

UNITED WISDOM

The Myth of Progress: What Do We Count as Improvement?

Traditions and Worldviews

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Epigraph

> *“Nature is only subdued by submission.”*

Francis Bacon, Novum Organum, I, §3. A clause from the aphorism in Joseph Devey's English edition, with its opening conjunction omitted: text.

What this article is about

A new system reduced the time needed for a task, but added waiting and deprived some people of a clear way to seek help. Did things improve? One person answers in terms of speed, another accessibility, and a third participants' freedom. “Progress” often conceals this divergence, joining novelty, greater capabilities, and moral improvement into one story. Myth here means a narrative that gives change direction and promises a meaningful outcome; it does not automatically mean a lie. Real achievements exist, but they cannot establish that every subsequent change is more useful or that history guarantees a good ending. This article examines different measures of improvement, the dispute over knowledge and virtue, the distribution of benefits, and the cost of replacing old arrangements. Its practical task is to preserve our ability to change life without surrendering judgment to a slogan of inevitable advance. Improvement begins by asking what changed, for whom, and according to which measure it is better.

I. New and better are different properties

Novelty describes a relationship to time; improvement describes a relationship to a chosen criterion. A new object appears later than an old one; this does not yet mean it is more useful, fairer, or more reliable. Progress requires measurement and comparison. Without them, the word can describe any change the narrator likes while persuading others that objections are directed against the future itself.

Imagine a hypothetical service replacing paper registration with an app. For someone with a suitable phone and skills, the process becomes faster. Another participant must seek help and loses independence. A third can now register remotely, which was previously impossible. One change has different results, and a general answer must not erase any of them. Asking about accessibility does not reject technology; it helps identify which part of the arrangement needs correction.

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The same reasoning applies to personal life. Someone buys a more powerful tool and concludes that work must become easier. Perhaps it resolves an earlier limitation. Perhaps it requires training, extra space, and maintenance. Until a specific result is named, greater capabilities and a better life remain different assumptions. A purchase need not be a mistake to fall short of a promise of complete relief.

The distinction also protects older arrangements from pointless idealization. They can be familiar yet inconvenient, unjust, or dangerous. Their defects do not disappear because a new version has defects too. Comparison must retain both the actual cost of preservation and the actual cost of change. The conversation then ceases to be a choice between worshiping novelty and loyalty to the past. It becomes work on the conditions under which a particular change deserves to be called an improvement, and the information needed to verify that.

II. A large narrative connects separate successes

The myth of progress arranges changes into a story of general movement toward the better. It connects scattered achievements and helps us imagine a future worth working for. This form can sustain research, education, and long projects. It becomes dangerous when it guarantees outcomes regardless of human decisions or explains every loss as a necessary stage that need not be discussed.

A hypothetical organization automates several processes. Each local task becomes faster. From these results, a manager concludes that every subsequent automation will also help. Employees' objections now sound like fear of the future, though they may concern specific errors: incomplete data, unclear responsibility, or lost exceptions. The local success was real; the broader conclusion remains unverified. A story has turned limited evidence into universal permission.

A large narrative also assigns roles: bearers of the future, obstructive people, inevitable victims, and winners. This simplifies conflict while stripping away detail. A worker opposing an opaque assessment system may want better technology, rather than preservation of earlier arbitrary decisions. A reform supporter can acknowledge its costs. Once roles are assigned beforehand, both must defend positions they never asserted.

A useful story leaves room for conditions. The future can improve if goals are defined, responsibility allocated, and discovered losses corrected. It does not promise that time will do this work itself. Hope differs from a guarantee: it sustains action under uncertainty without forbidding scrutiny. Mythic direction can remain an image of what is desired, but decisions need separate grounds. Participants need not sacrifice present lives to a story unable to explain who handles the transition or how its result will be judged.

Narratives of advance often exclude comparison with what would have happened without the change. A new system coincided with a better indicator, but coincidence does not establish cause. Workload, participants, or external conditions may have changed. A general causal conclusion requires appropriate verification. In a limited personal task, we can at least identify alternative explanations instead of presenting one observation as proof of universal benefit. This preserves an established achievement without extending it through inertia.

