Enlightenment Now

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Some Deep Questions
• Why is the world filled with woe?
• How can we make it better?
• How do we give meaning and purpose to our lives?
Many people have answers to these questions
For example….

• Morality is dictated by God in holy scriptures. When everyone obeys his laws, the world will be perfect.
• Problems are the fault of evil people, who must be shamed and defeated.
• Our tribe should claim its rightful greatness under the control of a strong leader who embodies its authentic virtue.
• In the past we lived in a state of order and harmony, until alien forces brought on decadence and degeneration. We must restore the society to its golden age.
What about the rest of us?
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ENLIGHTENMENT NOW

THE CASE FOR REASON, SCIENCE, HUMANISM, AND PROGRESS
There is an alternative system of beliefs and values...
The Ideals of the Enlightenment

• Use knowledge to enhance human flourishing.
• Many people embrace the ideals of the Enlightenment without being able to name or describe them.
• Faded into the background
  – status quo
  – establishment
• Other ideologies have passionate advocates.
• Enlightenment ideals need a positive defense, explicit commitment.
Four themes

• Reason
• Science
• Humanism
• Progress
Reason

• Traditional sources of belief are generators of delusion:
  – faith
  – revelation
  – tradition
  – authority
  – charisma
  – mysticism
  – intuition
  – hermeneutic parsing of sacred texts
1. Reason

• Reason is non-negotiable
  – As soon as you try to provide reasons why we should trust anything other than reason…
    • Why you’re right.
    • Why other people should believe you.
    • That you’re not lying
    • or full of crap…
  – you’ve lost the argument!
1. Reason

• Human beings, on their own, are not particularly reasonable.
  – generalize from anecdotes
  – reason from stereotypes
  – seek evidence that confirms our beliefs, ignore evidence that disconfirms them
  – are overconfident about our knowledge, wisdom, & rectitude.
1. Reason

- BUT people are *capable* of reason
- *If* they establish certain norms and institutions:
  - free speech
  - open criticism & debate
  - logical analysis
  - fact-checking
  - empirical testing...
2. Science

• The world is *intelligible*.
• Understand the world by formulating possible explanations and testing them against reality.
• Science is our most reliable means of understanding the world…
• Including ourselves.
  – Science of human nature
  – Beliefs about society are testable.
3. Humanism

- The ultimate moral purpose is to reduce the suffering and enhance the flourishing of human beings
3. Humanism

• Alternatives to humanism:
• The ultimate good is to...
  – enhance the glory of the tribe, nation, race, class, or faith
  – obey the dictates of a divinity and pressure others to do the same
  – achieve feats of heroic greatness
  – advance a mystical force, dialectic, struggle, or pursuit of a utopian or messianic age
3. Humanism

- Humanism is feasible because people are endowed with a sense of *sympathy*
  - concern with welfare of others
3. Humanism

• By default, circle of sympathy is small: kin, friends, allies…
• Can be expanded through *cosmopolitanism*:
  – education
  – journalism
  – art
  – mobility
  – reason
    • nothing special about *me*
4. Progress

• If we apply *knowledge* and *sympathy* to reduce suffering and enhance flourishing, we can gradually succeed.
So How Did That Enlightenment Thing Work Out?
Intellectuals hate progress.

(Intellectuals who call themselves “progressive” really hate progress.)
If you think that we can solve problems...

- You have a
  - “blind faith”
  - “a quasi-religious belief” in the
  - “the outmoded superstition”
  - “false promise” of the
  - “myth” of the
  - “onward march” of
  - “inevitable progress.”
• You are a
  – “cheerleader” for
  – “vulgar American can-doism” with the
  – “rah-rah” spirit of
  – “boardroom ideology”
  – “Silicon Valley,” and the
  – “Chamber of Commerce.”
• You are a practitioner of
  – “Whig history”
  – a “naïve optimist”
  – a “Pollyanna”
  – a “Pangloss”
Progress: An Empirical Hypothesis

• Human well-being can be measured:
  – Life
  – Health
  – Sustenance
  – Prosperity
  – Peace
  – Freedom
  – Safety
  – Knowledge
  – Leisure
  – Happiness

• If they have increased over time, that is progress.
Life
Life Expectancy, 1771-2015

