

JAMES KLAGGE

THE GOOD OLD DAYS:

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“Progress might have been alright once  
but it has gone on far too long.”

*Ogden Nash*

I

*Codger:* Remember the good old days? You could get an ice cream cone for 5 cents. You knew all your neighbors and they'd help you out when you needed help. People worked hard, but they appreciated what they had. You didn't have so many complicated choices to make. Life was simpler then. Those were the good old days.

*Whipper-snapper:* You must be kidding! Sure you could get an ice cream cone for 5 cents, but you had to hoe corn from sun-up to sun-down just to get 25 cents. That didn't leave much time for anything else. Anyway, there was no entertainment to enjoy. You had to wash up in cold water, go outside to use the toilet, and the only way to stay warm in winter was to go outside and chop wood. You had no choice of what to do in life. You grew up believing what your parents believed, you did what your father had done for a living, you married the girl next door, and you had more children than either of you wanted.

*Codger:* I know, but I was happier then. Life was simpler.

*Whipper-snapper:* You're just getting senile. Your memory is operating selectively. You're blocking out the limitations and hardships, and focussing on the few good things. You think you were happier then because you are only remembering the happier times. And you are comparing it with now, when you are aware of unhappy times.

*Codger:* Perhaps. But I think I'm being fair. I remember all those bad things you mentioned, but they just didn't matter much.

*Whipper-snapper:* Look, you're older now, and older people are less happy than younger people. You were in the prime of your life then. You lived with zest. Now you are old. You feel useless and unwanted. Most of your old friends are dead. Your body is deteriorating, so you experience limitation and pain. If you had been old then, you would have been unhappier (as you are now), and if you were young now, you'd be happier (as you think you were then).

*Codger:* Again, you may be right, but I'm trying to be fair. I knew old people then. They lived with their children, they did what they could around the house, and they died with dignity. Old people now live alone, or in homes with other old people we don't know. We die in hospitals, alone, usually long after we are of any use to ourselves or to others. We live longer, but we are no better off for it. Our bodies usually end up outliving our minds. I know young people now. But they don't seem to get any satisfaction out of life. They have a lot more than young people used to, but they don't seem to enjoy what they have very much, and they always seem to want more than they have. They worry about their job, their physical fitness, and their cars. Nothing satisfies young people any more. In the good old days young people were satisfied.

*Whipper-snapper:* If you could take a time-machine back to those so-called good old days, knowing how things are now, you would stop thinking they were so good. People were probably not as satisfied then as you think, but to the extent that they were satisfied then, it was because they didn't know any better. If people have limited ambitions and options, it is easier to satisfy them. But no one would want to go back and limit his options.

*Codger:* You're right, but I'm not sure what that proves. I wouldn't be happy if I returned in a time-machine, knowing what I know now, but that doesn't show people weren't happier then. I think people were happier then than they are now - I certainly was. And I am trying to be conscious of all the warnings you properly made. Why are you so sure I'm wrong? You didn't live then.

*Whipper-snapper:* I guess I have always pictured life in the old days from the perspective of my own ambitions and options. From that perspective it looks pretty dreary. But, of course, fortunately for them, people who lived then didn't have my perspective. So you are not advocating that we

throw away our technology and social progress and return to the good old days?

*Codger:* Heavens, no! We would never be happy with that.

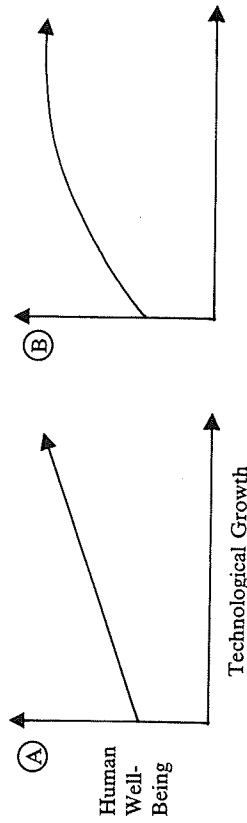
*Whipper-snapper:* Then what are you getting at?

*Codger:* I'm just afraid that someday people will look back on 1987 as the good old days.

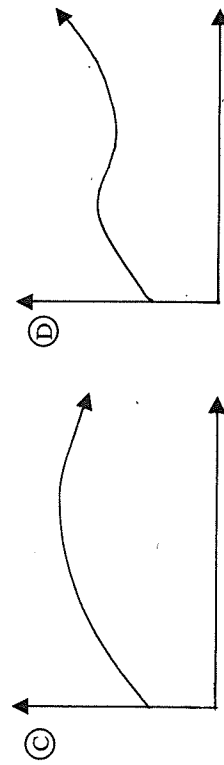
*Whipper-snapper:* Perhaps some will. But only the old and senile. And no one will pay attention to them.

