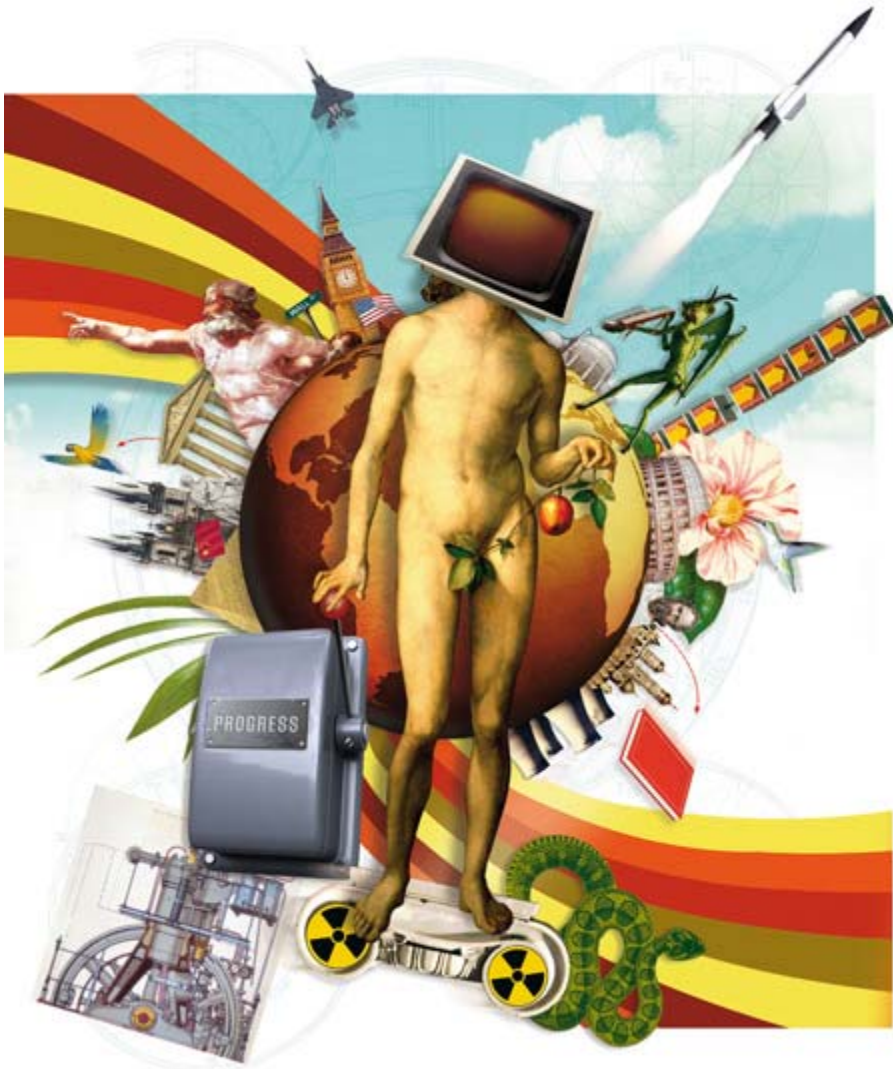


The idea of progress

Why is the modern view of progress so impoverished?

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THE best modern parable of progress was, aptly, ahead of its time. In 1861 **Imre Madach** published "**The Tragedy of Man**", a "Paradise Lost" for the industrial age. The verse drama, still a cornerstone of Hungarian literature, describes how Adam is cast out of the Garden with Eve, renounces God and determines to recreate Eden through his own efforts. "My God is me," he boasts, "whatever I regain is mine by right. This is the source of all my strength and pride."

Adam gets the chance to see how much of Eden he will "regain". He starts in Ancient Egypt and travels in time through 11 tableaux, ending in the icebound twilight of humanity. It is a cautionary tale. Adam glories in the Egyptian pyramids, but he discovers that they are built on the misery of slaves. So he rejects slavery and instead advances to Greek democracy. But when the Athenians condemn a hero, much as they condemned Socrates, Adam forsakes democracy and moves on to harmless, worldly pleasure. Sated and

miserable in hedonistic Rome, he looks to the chivalry of the knights crusader. Yet each new reforming principle crumbles before him. Adam replaces 17th-century Prague's courtly hypocrisy with the rights of man. When equality curdles into Terror under Robespierre, he embraces individual liberty—which is in turn corrupted on the money-grabbing streets of Georgian London. In the future a scientific Utopia has Michelangelo making chair-legs and Plato herding cows, because art and philosophy have no utility. At the end of time, having encountered the savage man who has no guiding principle except violence, Adam is downcast—and understandably so. Suicidal, he pleads with Lucifer: "Let me see no more of my harsh fate: this useless struggle."