Source: Our World in Data, based on Riley 2000; WHO; World Bank
Child Mortality, 1751-2015

Source: Our World in Data, based on UN; Human Mortality Database
Health
Childhood Deaths from Infections Disease, 2000-2013

Source: World Health Organization
Sustenance
Calories, 1700-2013

Source: Our World in Data, based on Fogel 2004; UN FAO
Undernourishment 1970-2015

Source: Our World in Data, based on UN FAO
Famine Deaths, 1860-2016

Source: Our World in Data, based on Devereux 2000; Ó Gráda 2009; White 2011; EM-DAT
Prosperity
Gross World Product, 1-2015

Source: Our World in Data, based on World Bank; Maddison Project
GDP Per Capita, 1600-2015

Source: Our World in Data, based on World Bank; Maddison Project
Extreme Poverty, 1820-2015

Source: Our World in Data, based on Bourguignon & Morrison 2002; World Bank
International Inequality, 1820-2013

Sources: OECD Clio-Infra; Milanović 2012 & personal communication
Social Spending, OECD Countries, 1880-2016

Source: Our World in Data, based on Lindert 2004; OECD

Sources: Meyer & Sullivan 2012; Meyer, personal communication
Peace
Great Power War, 1500-2015

Sources: Levy & Thompson 2011; Uppsala Conflict Data Project
Battle Deaths, 1900-2005

Source: Lacina, Gleditsch, & Russett, 2006
Battle Deaths, 1946-2016

Source: Peace Research Institute of Oslo; Uppsala Data Conflict Project
Freedom and Rights
Democracy vs. Autocracy, 1800-2015

Source: HumanProgress, based on Polity IV
Violent Crime
Homicide Deaths, Western Europe, US, Mexico, 1300-2015

Sources: Eisner 2003; Roth 2009; FBI; Vilalta personal communication
Homicide Deaths 1967-2015

Sources: FBI; Office for National Statistics (UK); Krug et al. 2002; UN Economic & Social Council
Rape & Domestic Violence, US, 1993-2012

Source: US Bureau of Justice Statistics

Sources: Finkelhor 2014; Nat. Child Abuse & Neglect Data System; US Bureau of Justice Statistics
Safety
Motor Vehicle Accident Deaths 1925-2015

Source: National Highway Traffic Safety Administration

Sources: National Highway Traffic Safety Administration; National Center for Statistics & Analysis
Plane Crash Deaths 1970-2015

Source: Aviation Safety Network
Deaths from Falls, Fires, Drowning, Poison, US, 1903-2014

Source: National Safety Council
Occupational Accident Deaths, US, 1913-2015

Sources: Bureau of Labor Statistics; National Safety Council; CDC; OSHA
Natural Disaster Deaths, 1900-2015

Source: Our World in Data, based on EM-DAT, The International Disaster Databas
Lightning Strike Deaths US
1900-2015

Source: Our World in Data, based on Lopez & Holle; NOAA
Knowledge
Literacy, 1475-2010

Sources: Our World in Data, based on Van Zanden et al.; Nat. Ctr. for Education Statistics; CIA
IQ Gains 1909-2013

Source: Pietschnig & Voracek 2015
Quality of Life
Work Hours, W. Europe & US, 1870-2000

Source: Our World in Data, based on Huberman & Minns 2007
Utilities, Appliances, Housework 1900-2015

Sources: Greenwood et al. 2005; US Census Bureau; Our World in Data; Bureau of Labor Statistics

Sources: Aguiar & Hurst 2007; Bureau of Labor Statistics
Happiness
Life Satisfaction vs. Income, 2006

Source: Stevenson & Wolfers 2008, based on Gallup World Poll 2006
How is the fact of human progress reflected in the news?
Tone of the News

Source: Leetaru 2011
Why Do People Deny Progress?

1. The Availability Heuristic:
   - People estimate risk according to how easily they can recall examples from memory
   - The nature of news:
     - News is about stuff that happens, not stuff that doesn’t happen
     - New is about sudden events, not gradual changes
CNN Holds Morning Meeting To Decide What Viewers Should Panic About For Rest Of Day

ATLANTA—Kicking around ideas ranging from an uptick in child kidnappings to a new link between laptops and cancer, senior CNN staffers held their regular daily meeting this morning to decide which topic viewers should panic about for the rest of the day. “It’s always kind of tough to get our meetings
• “The world is getting more dangerous (and always has been).”
Why Do People Deny Progress?