A hypothetical team introduces a meeting arrangement and then completes a project faster. Perhaps the arrangement helped. Perhaps the project was easier, or the team had acquired needed experience. To decide what to retain, examine specific transitions: where did waiting decrease, which information arrived earlier, and whose participation became easier? Even without a full experiment, this provides grounds for the next trial. A celebratory “We became more efficient” may be true, but does not explain how or where the result can be repeated. Progress that can identify the mechanism of its limited benefit is easier to maintain and correct.

III. Knowledge expands capability without choosing its purpose

Francis Bacon connects knowledge with human power to act. In Novum Organum, I, §§1–3, understanding causes and employing means belong to the project of investigating nature. The phrase about submitting to nature also recalls a limit: action requires knowledge of conditions. This philosophical project does not prove that every technical power automatically produces moral good.

Capability asks “What can now be done?” Purpose asks “For what, and at what acceptable cost?” Faster dissemination can assist communication and spread error. More precise observation can support research and restrict privacy. Evaluating the result requires decisions about rights, access, and responsibility. Invention creates new means without canceling the questions arising through their use.

A hypothetical editor receives software that accelerates text preparation. More publication is now possible. Yet if source verification remains unchanged, speed may merely increase unsupported claims. Process improvement requires coordinating pace with quality. Sometimes the result is the same number of articles with less strain; sometimes more verified articles. Publication counts alone choose neither outcome nor tell us which better serves readers.

Knowledge of a limitation is also an achievement. A researcher finds that an effect exists only under certain conditions; the project proves smaller than its earlier promise. Promotional progress sees disappointment. Research sees a more accurate picture and therefore better grounds for action. Progress in knowledge sometimes reduces certainty and scale. It need not resemble continuously expanding power. People gain the ability to do less that is unnecessary, abandon false promises, and preserve resources for a task that can actually be solved.

IV. The development of arts does not guarantee the development of virtue

In the Discourse on the Sciences and Arts, 1750, Part I, Jean-Jacques Rousseau disputes an automatic connection between cultural refinement and moral improvement. His polemical text should not be treated as empirical proof that all knowledge harms. It questions the gap between outward sophistication and life's quality: embellishing relationships can make dependence more pleasant instead of eliminating it.

A contemporary analogy proposed by the authors is a polite interface for an opaque rule. Users receive friendly messages but cannot understand a refusal's reason or how to challenge it. Beautiful language improves the impression without changing their position. This gives no reason to reject good design. It gives grounds for checking whether form accompanies a real ability to act. Care that cannot be used remains limited even in an impeccable tone.

Rousseau helps challenge an overly easy conclusion, rather than authorize idealizing lack of education. Refusing inquiry can preserve a cruel custom as effectively as new technology can intensify it. Moral quality is not determined by one level of equipment or refinement. Treatment, consequences, and opportunities available to people require examination. New knowledge can help name an injustice an earlier tradition did not permit discussing.

Two questions should therefore remain distinct. Have knowledge and means increased? Have humiliation, powerlessness, and hidden coercion decreased? Answers sometimes converge and sometimes diverge. The divergence makes inquiry necessary. Counting every technical success as moral improvement removes a standard of scrutiny. Counting every development as decline removes opportunities to correct real limitations. In both cases, a large narrative speaks instead of people whose lives changed. It is more precise to preserve achievements within their actual domain and assess promised moral benefits separately.

V. Enlightenment can be a process rather than a completed state

In his 1784 answer to “What Is Enlightenment?”, Immanuel Kant distinguishes an enlightened age from an age of enlightenment. The text centers on using one's own understanding and reasoning publicly. This is a normative philosophical position in a historical context, rather than a measured index of society's maturity. Distinguishing process from attained state helps discuss improvement without prematurely declaring completion.