Things today are not quite that bad. But Madach's 19th-century verse contains an insight that belongs slap bang in the 21st. In the rich world the idea of progress has become impoverished. Through complacency and bitter experience, the scope of progress has narrowed. The popular view is that, although technology and GDP advance, morals and society are treading water or, depending on your choice of newspaper, sinking back into decadence and barbarism. On the left of politics these days, "progress" comes with a pair of ironic quotation marks attached; on the right, "progressive" is a term of abuse.

It was not always like that. There has long been a tension between seeking perfection in life or in the afterlife. Optimists in the Enlightenment and the 19th century came to believe that the mass of humanity could one day lead happy and worthy lives here on Earth. Like Madach's Adam, they were bursting with ideas for how the world might become a better place.

Some thought God would bring about the New Jerusalem, others looked to history or evolution. Some thought people would improve if left to themselves, others thought they should be forced to be free; some believed in the nation, others in the end of nations; some wanted a perfect language, others universal education; some put their hope in science, others in commerce; some had faith in wise legislation, others in anarchy. Intellectual life was teeming with grand ideas. For most people, the question was not whether progress would happen, but how.

The idea of progress forms the backdrop to a society. In the extreme, without the possibility of progress of any sort, your gain is someone else's loss. If human behaviour is unreformable, social policy can only ever be about trying to cage the ape within. Society must in principle be able to move towards its ideals, such as equality and freedom, or they are no more than cant and self-delusion. So it matters if people lose their faith in progress. And it is worth thinking about how to restore it.

Cain and cant

By now, some of you will hardly be able to contain your protests. Surely the evidence of progress is all around us? That is the case put forward in "It's Getting Better All the Time", by the late Julian Simon and Stephen Moore then at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think-tank in Washington, DC. Over almost 300 pages they show how vastly everyday life has improved in every way.

For aeons people lived to the age of just 25 or 30 and most parents could expect to mourn at least one of their children. Today people live to 65 and, in countries such as Japan and Canada, over 80; outside Africa, a child's death is mercifully rare. Global average income was for centuries about \$200 a year; a typical inhabitant of one of the world's richer countries now earns that much in a day. In the Middle Ages about one in ten Europeans

could read; today, with a few exceptions, such as India and parts of Africa, the global rate is comfortably above eight out of ten. In much of the world, ordinary men and women can vote and find work, regardless of their race. In large parts of it they can think and say what they choose. If they fall ill, they will be treated. If they are innocent, they will generally walk free.

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It is an impressive list—even if you factor in some formidably depressing data. (In the gently dissenting foreword to her husband's book *Simon's widow* quotes statistics claiming that, outside warfare, 20th-century governments murdered 7.3% of their people, through needless famine, labour camps, genocide and other crimes. That compares with 3.7% in the 19th century and 4.7% in the 17th.) Mr Moore and Simon show that health and wealth have never been so abundant. And for the part of humanity that is even now shedding poverty, many gains still lie ahead.

The trouble is that a belief in progress is more than just a branch of accounting. The books are never closed. Wouldn't nuclear war or environmental catastrophe tip the balance into the red? And the accounts are full of blank columns. How does the unknown book-keeper reconcile such unknowable quantities as happiness and fulfilment across the ages? As Adam traverses history, he sees material progress combined with spiritual decline.

Even if you can show how miserable the past was, the belief in progress is about the future. People born in the rich world today think they are due a modicum of health, prosperity and equality. They advance against that standard, rather than the pestilence, beggary and injustice of serfdom. That's progress.

Every day, in every way...

The idea of progress has a long history, but it started to flower in the 17th century. Enlightenment thinkers believed that man emancipated by reason would rise to ever greater heights of achievement. The many manifestations of his humanity would be the engines of progress: language, community, science, commerce, moral sensibility and government. Unfortunately, many of those engines have failed.

Some supposed sources of progress now appear almost quaint. Take language: many 18th-century thinkers believed that superstitions and past errors were imprinted in words. "Hysteria", for example, comes from the Greek for "womb", on the mistaken idea that panic was a seizure of the uterus. Purge the language of rotten thinking, they believed, and truth and reason would prevail at last. The impulse survives, much diminished, in the vocabulary of political correctness. But these days few people outside North Korea believe in language as an agent of social change.