2. The Negativity Bias:
   - “Bad is stronger than good”
   - We think about and feel bad events more than good ones (especially recent bad events)
     • Franklin Pierce Adams: “Nothing is more responsible for the good old days than a bad memory.”
Why Do People Deny Progress?

3. The Prophesy Market:
   - Pessimism sounds serious
   - Optimism sounds frivolous
Three Questions about Progress and Enlightenment
1. Isn’t it *good* to be pessimistic?

- No:
- It’s good to be *accurate!*
  - Be aware of suffering & injustice where they occur.
  - Be aware of how they can be reduced.
1. Isn’t it *good* to be pessimistic?

- Dangers of thoughtless pessimism:
  - Fatalism:
    - Why waste time and money on a hopeless cause?
  - Radicalism:
    - “Smash the machine”
    - “Drain the swamp”
    - “Burn the empire to the ground”
    - “Only I can fix it”
2. Is Progress Inevitable?

• Does progress mean that everything gets better for everyone everywhere all the time?

• No: Progress ≠ Magic
  – Progress = using knowledge to solve problems
  – Problems are inevitable.
  – Solutions create new problems.
Is Progress Inevitable?

- Severe global challenges
  - Climate change
  - Nuclear weapons
• Unsolved (but solvable):
  – Decarbonization via:
    • carbon pricing
    • low-, zero-, and negative-carbon technologies
  – Denuclearization via:
    • international stability
    • arms reduction
3. Does the Enlightenment Go Against Human Nature?

- Is humanism “arid,” “tepid,” “flattened”?
- Is the conquest of disease, famine, poverty, violence, and ignorance … boring?
- Do people need to believe in magic, a father in the sky, a strong chief to protect the tribe, myths of heroic ancestors?...
Applying knowledge and sympathy to enhance human flourishing is heroic, glorious, spiritual!
• Not just a myth
  – True (to the best of our knowledge)
• Not just one tribe
  – All of humanity
• We are born into a pitiless universe, facing steep odds against life-enabling order and in constant jeopardy of falling apart. We were shaped by a force that is ruthlessly competitive. We are made from crooked timber, vulnerable to illusions, self-centeredness, and at times astounding stupidity.

• Yet human nature has also been blessed with resources that open a space for a kind of redemption. We are endowed with the power to combine ideas recursively, to have thoughts about our thoughts. We have an instinct for language, allowing us to share the fruits of our experience and ingenuity. We are deepened with the capacity for sympathy—for pity, imagination, compassion, commiseration.
• These endowments have found ways to magnify their own power. The scope of language has been augmented by the written, printed, and electronic word. Our circle of sympathy has been expanded by history, journalism, and the narrative arts. And our puny rational faculties have been multiplied by the norms and institutions of reason: intellectual curiosity, open debate, skepticism of authority and dogma, and the burden of proof to verify ideas by confronting them against reality.

• As the spiral of recursive improvement gathers momentum, we eke out victories against the forces that grind us down, not least the darker parts of our own nature. We penetrate the mysteries of the cosmos, including life and mind. We live longer, suffer less, learn more, get smarter, and enjoy more small pleasures and rich experiences. Fewer of us are killed, assaulted, enslaved, oppressed, or exploited by the others. From a few oases, the territories with peace and prosperity are growing, and could someday encompass the globe. Much suffering remains, and tremendous peril. But ideas on how to reduce them have been voiced, and an infinite number of others are yet to be conceived.
• We will never have a perfect world, and it would be dangerous to seek one. But there is no limit to the betterments we can attain if we continue to apply knowledge to enhance human flourishing.

• This heroic story is not just another myth. Myths are fictions, but this one is true—true to the best of our knowledge, which is the only truth we can have. We believe it because we have reasons to believe it. As we learn more, we can show which parts of the story continue to be true, and which ones false—as any of them might be, and any could become.

• And the story belongs not to any tribe but to all of humanity—to any sentient creature with the power of reason and the urge to persist in its being. For it requires only the convictions that life is better than death, health is better than sickness, abundance is better than want, freedom is better than coercion, happiness is better than suffering, and knowledge is better than superstition and ignorance.
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