A hypothetical institution opens a feedback channel. This can be an important step. Sending a message does not, however, equal receiving a substantive answer or changing a rule. If the channel exists only for reporting purposes, the availability of a form is mistakenly presented as participation. Examine what follows: was the message read, can information be corrected, is

the answer clear, and is someone accountable for the decision? The process thus acquires an observable structure.

Acknowledging incompleteness does not devalue a step. Someone learning to ask questions can still err and fear authority. An organization permitting discussion can still preserve unequal voices. Demanding perfection declares every improvement fictitious; calling the first step final success eliminates work on remaining limitations. Between these extremes, a specific result and the next unknown can be recorded simultaneously.

This perspective helps personal development. “I now always choose consciously” is a strong claim difficult to fulfill. “In one recurring episode, I notice the decision point earlier” is smaller but verifiable. It can be preserved and developed without a grand new life story. Progress need not entitle someone to consider themselves superior to others. Sometimes it means clarifying one's grounds, admitting an error, and not demanding that another person instantly follow a path that took oneself considerable time.

VI. More means do not always create more real opportunities

In UNDP's explanation of human development, emphasis moves from economic wealth toward people's opportunities and choices. The page connects Mahbub ul Haq's approach with Amartya Sen's work on capabilities. This is an official account of a framework, rather than a reading of all Sen's work. Our topic needs this distinction: a resource matters through the life someone can actually lead, rather than merely possession of an object or income.

A hypothetical library digitizes its archive. Access has nominally expanded: documents can be opened remotely. Yet poor descriptions, confusing search, and unreadable images limit actual opportunity. Another archive may have fewer files but a clear catalog, assistance, and usable text. “How many items were uploaded?” matters at one stage but cannot adequately evaluate readers' knowledge. Accessibility, usability, and use are different results.

This reasoning clarifies expanded choice. Twenty nearly identical plans can offer less freedom than two understandable options. The ability to refuse matters too, particularly if refusal does not remove necessary access. Lack of choice cannot be justified by a new system formally providing more functions. Freedom arises in the relationship between people and available arrangements, rather than in button counts alone.

The capabilities framework promises no guaranteed happiness. Someone may gain access without choosing the offered activity. This is not automatically failed development: choice includes preferring something else. Improving an environment and evaluating a person's decision therefore remain distinct. Educational opportunity matters because it is available and usable, rather than only because everyone must use it. A large project becomes more

convincing when it explains which actual capability it expands and whether it preserves the independence of those it intends to help.

VII. Average improvement can hide another person's loss

An aggregate indicator can confirm change while concealing its distribution. Reduced average service time is useful evidence. Yet it does not show who waits longer, who disappeared from measurement, or how many lost access altogether. Evaluating progress therefore requires examining both the aggregate and its constituent groups. Otherwise, the majority's convenience quietly becomes everyone else's absence.

Imagine a hypothetical service answering routine requests faster after reform. Unusual cases enter a separate queue without a clear deadline. The first queue's average improves. Presenting it as the entire service's result changes the report's subject. The problem need not be false numbers; it can be incorrect coverage. Excluded cases must return to the picture, and their outcomes be checked.

Distribution also concerns labor. One participant's convenience may rest on another's unnoticed workload. A customer receives a quick answer while an employee responds during personal time. The result cannot be evaluated solely through the customer's impression or the employee's dissatisfaction. Responsibility arrangements, resources, and availability limits are needed. Improvement sustained by a hidden exception is unreliable and may cease to count as improvement once its price becomes visible.

This does not require equal immediate benefit for everyone. Real advantages can be uneven and require compensation, training, or another route. Precise discussion permits this without making losses anonymous. Who bears the cost, for how long, with whose consent, and how can their position improve? These questions do not obstruct movement. They define which progress we are prepared to defend. Without them, “the common good” risks naming benefits for those able to construct the aggregate indicator.

VIII. Change needs care after launch

Introducing something new is only part of improvement. Systems need maintenance, error correction, training, and ways to function during failure. If these tasks are omitted, announced success describes a launch moment rather than sustained benefit. Progress can consist in caring well for something already created without a prominent new project. Invisible work remains important.