## II

Let us reflect on what Codger has said. What is the relationship between technological growth and human well-being? The following graphs indicate some of the main possibilities:



Graphs A, B Graphs A and B represent human well-being as a monotonically increasing function of technological growth. In the case of B, human well-being has an upper bound (with respect to technological growth).



Graphs C, D. Graphs C and D represent the occurrence of inverse correlations over certain intervals of technological growth. C represents the inverse correlation as permanent after a certain level of growth. D represents the inverse correlation as temporary, though possibly recurrent.

Codger may lead us to think that human well-being is sometimes inversely correlated with technological growth, as represented by graphs C and D. Codger's position involves or requires a number of qualifications:

1. Technological growth is clearly not the only factor that influences human well-being. Other factors, such as social, political, and economic arrangements, religious and moral climate, and evolutionary factors, may be significant in influencing human well-being.

The extent to which this is a serious qualification depends on the way in which we define "technology". Suppose we define technology as: *any artifact that increases our ability to achieve our ends*. According to this definition, social, political, and economic arrangements could be instances of technology.<sup>1</sup> Of course we don't want to make the concept of technology so broad that we are virtually stipulating that technology is the only influence on human well-being. As I have defined technology, some relevant factors that are not technological are the availability of natural resources, and the prevalence of and our susceptibility to diseases. Yet these in turn seem to be largely influenced by technology.

Although technological growth is clearly not the only factor that influences human well-being, it seems legitimate to treat it as the fundamental influence, in terms of its direct as well as indirect effects.

2. Codger has not attempted to distinguish the effects of various individual technologies on human well-being – a task that would be rather difficult. It is quite likely that some individual technologies are not inversely correlated with human well-being. Codger simply lumps all of technology together in its effects.

3. Codger's claim is limited to the circumstances of his own lifetime. He is not making a claim about people who are in vastly different circumstances of affluence or technological development. There are bound to be circumstances of technological growth – perhaps even most of them – that do not confirm Codger's experience.

4. Codger is not appealing to any of the standard complaints about technological growth – that it leads to deterioration of the environment, depletion of natural resources, catastrophic accidents, and health harms. Let us call these possible effects of technological growth "negative direct effects". Complaints about these may have some substance to them, but they are apparently not what Codger is complaining about.

5. Finally, Codger reports only his own experience. Other people who

lived through the same time and circumstances might feel differently. But Codger's experience does not seem to be uncommon, at least among old senile people.

Despite all of these qualifications, Codger's position is an interesting one. It is interesting because it is paradoxical. If we understand "technology" as any artifact that increases our ability to achieve our ends, and if we ignore negative direct effects, it seems to be a sheer truism that technological growth improves human well-being.

### III

In what ways, besides negative direct effects, might technological growth adversely affect human well-being? There seem to be three general ways. Let's call these Psychic Effects:

1. Technology can create ends for us by making things possible that were not previously possible.
2. Technology can decrease the satisfaction we get in achieving our ends.
3. Technology can depreciate certain ends by making other ends more attainable and, hence, more attractive.

All three of these ways trade on the fact that means can themselves influence ends. Let us examine these in turn.

1. Since pursuing and achieving ends is a main source of human well-being, one might think that creating ends could only improve human well-being. But acquiring ends is only the first step in pursuing and achieving them. One can acquire ends without having or acquiring the ability to pursue or achieve them. It is, of course, irrational to acquire ends that one cannot reasonably hope to pursue or achieve. But that is a form of irrationality to which humans are commonly susceptible.<sup>2</sup>

Commercial advertising trades on the ability to create ends for people by making the ends *seem* achievable, or by deflecting the question of their achievability. But for many people the end is acquired while the means are still lacking. Of course, the well-being of some – those who can pursue and reasonably hope to achieve the ends created – may be increased, but to the extent that the means for achieving ends are

unequally distributed, frustration will be more common than satisfaction. Since producers and advertisers are benefited by creating ends for people, and they are not harmed by frustration, there is an incentive to use technological growth in ways that end up decreasing human well-being overall.

