered something resembling indentured servitude (Sutherland, 2025).

The joke works because of the contradiction.

The young professional possesses a smartphone with capabilities unimaginable to earlier generations.

She can speak instantly to Australia.

She can work for a company on another continent.

She can summon information, food, entertainment and transport almost immediately.

She lives in one of the most technologically sophisticated cities that has ever existed.

Yet an enormous part of her productive life may be spent earning permission to continue occupying a small portion of somebody else's building.

What exactly has progressed?

Technology certainly has.

The economic relationship looks oddly familiar.

This does not mean nineteenth-century Russia was preferable to twenty-first-century London.

It means history behaves rather badly when forced onto a line running from:

bad → good.

Old relationships disappear and return in altered forms.

Advantages move.

Disadvantages move.

Problems mutate.

What one generation solves another may encounter in a form the first scarcely recognises.

Moving the Smoke

Western industrial societies provide another example.

During industrialisation, factories polluted Western cities. Workers performed dangerous processes. Smoke, chemicals, noise and industrial accidents existed close to the consumers who benefited from manufactured products.

Over time, environmental regulation strengthened.

Working conditions improved.

Cleaner technologies appeared.

These were genuine achievements.

Globalisation also made it possible to move some dirty, dangerous and labour-intensive processes somewhere else.

The Western consumer still buys the product.

The factory may now stand thousands of miles away.

Again, the result changes according to the boundary.

Measure pollution produced **inside Britain** and moving production overseas may improve Britain's figures.

Measure pollution associated with **British consumption** and some of it returns to the account.

The smoke has disappeared from one boundary.

It has not necessarily disappeared from the atmosphere.

This does not make international trade bad.

Industrial development has improved the material circumstances of enormous numbers of people.

It simply demonstrates how easily "progress" changes when the observer moves the line.

The Elephant and the Tree

There is an old story, retold by Heinrich Zimmer and later by Ken Wilber, concerning the Indian philosopher Shankara.

Shankara had been teaching a king that the apparently separate world we ordinarily experience does not possess quite the independent reality we assume it does.

The king decided to test him.

As Shankara approached the palace, an angry elephant was released towards him.

Shankara ran.

With considerable speed and rather little philosophical dignity, he climbed a palm tree.

After the elephant had been restrained, the amused king asked the obvious question.

If the elephant belonged to an ultimately non-real world, why had the great philosopher run away from it?

Shankara's reply, in essence, was wonderfully mischievous.

The king had seen a non-real Shankara flee from a non-real elephant and climb a non-real tree; why should that present a philosophical problem? (Zimmer, 1951; Wilber, 1977).

It is easy to treat this merely as an entertaining paradox.

It contains something more useful.

At one level, the elephant matters enormously.

Shankara climbs the tree.

If a car approaches, move.

If the roof leaks, repair it.

If somebody is hungry, feed them.

If an infection can be treated, treat it.

Nothing about this argument requires indifference towards ordinary life.

Yet at another level, something curious has happened before any of those events can become a story.

Awareness has divided what is happening into things.

Here is the elephant.

Here is Shankara.

Here is the tree.

Here is danger.

Here is escape.

Here is before.

Here is after.

The Indian tradition of Advaita Vedanta pushes the question further still. It asks whether the separateness we ordinarily attribute to observer and observed belongs entirely to reality itself, or partly to the way awareness organises reality.

One need not accept its metaphysics to appreciate the question.

To recognise that a distinction has been constructed does not make its consequences negligible. At the level at which hunger is felt, food matters. At the level at which an elephant charges, the tree matters.

The point is not to withdraw from life, but to stop mistaking our necessary distinctions for the whole of reality.

Perhaps our filters do more than prevent us from seeing the whole picture.

Perhaps the picture divided into separate things is already, to some degree, the work of the filters.

Problems and Solutions

This casts the idea of progress in a slightly different light.

We usually imagine that the world contains problems.

We discover them.

We solve them.

Then we move forward.

But before something can become a problem, several things must already have happened.

We must have separated one condition from the rest of experience.

We must prefer another possible condition.

We must compare what exists with what we imagine could exist.

We must introduce time: things are this way now and might become another way later.

Only then does a problem appear.

This does not make the problem trivial.

The charging elephant remains an excellent reason to climb a tree.

It means something subtler.

A problem can be solved without existence itself moving towards a solved condition.

We repair the roof.

The roof eventually requires repairing again.

We cure one disease.

People live long enough to encounter another.

We make transport faster.

Then build our lives around travelling farther.

We invent labour-saving devices and discover enough new work to fill the time they save.

None of this constitutes failure.

It may simply reveal that the expectation of final arrival was misplaced.

Perhaps the traveller, the road and the destination do not exist as three independently separate things.

