

Moral Progress Amid Technological Change

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While it is true that I lived for some time in Montana, in the years immediately following the Unabomber incident, I am not a Luddite. Not that all Montanans are Luddites, mind you, but few in the state found it entirely remarkable that the *Unabomber Manifesto* was penned in the vast reaches of lightly populated prairies and mountains. Though I am not a strict believer in geographical determinism on moral psychology, there are sets of common personality characteristics frequently found among those drawn to remotely populated areas in the developed world. Many of these characteristics often involve a skepticism toward the technological pleasantries of modern life brought on by our increasing affluence, often expressed in moral terms.

My best friend in Montana, the environmental historian Dan Flores, embodies these traits: either because of or despite the comfortable lifestyle afforded him by his university job, Dan built a small cabin “off the grid,” as the locals say, in the foothills of the Sapphire Mountains in the Bitterroot Valley outside of Missoula. From a “soft” or green technology perspective, Dan’s place is a marvel—an adobe cabin that can be heated easily with a wood-burning stove, solar panels to provide hot water and additional heating when necessary, and a composting toilet. The reasons that Dan made this sort of investment in his lifestyle were complex. Part of it was surely to get up high enough to have a spectacular view of the valley that he loves. But part of it as well was to embody a bioregional lifestyle (Dan has written extensively on this topic), born out of a commitment to help mitigate the impact of modern technologically enhanced lifestyles on the sustainability of the earth’s ecosystems.

Dan’s technological caution—leading him either to find alternatives to the dominant forms of technological advancement or, in some cases, to seek to revive older technologies that were more in use before the industrial revolution—is based in a considered skepticism, let us call it an “environmental skepticism,” about technology. This skepticism underscores the conviction held by Dan and others that we have some kind of personal moral responsibility toward more living beings than just other humans. This occasionally explicit, but largely implicit, environmental ethic is variably directed: sometimes toward a sense of obligation to nature itself; or more simply toward future human generations who we know will lead comparatively better lives if more Americans lived as Dan does (lighter on the earth and consuming fewer of the world’s nonrenewable natural resources); or even toward the ability of those in poorer countries to get access to the resources that we in the developed world often take for granted. The philosophical foundations for such obligations don’t matter so much for me here. What does matter is that Dan’s motivations are moral, plausibly indicate some form of moral progress—in the sense at least that they are an expansion of moral consideration to broader circles of consideration than most people have considered the proper scope of morality in the past—and are directly tied to a worry about technological advancements brought on by prosperity.

Which brings me to John Lachs’s fine essay. There is much I like in Lachs’s “Both Better Off and Better,” and much that I would like to press him on further based upon competing claims to moral progress, like the one I have just sketched. I find this paper

a bit curious because my intuition is that Lachs would admire my friend Dan, just as I do. Surely someone like Lachs, who, I believe, is interested in the relationship between human health and a more expansive idea of living well, would see the importance of expanding notions of living well to include the health of the ecosystems around us. So, at least, I would imagine that Lachs would find Dan's lifestyle "healthy," in this sense.

But what I am not sure of from this essay is how sensitive Lachs is to the expanded sense of moral consideration that motivates Dan's more environmentally responsible lifestyle. Further, I do not see an awareness of the tensions such an environmental view has with the instruments of human progress that Lachs's lauds throughout this essay. The opposition that Lachs does acknowledge to his position seems easy to overcome. Lachs suggests, for example, that "the claim that each technological advance . . . leads to more misery than good is simply false." If this is Lachs's foil then, to follow his own lead, it may be something of a "no-brainer." Such a broad dismissal of every technological advance isn't warranted on the face of it. But neither, I would argue, is an endorsement of modern technologies (or the affluence that affords them) on the basis of the benefits they have brought to individual humans living in the world today. What is more interesting to consider is the position of the environmental skeptic who would maintain that many technological advances, when aggregated by multiple users, lead to more misery, if we consider misery on a broader scale, e.g., inclusive of the welfare of nonhumans and future humans. This is not a worry, however, that Lachs seems willing to confront.

For example, if we view technological advance in a broader context than simply the easier access to commodities that it gives us and the direct improvements in our day-to-day lives that it offers us, we can see that the cumulative results of many millions of people having their day-to-day lives improved by technological advance can be catastrophic. These results may not immediately cause misery for those directly benefiting from new technologies today, but they will harm the larger biotic systems and the humans to come after us. (I hasten to add here that I'm assuming that if Lachs is interested in the welfare of those humans spatially distant from us, he must also be interested in those temporally distant from us. Lachs need not hold such a view, but I would find it odd if he adopted something like Derek Parfit's conclusions on this topic.)