A hypothetical building receives modern equipment. Everything works at the presentation, but a year later nobody handles updates, parts, or repairs. The old method was slower but supported by identifiable people. The conclusion need not be going backward. Maintenance

can be organized, or a fallback route retained. Comparison must include real conditions and upkeep, rather than an ideal new project versus an actually worn-out old one.

For knowledge, care means checking and correcting. New research refines an earlier conclusion; an archive receives better attribution; an article is revised after an error is found. This need not show the original work wholly failed. Declaring correction unnecessary to protect reputation, however, puts the success narrative above substance. Sustained improvement permits finding defects and preserves the history of changes.

Care also limits speed. If the new pace leaves no time to understand outcomes, an organization loses its ability to adjust direction. Implementations multiply while quality remains unknown. Sometimes the sensible step is to pause expansion and examine what is installed. This does not surrender to the past; it can enable the next responsible advance. A mature progress narrative tells stories of repair, completion, and abandoning unconfirmed benefits as well as creation.

IX. Inner work offers another measure of change

Some traditions assess improvement through the quality of conduct rather than the volume acquired. In the Dhammapada, 223–234, translated by Max Müller, overcoming anger, truthfulness, and discipline of speech, body, and mind are discussed. This is a Buddhist path with a religious goal. It differs from contemporary economic development, yet recalls that expanded external means do not exhaust human change.

In a hypothetical dispute, someone gains information and learns to answer more forcefully. This ability can help defend a position. Yet if conversation becomes more humiliating and the ability to hear questions disappears, greater skill need not improve the relationship. Another measure asks whether unnecessary harm decreased and clarity increased. This is a contemporary ethical application, rather than proof of spiritual attainment through one successful conversation.

The same counterexample challenges romantic ideas of inner progress. Someone can speak of humility while avoiding responsibility, of peace while leaving conflict unresolved, or of nonattachment while breaking promises. Beautiful inward labels also need connection with action. Reduced emotional intensity does not always mean maturity. Sometimes calm supports clear action; sometimes it hides nonparticipation. The specific sequence must be examined.

External and internal measures should not destroy each other. An accessible tool can enable care, while relationships' quality determines its use. Someone can gain resources while choices remain difficult. Wealth cannot be expected to remove every question, nor can inner work alone be advised where actual means are lacking. Improvement gains substance where

they meet: what the environment enables, and how someone handles that opportunity, themselves, and others.

Improvement does not always look like increase. A participant learns to make fewer promises and stops breaking them. An organization reduces functions but makes core ones accessible. A family relinquishes some holiday duties and gains time together. In these hypothetical examples, one indicator decreases while another improves. Growth cannot be the only measure of development. Sufficiency helps reveal when another acquisition no longer supports the goal that originally prompted change.

The right to finish matters equally. A project may fulfill its limited task; further expansion is then a separate choice rather than a debt to “progress.” If every success demands another round of scaling, participants lose the opportunity to enjoy achievements. A pause can allow integration, assessment, and care. Completion does not render earlier work meaningless. It records a result and leaves freedom to open another question. This can be particularly valuable personally: people stop treating themselves as permanently unfinished systems and gain permission to live with existing capabilities, changing only what has actual grounds for change.

X. Hope remains stronger without a guaranteed ending

Rejecting inevitable progress need not mean abandoning hope. Its grounds move from time's course to people's ability to act, cooperate, and correct. Real improvement can be local, incomplete, and reversible. That makes it worth caring for. If achievements are considered guaranteed by historical law, care looks unnecessary until circumstances worsen again.

We can acknowledge a technology's specific benefits without promising universal salvation, defend reform while demanding correction of exceptions, or finish a disappointing project without declaring all inquiry meaningless. These positions offer less ceremony but more responsibility. They distinguish goals, means, outcomes, and what remains unverified. The next step therefore need not depend on preserving an earlier narrative at any cost.

Return to the system that accelerated a task while worsening access. The answer is no longer simply “progress” or “regression.” We know what became faster, who needs another route, and where measurement is incomplete. We can preserve the successful part, restore access, and examine the new arrangement. If this is impossible, there are grounds to reject the change or narrow its scope. The decision becomes more specific because “better” now has a measure and participants.