Perhaps they arise together within the same act by which experience is divided and named.

The Trouble With Utopia

Every Utopia contains the boundary problem.

A Utopian proposal imagines the world after certain variables have been improved.

Everyone has food.

Everyone has shelter.

Education becomes universal.

Energy becomes cheap.

Work becomes easier.

Disease becomes rarer.

These sound like perfectly worthwhile aims.

Yet people remain people.

Scarcity moves.

Status finds another language.

Power reorganises itself.

New technologies produce new possibilities, including new ways to behave badly.

The world beyond the model continues generating feedback.

This does not mean that we should abandon attempts to improve anything.

Quite the reverse.

Repair what needs repairing.

Relieve suffering where it can be relieved.

Build the bridge.

Treat the infection.

Teach the child.

Improve the business.

Make the machine safer.

The mistake lies elsewhere.

It lies in believing that because **a problem can be solved**, existence itself must therefore be travelling towards **a solved condition**.

There is little reason to assume that it is.

Neither Optimism Nor Pessimism

This is not a pessimistic argument.

Pessimism requires progress almost as much as optimism does.

The pessimist looks at an imagined upward path and concludes that we are travelling downwards.

The optimist looks at the same graph and expects the line to continue upwards.

Perhaps the graph is the problem.

Life contains birth and death.

Creation and destruction.

Love and separation.

Health and illness.

Comfort and discomfort.

Discovery and loss.

Periods of peace and periods of violence.

Great intelligence and extraordinary foolishness can inhabit the same person.

We call some of these conditions progress and others decline because we prefer one to another.

Preference is human.

It does not establish a direction for history.

But preference remains sufficient for action.

We do not need to prove that history is advancing before feeding a hungry person.

Nor does an act need to form part of some cosmic plan before it becomes worthwhile.

Within ordinary life, we prefer one condition to another and act accordingly.

The mistake comes when we turn that preference into a theory about the destination of existence.

What Happens to Our Children?

At my age, much of what happens during the next fifty years will affect my sons and daughters more than it affects me.

It is tempting to ask whether they will inherit a better world or a worse one.

I increasingly suspect that this is the wrong question.

They will inherit **their** world.

Some things will be easier than they were for me.

Some things will be harder.

They will possess abilities my generation would once have regarded as science fiction.

They may lose things my generation barely noticed because we assumed they would always be there.

They will solve some of the problems we leave behind.

Their solutions will contribute to circumstances that their own children will eventually need to negotiate.

Indeed, "inheritance" may itself be too simple a description.

They will not merely receive a finished world from us.

Through their perceptions, choices and relationships, they will participate in bringing their world into appearance, just as we have participated in bringing ours into appearance.

This does not mean we have no responsibility towards them.

Quite the opposite.

We can behave responsibly precisely because a worthwhile action does not need to form part of a theory of historical progress.

You do not need to believe that humanity is marching towards perfection before planting a tree whose shade you will never sit beneath.

You simply plant the tree.

Life Is Not Going Anywhere

Perhaps this is what modern Western thought finds especially difficult to accept.

We have become accustomed to treating existence as a project.

There must be objectives.

Targets.

Outcomes.

Development.

Growth.

Solutions.

Milestones.

Improvement.

When things go badly, somebody has failed.

When things go well, we call it progress.

But the world existed before our measurements.

It continues beyond our models.

And it remains under no obligation to obey the boundaries we draw around it.

We should cure disease.

We should build things.

We should learn.

We should reduce suffering where we can.

We should use science, technology and intelligence because they represent remarkable human capacities.

And perhaps we can do all these things without requiring them to demonstrate that history is advancing.

The elephant comes.

The man climbs the tree.

The river is dammed.

The computer calculates.

The child grows old.

One thing follows another.

We divide the sequence into problems, solutions, successes and failures.

Those distinctions help us live.

They may even be necessary for us to live.

But perhaps we should hold them a little more lightly.

The optimist need not prove that everything is getting better.

The pessimist need not prove that everything is getting worse.

And the rest of us need not demand that existence justify itself by arriving somewhere.

A solution solves what it solves.

Then something else happens.

Life is not travelling towards perfection.

Nor is it necessarily falling away from some lost perfection in the past.

Perhaps the deeper error lies in imagining that life is an object travelling along a road, while we stand apart from it and judge its progress.

We are not standing outside life, measuring its journey.

Our measurements, our judgements and the person who appears to make them are also among the things happening.

The world changes.

We change.

Things arise and disappear.

Every front reveals a back.

Every boundary leaves something outside it.

And tomorrow, when it arrives, will not be the next stage of humanity's progress towards completion.

It will simply be tomorrow.

We can climb the tree when the elephant charges.

And we can climb down again when it has passed.

Life is not going anywhere.

Life is.

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