

HISTORY 250-2: Two Visions

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In what concerns humanity's future, both Steven Pinker and Naomi Klein agree that there is a natural limit on the level of technological advancement we can achieve. Past this point, the exponential curve of progress would degenerate into a different model. There are, however, remarkable differences in what these authors consider as the limit and what they believe will happen as we, society, approach it. Extensively, Pinker describes and praises the last centuries of improvement in all aspects of human life. However, as optimistic as he is about the future developments, he could not refrain from repeatedly acknowledging the power of entropy, and the meaningless fight against it.¹ In a similar way, Klein also sees this kind of limit as an ultimate force of nature, although she finds its origin much closer to us by thinking about Earth and how much environmental transformation it can support.²

This fundamental frontier of technology, observed by both, distinguishes itself from the limits of extractivism, observed by Klein: it discusses the human potential and technical capabilities alone, what is and what is not under our command, and how they relate to other frontiers such as the carrying capability of our planet. For Pinker, it is evident that we are not in control of the Universe, his discussions of entropy and mortality are evidence of that.³ At the same time, he tells a history of progress and sovereignty over this planet. He argues that wealth is created and thus we can always create more of it, making it hard to see the world through the lenses of Klein: maybe we are extracting wealth from the Earth, instead of creating it.⁴ For her, it is evident that humans do not (and will not) possess the technology to control the planet. She discusses the ever-lasting history of humans trying to bend nature to their taste. A "cultural narrative," as she describes it, has prevented people from seeing the side effects accumulate into a time bomb of climatic catastrophe, which she is certain could explode very soon.

Once established that both authors believe in a final barrier of scientific progress, the natural next questions are: "Where exactly is this barrier?" "What are the consequences of approaching it?" Pinker's answer to the first question is human biology itself: in his own words, "Medical progress today is more Sisyphus than Singularity." and "[...] longevity is not the same as immortality."⁵

1. Steven Pinker, *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress* (New York, NY: Viking, 2018), 61, 68, 79.

2. Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2014), 183–187.

3. Pinker, *Enlightenment Now*, 60–61.

4. Pinker, 80.

5. Pinker, 61.

He mentions these issues and doesn't deny the possibility of curing mortality, but he is a lot less optimistic as he is when discussing the major challenges in sustenance and wealth.⁶ This can only reinforce the idea that he sees health as the final barrier. For him, environmental and economic crises have been resolved in the past and will probably continue being resolved in the future, therefore, the only real limit has to be the ephemerality of life itself. In essence, Pinker sees society as a unity that was capable of facing the challenges imposed by the environment so far, and as long as it exists, the mortality of its components doesn't seem to threaten the existence of the unity.

Klein challenges this idea at its core: there is no reason to believe we will continue to overcome all obstacles, especially the ones produced in response to our own actions, such as Earth's reply to the increased burning of fossil fuels. Throughout her discussion, she makes it very explicit that *age quod agis* ("do what you are doing") is a motto leading society towards inevitable collapse.⁷ A more subtle point can be inferred from her ideas, though: technological advancement is necessarily bound to the environment. Since our planet necessarily has a limit to how much it can be transformed, technology itself is subject to an associated limit. When she says "[...] I began to see all kinds of ways that climate change could become a catalyzing force for positive change [...]," she tells us that as climate changes, the planet changes, and our technological limits can be changed accordingly.⁸ Thus, even if these barriers are ultimately bound to the environment, she believes they can be moved. That is not to be understood as a given, Klein explains that collective efforts are still necessary to oppose the inertia guiding scientific progress: "[...] climate change can be a catalyst for a range of very different and far less desirable forms of social, political, and economic transformation."⁹ In this sense, she sees humanity as a collection of individuals that need to work together (but which will not necessarily do that) if they want to perpetuate current rates of technical progress.

This positioning distinctly sets her answer to the second question we asked: this moving limit to technology marks the tipping point after which only a paradigm shift can keep humankind's limited control over the environment. Klein believes the same methods to scientific advancement can't be continuously applied indefinitely. Moreover, she argues we are currently witnessing society approach this limit for the first time in history. If that is the case, the old paradigm is clearly related to how fossil fuel technologies evolved. A transition to a new paradigm, according to her, is only possible through individual, coordinated action. This is corroborated by her extensive examples and personal stories, in particular, the following quote summarizes it elegantly: "Only when we dispense with these various forms of magical thinking, will we be ready to leave extractivism behind and build societies we need within the boundaries we have [...]"¹⁰ That is, while society's natural direction of progress points towards a catastrophic climate disaster, social movements and collective action can steer it towards a different route. It is to be noted how this view, with good and bad possible outcomes, contrasts with Pinker's way of thinking, in which the most probable outcome is (almost) always the good one, precisely what Klein calls "magical thinking".

6. Pinker, *Enlightenment Now*, 90–96.

7. Klein, *This Changes Everything*, 12–15.

8. Klein, 7.

9. Klein, 8.

10. Klein, 187.

However, Pinker also does not believe in magic, as he himself says: “[...] progress is an outcome not of magic but of problem-solving.”¹¹ But he also mentions problems are solvable. Even if he does not think technical advancements are “magic,” we can only infer that his idea of what would happen as we reach the final states of technical progress is very idealistic: underdeveloped countries catch up to developed ones in an abundance of metrics correlated to quality of life, while the world peacefully reaches a technological stagnation point. Pinker calls the more general socioeconomic phenomenon the *Great Convergence*. He is not as worried about it as Klein because he sees it as a very distant future.

Although both authors disagree on the limits to human technological advancement are, and what the implications of trespassing them are, there are still points of agreement. For example, just as Klein sees them as tipping points, we can also understand Pinker’s barrier as points of collapse: a perfect world would decay into a society lacking innovation, one of the fundamental characteristics that gave birth to its existence in the first place. In summary, the logical conclusions depend on the set of hypotheses we decide to assume: Klein’s idea of human powerlessness, or Pinker’s idea of human potential and sovereignty. Both present strong arguments that sustain the counter intuitive existence of a frontier to science.

References

Klein, Naomi. *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate*. Chap. 5. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2014.

Pinker, Steven. *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress*. Chap. 5–8. New York, NY: Viking, 2018.

11. Pinker, *Enlightenment Now*, 55.