This effect is not limited to the insidious effects of commercial advertising. Any communication of information about technological growth can have this effect because humans are susceptible to wishful thinking, even when no one tries to encourage this in them. This is one of the reasons we cringe at the thought of TV antennas on grass huts or tin shacks.

It is important to note that this negative effect on human well-being would not occur if humans were fully rational. If no one formed ends that were insufficiently attainable, then technological growth would not induce frustration. Technological growth, then, is not harmful *per se* in this respect. Rather, it is awareness of technological growth by less than perfectly rational people that is harmful. This makes it easy to think that the problem lies with people, not with technology – it is their own fault if they cannot handle it. And it is also easy for a man to think that he can handle it – it is those who rattle on about the “good old days” that cannot. But that is what is so insidious about this effect. It is difficult to defect it operating on oneself.

2. Technology can decrease the satisfaction we get from achieving our ends, in either of two ways. First, it can do so by making it easier to achieve the ends. It is commonly said, by old senile people, that one values more highly what one has worked hard for. If one’s well-being is influenced by the value one places on the achievement of one’s ends, and that value is decreased, then so is well-being.

Perhaps the decrease in value from a given achievement can be offset by achieving more ends. Indeed, since technology makes it easier to achieve ends, it should make it possible and easier to achieve more ends. Yet, one may have to contend with a diminishing marginal utility of achievement. In that case, it may be rather difficult to make up for loss of quality by increase in quantity.

Another respect in which technological growth can decrease the satisfaction of achieving ends is through the proliferation of possible ends. Let us assume all the possible ends are reasonably achievable by the individual in question. The problem lies in the fact that we cannot

predict in advance the likelihood of, or satisfaction from, achieving the various ends. Thus, in choosing which ends to pursue, we are choosing under a large degree of uncertainty. To the extent that our limited energies force us to choose among competing ends, we will never know for sure how well things might have turned out if we had made different choices. This should be called the Grass-is-greener-on-the-other-side phenomenon. We rarely think how lucky we are that things turned out as well as they did. We tend to anguish over how much better they might have turned out than they did. Thus, we may get less satisfaction from the pursuit and achievement of our ends than we would have if those ends had been the only ones we had or could have had.

Decreasing satisfaction from easily achieved ends is not a manifestation of irrationality. But it is something that we regularly ignore when we make things easier for ourselves, even when we can identify its operation in our past.

Decreasing satisfaction from uncertainty over counterfactual outcomes can be a manifestation of irrationality if one can or will no longer change which end one is pursuing. On the other hand, it can be rational to rethink one’s ends in light of information gathered from pursuing one of them. But since uncertainty about the satisfaction to be attained from the pursuit of other ends is so great, one may still be in no position to make a more rational comparative choice. Unless one’s choice has turned out rather badly, little can usually be gained, and much suffered, from second thoughts. And it is technological growth that allows for the second thoughts.

3. By creating certain ends, and making certain ends easily achieved, technological growth tends to seduce people away from kinds of ends that are not easily achieved but are deeply satisfying to achieve. Technological growth tends to sap the importance, in people’s minds, of cultivating interpersonal relationships and personal skills, and substitutes instead ends that bring immediate and easy satisfaction.<sup>3</sup>

This tendency is a manifestation of irrationality. We tend to prefer immediate satisfaction to later satisfaction even when we know the later satisfaction will be greater (or we tend to overestimate the uncertainty involved in the later satisfaction). This is known as pure time preference. Purely rational people would not be near-sighted in this way, as actual people tend to be. At any given moment we tend to care less about our overall well-being through time than about our short-term

well-being. And technological growth caters to this weakness in us.

There is another more diabolical sense in which technology can influence the ends we pursue. Technology, especially advanced technology, increases the ease with which we can manipulate and dominate other people – through, for example, weapons, electronic surveillance, and mass communication. While it is true that technology also increases the ease with which we can help others, the fact is that humans are very susceptible to opportunities for advancing their own interests and controlling others. Technology not only does nothing to check this impulse, it constitutes a temptation for it. Again, technology, while not bad in itself, appeals to something bad in us.<sup>4</sup>

#### IV

But is Codger right? Though I haven't bothered to survey the ways in which technological growth improves human well-being, they are enormous. Could they really ever be outweighed by the negative effects, both direct and psychic? In early stages of technological growth they clearly cannot. Negative effects (especially psychic ones) begin to mount only when technology has grown considerably. How considerably is not clear. But the presence of Codgers suggests we might have already reached such a point in the United States.<sup>5</sup>

If there is a point at which negative effects begin to outweigh positive effects, is this a temporary state? And if it is temporary, is it also recurrent? People who "believe" in technology will believe that any dips in the graph are only local, and that over sufficiently large intervals the graph rises. In other words, technological growth can always overcome its own negative effects.