Demonstrating the possibility of such negative cumulative results requires a careful case-by-case analysis with respect to each technological advance. Still, some fairly strong generalizations (on a par with Lachs's generalizations) can be made to identify which technologies are better from a broader standpoint than granting greater convenience to individuals. To take one of Lachs's central examples, the petrochemical-based transportation systems that now dominate the first world have added significantly to the rise of greenhouse gases, which are a major contributing cause to global warming, accounting for forty percent of greenhouse-gas emissions in the United States alone. While there has been room in the past for some scientific uncertainty about the phenomenon and effects of global warming, these concerns have now all been put to rest.

For most in the know, global warming is the single biggest environmental problem that we face today, since its effects will be the hardest to reverse in the future and since it threatens such a wide variety of species and ecosystems.

No one who has any understanding of contemporary environmental problems would celebrate the internal combustion engine or coal-fired electricity plants as improvements these days. Such technologies are, along with many other related processes, directly threatening the long-term viability of human and much nonhuman life on the planet. What is worse, we have developed an infrastructure, an economy, and a predominant set of lifestyles that are absolutely dependent on these systems as they exist in their current forms. It is not simply that we must ease ourselves off of a cultural addiction to automobile use, or have the courage to raise the price of gas as Europeans have done; it is that we have built a world where practically no viable substitutes can be offered anytime soon that could maintain the economic and social systems dependent on these forms of transportation and energy consumption. These are the “repetitive patterns of everyday existence,” as Lachs puts it, that I worry about. The relative increase in comfort afforded to those who own cars today seems to pale in comparison to the collective consequences of automobile use. And what is worse, it could have been otherwise. While we can understand that the engineers, planners and policy makers of the post-War boom did not anticipate the contributions they were making to global warming, they could expect that their push to create an automobile infrastructure came at the expense of the destruction of public transportation in America. No doubt they mistakenly thought they were improving everyday life. This is not to pine for the horse and buggy, but for a longer range view which could have given us the option of a Los Angeles or Atlanta with viable subways rather than clogged highways. But the possibility now of restructuring such cities to maximize public transportation seems grim at best. In the meantime our federal government continues to display an astonishing lack of leadership in this area: pushing for more oil drilling in Alaska and refusing to strongly regulate fuel efficiency standards, all to feed the economic hunger wrought by our fixation on the automobile.

Additionally, if those in developing countries follow our example and leave behind their bicycles and oxen in favor of personal automobiles (as the Chinese seem intent on doing), then the hazardous cumulative effects of this technology will be even greater. While Lachs would see the proof of the superiority of these technologies in the rush of the developing world to follow our lead, the empirical evidence gives us much greater pause.

We might also keep in mind here that simple access to such technologies does not necessarily make people in developed countries better off. As Nobel laureate economist Amartya Sen reminds us, African-Americans, who have a higher standard of living than their poor counterparts in most of the third world, are absolutely (not relatively) more deprived in terms of average life span than low-income Indians in the state of Kerala and, in the case of men, the Chinese as well. Even Bangladeshi men are more likely to live past forty than African-American men living in Harlem. If we take one measure of

the quality of life to be life span (for surely a longer life span gives one greater freedom to pursue one's life plans), then some people in developing countries are actually better off than some of us who have access to modern conveniences. Quality of life conceived as a moral standard does not necessarily follow technological change or even affluence.

Lachs, however, seems to see the proper measure of the propriety of technology not so much in those kinds of moral terms as in the language of individual character. Lachs is committed to the idea that modern technologies somehow improve our character, for example, by increasing bonds of empathy over distance through instantaneous media reports of suffering abroad. While I am skeptical of this claim, I think that Lachs is overlooking a more pressing set of moral issues here involving the phenomena he is describing. Clearly, one need not oppose Lachs's views with an argument that all modern technology, and the conveniences it brings, is bad because it corrupts our character. Unlike his infamous former Luddite neighbor up the road in Lincoln, Montana, my friend Dan's skepticism about technology is not necessarily a worry about how technology may corrupt human character, but a worry about human responsibility for the world we have created. Folks like Dan would not say that we would be better off if disease were more rampant or starvation was still a fact of everyday life in more of the world. Dan does not romanticize a time when hands and shoulders were dislocated by Model Ts, or shins were regularly cracked by kicks from horses. What Dan's environmental skepticism entails is greatly expanding the measure of how we are both better and better off to include a broader sense of what counts as the benefits of advanced technologies that more squarely confront the paradoxes of modern life. Only then will we have a better basis for determining the propriety of one technology over another and for judging whether every technological advance is a good one, even if it brings greater levels of individual welfare now.