Every time someone tells you to "be realistic" they are asking you to compromise your ideals

Other sources of progress are clothed in tragedy. The Germanic thought that individual progress should be subsumed into the shared destiny of a nation, or *volk*, is fatally associated with Hitler. Whenever nationalism becomes the chief organising principle of society, state violence is not far behind. Likewise, in Soviet Russia and Communist China unspeakable crimes were committed by the ruling elite in the pursuit of progress, rather as

they had been in the name of God in earlier centuries. As John Passmore, an Australian philosopher, wrote: "men have sought to demonstrate their love of God by loving nothing at all and their love for humanity by loving nobody whatsoever."

The 20th century was seduced by the idea that humans will advance as part of a collective and that the enlightened few have the right—the duty even—to impose progress on the benighted masses whether they choose it or not. The blood of millions and the fall of the Berlin Wall, 20 years ago this year, showed how much the people beg to differ. Coercion will always have its attractions for those able to do the coercing, but, as a source of enlightened progress, the subjugation of the individual in the interests of the community has lost much of its appeal.

Instead the modern age has belonged to material progress and its predominant source has been science. Yet nestling amid the quarks and transistors and the nucleic acids and nanotubes, there is a question. Science confers huge power to change the world. Can people be trusted to harness it for good?

The ancients thought not. Warnings that curiosity can be destructive stretch back to the very beginning of civilisation. As Adam and Eve ate from the Tree of Knowledge, so inquisitive Pandora, the first woman in Greek mythology, peered into the jar and released all the world's evils.

Modern science is full of examples of technologies that can be used for ill as well as good. Think of nuclear power—and of nuclear weapons; of biotechnology—and of biological contamination. Or think, less apocalyptically, of information technology and of electronic surveillance. History is full of useful technologies that have done harm, intentionally or not. Electricity is a modern wonder, but power stations have burnt too much CO₂-producing coal. The internet has spread knowledge and understanding, but it has also spread crime and pornography. German chemistry produced aspirin and fertiliser, but it also filled Nazi gas chambers with Cyclon B.

The point is not that science is harmful, but that progress in science does not map tidily onto progress for humanity. In an official British survey of public attitudes to science in 2008, just over 80% of those asked said they were "amazed by the achievements of science". However, only 46% thought that "the benefits of science are greater than any harmful effect".

From the perspective of human progress, science needs governing. Scientific progress needs to be hitched to what you might call "moral progress". It can yield untold benefits, but only if people use it wisely. They need to understand how to stop science from being abused. And to do that they must look outside science to the way people behave.

...I am getting richer and richer

It is a similar story with economic growth, the other source of material progress. The 18th century was optimistic that business could bring prosperity; and that prosperity, in its turn, could bring enlightenment. Business has more than lived up to the first half of that promise. As Joseph Schumpeter famously observed, silk stockings were once only for queens, but capitalism has given them to factory girls. And, as Mr Moore and Simon argue, prosperity has brought its share of enlightenment.

The Economist puts more faith in business than most. Yet even the stolidest defenders of capitalism would, by and large, agree that its tendency to form cartels, shuffle off the costs of pollution and collapse under the weight of its own financial inventiveness needs to be constrained by laws designed to channel its energy to the general good. Business needs governing, just as science does.

Nor does economic progress broadly defined correspond to human progress any more precisely than does scientific progress. GDP does not measure welfare; and wealth does not equal happiness. Rich countries are, by and large, happier than poor ones; but among developed-world countries, there is only a weak correlation between happiness and GDP. And, although wealth has been soaring over the past half a century, happiness, measured by national surveys, has hardly budged.

That is probably largely because of status-consciousness. It is good to go up in the world, but much less so if everyone around you is going up in it too. Once they have filled their bellies and put a roof over their heads, people want more of what Fred Hirsch, an economist who worked on this newspaper in the 1950s and 1960s, called “positional goods”. Only one person can be the richest tycoon. Not everyone can own a Matisse or a flat in Mayfair. As wealth grows, the competition for such status symbols only becomes more intense.

And it is not just that material progress does not seem to be delivering the emotional goods. People also fear that mankind is failing to manage it properly—with the result that, in important ways, their children may not be better off than they are. The forests are disappearing; the ice is melting; social bonds are crumbling; privacy is eroding; life is becoming a dismal slog in an ugly world.