A large story helps while it supports imagining what is desired without confiscating judgment of the present. The myth of progress can invite work, rather than authorize calling every price necessary. Improvement needs witnesses, comparison, care, and opportunities to object. The future remains open. This is not emptiness urgently requiring a guarantee. It is a space of

responsibility where people can still decide what to preserve, what to change, and how to recognize a result worthy of continuation.

What this means in practice

Choose a change currently called an improvement: a working arrangement, app, habit, or way of communicating. State the criterion before evaluation. What should improve—speed, access, quality, independence, workload, or predictability? If several criteria matter, do not conceal potential conflict. Faster for one can mean harder for another, and more functions can mean less clarity.

Describe the earlier situation and new result with equal coverage. Do not compare an ordinary old system with an ideal presentation of the new one. Include exceptions, maintenance, and people potentially lost from measurement. A personal task may need several observations; a collective decision needs appropriately scaled data. If they are absent, limit the conclusion: a local change is known, while overall benefit remains unestablished.

Name transition costs and who bears them. Are training, time, expense, help, or a reserve needed? Can someone refuse without losing essential access? These questions do not mean change must stop. They show the conditions making it acceptable. Some losses can be reduced, others require a separate decision, and others invalidate an overly broad promise.

Then define when and under what conditions to check. Which result confirms benefit, which requires correction, and who will make that correction? Perfection need not be awaited, but retaining a return route helps where possible. Keep partial results described as partial. A system can become faster while remaining insufficiently accessible; a habit can ease one episode without solving an entire life. Hope thus gains grounds in real work. The future need not guarantee success to make action worthwhile, and honest assessment need not destroy the wish to improve.

Key quotation

> *“We do not live in an enlightened age, but in an age of enlightenment.”*

Immanuel Kant, “An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?”, 1784, paragraph on an enlightened age. An abridged rendering of the paragraph's question and answer based on Mary J. Gregor's English text: source. The distinction between process and state is retained; this is not a characterization of all twenty-first-century societies.

Connections between traditions

Comparison	Similarity	Boundary
Bacon I.1–3 ↔ Rousseau, Part I	Both question knowledge's relationship with human life.	Bacon's expanded capability and Rousseau's moral critique address different tasks.
Kant, “Enlightenment” ↔ UNDP, human development	Human participation and actual opportunities matter.	Philosophical autonomy differs from the contemporary capabilities framework; no historical connection is claimed.
Rousseau ↔ criticism of a beautiful interface	Refined form may leave dependence unchanged.	The contemporary scene is an author analogy, rather than Rousseau's empirical conclusion about technology.
Dhammapada 223–234 ↔ technical improvement	Action's quality cannot be measured by means alone.	Religious liberation and technical efficiency have different ultimate goals.
Kant, enlightenment as process ↔ checking new arrangements	A first step is not a completed state.	Local scrutiny does not measure worldwide historical progress.

Primary sources and research

1. Francis Bacon, Novum Organum, I, §§1–3, Joseph Devey's English edition. Knowledge, power to act, and natural conditions.

2. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Discourse on the Sciences and Arts, 1750, Part I, translated by G. D. H. Cole. Critique of the automatic connection between refinement and virtue.

3. Immanuel Kant, “An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?”, 1784. Public reason and process versus state; English translation by Mary J. Gregor, 1996. The Russian version identifies its own translation.

4. UNDP, What is human development?. A brief official explanation of human capabilities and choice, rather than Sen's entire corpus.

5. Dhammapada 223–234, translated by Max Müller. Another measure of action in a particular Buddhist context.

Tags

progress, myth, improvement, novelty, future, hope, knowledge, technology, morality, Bacon, Rousseau, Kant, Enlightenment, UNDP, human development, capabilities, choice, accessibility, quality, distribution, consequences, maintenance, responsibility, change, Dhammapada, inner work, criterion, verification, care, everyday decision

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