For example, despite all of the progress in hunger relief or disease prevention that Lachs might point to, the impacts of new agricultural technologies have produced an unsustainable lifestyle in relation to the carrying capacity of global food systems. Modern agricultural practices have left 38 percent of topsoil in a severely degraded state throughout the world. Evidence is convincing that the first green revolution did more harm than good. So while our average yields per corn plant have not increased since the 1930s, the number of individual plants per acre has gone up dramatically. Because there is little chance that this ratio will improve, we are left with a future of depleted soil and little likelihood that we will be able to produce the amounts of food that we have been producing for the last fifty years without destroying even more topsoil. In the meantime, expanded food availability has increased population and hence increased demand. The success of agricultural technology has paradoxically created a looming crisis in productivity that will threaten food supplies for future humans, as well as hasten the destruction of the land that is the foundation of most animal life.

I agree with Lachs that the answer to dilemmas like these is not to follow the Luddites' lead and bemoan the moment that we first put plow to soil, but instead to

be more cautious about the immediate benefits of technological progress and to dig deeper, as it were, to find a moral basis for such decisions that would take a longer view of the possible consequences of such technologies. Such a view might challenge whether expansion of the availability of the fruits of technology is really a good goal, and encourage us to think through how the terms of such a challenge can be coached in a language of ethics, and hence responsibility.

I would also argue that many new technologies are probably more agnostic with respect to moral progress measured in terms of empathy or character than Lachs appears to think. For some, like Lachs, media reports of human and ecological catastrophe will embolden concern and empathy; for others, such reports will increase the proclivity toward callousness—disasters simply become one more form of “infotainment” that can be easily ignored. Technological changes, and the new lifestyles they produce, ought to be evaluated more concretely, and less subjectively, in terms of their actual effects on the world.

I no longer live in Montana. I’ve moved from *a* village to *the* village, in Manhattan. Here is a place that technology has made and, I would argue, one of the best places it has made. For, despite the complaints that people will raise about New York City, it is a model of resistance to the energy inefficiency and excess of the suburbs that now sprawl across the American landscape, made possible by the extension of modern transportation networks. Sprawl is a function of the automobile and sprawl is one of the principal reasons why North Americans consume a far greater share of natural resources than other parts of the world. We can see this when we compare a city like New York, created before the automobile and, despite the efforts of Robert Moses, still comparatively resistant to the automobile, with a newer city like Houston. While perhaps few people might think of New Yorkers as environmentalists, the fact is that the state of New York is the most energy-efficient, per capita, in the union largely because of the residents of Manhattan. In contrast, Houston, with more green space per capita than New York, is an environmental disaster (for instance, now surpassing Los Angeles in terms of poor air quality). New York does so well in comparison because most New Yorkers do not own cars (or if they have them, drive them far less regularly than other Americans), and most live in apartments where shared walls share heating costs. If energy consumption is one measure of living lightly on the earth, then your average New Yorker is doing almost as well as my friend Dan in Montana, and even much better than Dan’s neighbors farther down the valley in Missoula.

I summarize these brief facts about my new home only to make the point that an environmental skepticism about affluence and technology, and the related need to find a larger moral barometer for the benefits of affluence and technology, can come in a variety of forms. My comments here should not be taken as an appeal for a more enlightened bioregional neoluddism that rhapsodizes about life off of the grid. There are many ways to encourage more responsible lifestyles—to encourage an expanded sense of moral progress with respect to the larger world and the future—than we might imagine. Moral progress in the form of a new attitude toward technological change and

affluence must take place in the inner city as well as at the frontiers of wilderness. The common link between the varieties it takes, however, should be indexed to a broader sense of moral responsibility than most of us have been willing to admit so far. This will mean, in turn, that we need to rethink what counts as moral progress in terms of lifestyle. While I think many would find Dan's lifestyle laudable, many more are too willing to write off cities as forms of moral and physical degeneration. Our challenge, then, is to bolster arguments for an environmental measure of progress that favors development of an appropriate technology beneficial to all of us— current and future humans, as well as nonhumans—regardless of the form it takes. Our fate depends on such a turn, more so than on an expectation of moral progress through affluence.

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