All this scepticism, and more, is on display in “Nineteen Eighty-Four” and “Brave New World”, the two great British dystopian novels of the 20th century. In them George Orwell and Aldous Huxley systematically subvert each of the Enlightenment’s engines of progress. Language—Orwell’s Newspeak—is used to control people’s thought. The individuals living on Airstrip One are dissolved by perpetual war into a single downtrodden “nation”. In both books the elite uses power to oppress, not enlighten. Science in Huxley’s London has become monstrous—babies raised *in vitro* in hatcheries are chemically stunted; and the people are maintained in a state of drug-induced tranquillity. And in the year of our Ford 632, Huxley’s world rulers require enthusiastic consumption to keep the factories busy and the people docile. Wherever the Enlightenment saw scope for human nature to improve, Orwell and Huxley warned that it could be debased by conditioning, propaganda and mind-control.

Crooked timber

The question is why neither Orwell’s nor Huxley’s nightmares have come to life. And the answer depends on the last pair of engines of progress: moral sensibility in its widest sense, and the institutions that make up what today is known as “governance”. These broadly liberal forces offer hope for a better future—more, indeed, than you may think.

The junior partner is governance—not an oppressive Leviathan, but a democratic system of laws and social institutions. Right and left have much cause to criticise government. For the right, as Ronald Reagan famously said, the nine most terrifying words in the English

language are: "I'm from the government and I'm here to help." For the left, government has failed to tame the cruelty of markets and lift the poor out of their misery. From their different perspectives, both sides complain that government regulation is often costly and ineffectual, and that many decades of social welfare have failed to get to grips with an underclass.

Yet even if government has scaled back its ambitions from the heights of the post-war welfare state, even if it is often inefficient and self-serving, it also embodies moral progress. That is the significance of the assertion, in the American Declaration of Independence, that "all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights". It is the significance of laws guaranteeing free speech, universal suffrage, and equality before the law. And it is the significance of courts that can hold states to account when they, inevitably, fail to match the standards that they have set for themselves.



Illustration by Matt Herring

Such values are the institutional face of the fundamental engine of progress—"moral sensibility". The very idea probably sounds quaint and old-fashioned, but it is the subject of a powerful recent book by Susan Neiman, an American philosopher living in Germany. People often shy away from a moral view of the world, if only because moral certitude reeks of intolerance and bigotry. As one sociologist has said "don't be judgmental" has become the 11th commandment.

But Ms Neiman thinks that people yearn for a sense of moral purpose. In a world preoccupied with consumerism and petty self-interest, that gives life dignity. People want to determine how the world works, not always to be determined by it. It means that people's behaviour should be shaped not by who is most powerful, or by who stands to lose and gain, but by what is right despite the costs. Moral sensibility is why people will suffer for their beliefs, and why acts of principled self-sacrifice are so powerful.

People can distinguish between what is and what ought to be. Torture was once common in Europe's market squares. It is now unacceptable even when the world's most powerful nation wears the interrogator's mask. Race was once a bar to the clubs and drawing-rooms of respectable society. Now a black man is in the White House.

There are no guarantees that the gap between is and ought can be closed. Every time someone tells you to "be realistic" they are asking you to compromise your ideals. Ms Neiman acknowledges that your ideals will never be met completely. But sometimes, however imperfectly, you can make progress. It is as if you are moving towards an unattainable horizon. "Human dignity", she writes, "requires the love of ideals for their own sake, but nothing requires that the love will be requited."

Striving, not strife

At the end of Madach's poem, Adam is about to throw himself off a cliff in despair, when he glimpses redemption. First Eve draws near to tell him that she is to have a child. Then God comes and gently tells Adam that he is wrong to try to reckon his accomplishments on a cosmic scale. "For if you saw your transient, earthly life set in dimensions of eternity, there wouldn't be any virtue in endurance. Or if you saw your spirit drench the dust, where could you find incentive for your efforts?" All God asks of man is to strive for progress, nothing more. "It is human virtues I want," He says, "human greatness."

Ms Neiman asks people to reject the false choice between Utopia and degeneracy. Moral progress, she writes, is neither guaranteed nor is it hopeless. Instead, it is up to us.



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Websites

The Hungarian Electronic Library provides a translation of "[The Tragedy of Man](#)". Google Books has excerpts from "[It's Getting Better All the Time](#)". Susan Neiman wrote a [book on moral clarity](#).