

The Injustice of Progress

By Theodore Dalrymple

Reading a newspaper headline recently—on my telephone, of course—I suddenly became aware of a terrible injustice that was about to be done to me.

The headline proclaimed that 70 was the new 60, and that scientific research had borne this out. Of course, we hardly needed scientific research to inform us of this: It was virtually self-evident anyway.



When I started out in medicine, a geriatric patient was anyone over the age of 65—lower than the retirement age now. When one looks at photographs of people of the 1940s who were then in their 50s or 60s, one is struck by how old they looked, how worn-out both physically and mentally,

deeply lined, as it were, by their experience of two world wars and an economic slump. I might add also that they seem to have a depth of character that is largely absent from faces today. Whether it was suffering and hardship that give character to their physiognomy, or something else, I do not know; though when suffering is too crushing, it can empty faces of all expression.

What, then, was the injustice of which the newspaper made me suddenly aware? It was this: If present trends continue, succeeding generations who reach my present age will regard me, as judged by my photographs, as prematurely

aged. *They* will be leaping around like puppies, whereas I have to take anti-inflammatory drugs to prevent my finger joints from seizing up completely. There is no justice in this: Why should people live longer and healthier than I simply because they were born after me? They did nothing to deserve this immense benefit; they simply freeloaded on the ingenuity and hard work of those who came before them.

Some people might say—almost certainly *will* say—that I myself have benefited from precisely the same injustice toward previous generations. With this I wholly agree, and plead guilty, if it is understood that my guilt is not personal but (to use a word much in vogue these days) *structural*.

What is done, however, is done, and cannot be undone. What we *can* do, however, and what I would maintain we *must* do to prevent further intergenerational injustice of this type, is to halt all future medical progress, so that all future generations are born on a level playing field and remain on it. There is nothing more unjust than that people should enjoy privileges that they have done nothing to earn.

Of course, what applies to medicine applies to everything else. I accept that we cannot alter the past and therefore that, unjust as it may be toward past generations, we have to accept progress that has already been made and from which we benefit without ourselves having done anything to deserve it. How many people understand the way in which all the things upon which they are dependent work, let alone have done anything to develop them?

Of course, reactionaries might ask whether all those things really represent progress in any wider sense, whether anyone is the happier for them. For example, it has been shown that children without access to screens of various kinds are the happier for their absence. But the lamentable fact is that once such “progress” is entrenched, it becomes to all intents and purposes irreversible. You cannot go back to a

prelapsarian state as if what had been developed had never existed. This surely is the meaning, or one of the meanings of, the story of the Garden of Eden and the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge: You cannot return to a state of innocence once you have lost it, or un-know what once you have known, at least not do so deliberately, as a matter of policy.

Nor do people necessarily pursue what they know is best for them, or what will make them happiest. Contrary to the utilitarians, we are not and could never be happiness-maximizing calculating machines. Children who are deprived of their screens are much the happier for it, but as soon as the opportunity arises to return to them, they do so, even in the knowledge that they will be the unhappier for it. The Russian writer V.G. Korolenko—the near contemporary of Chekhov—once wrote that man is made for happiness as a bird for flight, which seems to me about as inaccurate an aphorism as it is possible to imagine. Self-destruction starts so early in life that it might well be regarded as an instinct, so universal, or near universal, is it. No doubt there are degrees of it, but I doubt that there are many people alive who have never taken a bad decision of their own free will knowing full well that its result will be harmful to them or to their peace of mind.

But to return to the question of progress and justice. As justice is the political virtue of political virtues, the only one in fact that we truly value or believe, it follows that progress is justice's worst enemy, for of course some people, through no fault of their own, will not live to see it; just as some will live to see it, through no effort or merit of their own. Could injustice be greater?

Therefore, in the name of intergenerational justice, it is necessary that all progress should cease, and all attempts at improvement be halted. Quite apart from the fact that most progress is equivocal in any case, that there is no gain without loss, and that when progress is made it is unevenly

shared among those of the very generations who might benefit from it (another terrible injustice in itself, an affront to the principle of equality), there is no way in which the terrible wrong done to those who died before the progress was made can be righted. Imagine how awful it must be to die of a disease that you know will one day be curable! It would be a great consolation to know that it will never be curable!

It follows from this that research should cease wherever it is carried out, for its results can only increase injustice, and injustice is what we must dedicate our lives to eliminating.

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