Old people like Codger don't believe in technology in this sense. It could be that old people are more sensitive to the subtle ways in which technological growth caters to human weaknesses. Since technological growth always presents itself as perfectly rational, it easily obscures from us its negative psychic effects. Who would think that something so rational caters to something irrational in us? Only someone with years of experience, who can discern its subtle effects on himself and on us. Only an old and, apparently, senile person.

Perhaps Aristotle was right when he recommended:

Therefore we ought to attend to the undemonstrated sayings and opinions of experienced and older people or of people of practical wisdom not less than to demonstrations; for because experience has given them an eye they see aright.

(*Nicomachean Ethics* VI, 11)

#### APPENDIX

Early explorations of the value and danger of technology can be found in the Greek myth of Prometheus and the associated myth of Pandora. The earliest and most interesting sources of the myths are Hesiod (Eighth Century B.C.) and Aeschylus (Fifth Century B.C.).<sup>6</sup>

Though there are differences between versions of these myths, the basic structure of the story is this: Prometheus stole fire from the gods and gave it to mankind for its benefit. Zeus sent punishment in return.

##### A. *The Prior Settings*

In Hesiod's *Works and Days* mankind earlier had had fire and other technologies and lived in an idyllic state, a day's work producing a year's requirements. Prometheus, in an attempt to outwit Zeus, tricked (or tried to trick) Zeus into accepting oxen bones and fat as the proper sacrifice, reserving the edible parts for man. Zeus was angered by this and took fire away from man as punishment. Prometheus stole it again for man.

According to Aeschylus, on the other hand, mankind had been in a very beastly and precarious state, and Zeus was about to blot it out. Prometheus stole fire, which mankind had never previously had, to benefit mankind and save it from extinction.

##### B. *The Punishments*

In Aeschylus' play, Zeus punished Prometheus for stealing fire by having him staked to a mountainside by Hephaistos, the lame god of technology. In *Works and Days*, Hesiod has Zeus send the punishment to mankind in the form of the woman, Pandora, who was created from clay by Hephaistos. Pandora released all evils into the world by illicitly opening a jar containing them. In the *Theogony*, Hesiod includes both these punishments, of Prometheus and of mankind, though the punishment of mankind is simply woman herself, symbolized by Pandora, and not also the released contents of a jar.

### C. *Some Meanings*

Though these myths reflect many concerns, they are clearly concerned with technology. Fire exemplifies technology and symbolizes a wide range of technology and technical knowledge. This wide range is spelled out by Prometheus in Aeschylus' play. What views about technology do we find in this conglomeration of myths?

Aeschylus' Prometheus sees technology as an unmix'd blessing for mankind. According to the play, mankind receives no punishment for receiving fire from Prometheus. Indeed, Zeus does not blot out mankind after all, but directs his anger against Prometheus instead.<sup>7</sup> Prometheus himself suffers from man's possession of technology, but he continues to "believe" in technology. He sees his own punishment as an excessively capricious exercise of Zeus' newly-gained power.

But it is not clear that Aeschylus' play confirms Prometheus' view of technology. If we see Prometheus as symbolizing mankind in the play,<sup>8</sup> or as symbolizing the divine element in man that attempts to overreach his proper condition, the play can be seen as reacting to the common view, espoused by Prometheus, that technology is the salvation of mankind. The play may be expressing the truth, embodied in the punishment of Prometheus, that we easily miss seeing the dangers of technology, even though they are right before our eyes. We miss seeing how it is that we suffer from technology.<sup>9</sup>

In *Works and Days*, Hesiod does not describe the condition of pre-technological man, as Aeschylus had.<sup>10</sup> He describes a life of ease lost by Zeus' hiding fire. Man's loss of fire seems gratuitous since it is caused by Prometheus' trickery, unless, again, we identify Prometheus with (a divine aspect of) mankind. Fire is then stolen by Prometheus and returned to mankind, but only at a price. In Hesiod's version the price is paid by mankind, through the introduction of evil into the world.

As with Aeschylus' play, Hesiod's myth makes the connection between technology and human harm appear gratuitous at one level. Indeed, man had lived idyllically with technology at an earlier time. But it is possible to see the myth as embodying the thought that technology has its price, even though it is not easy to see the connection. The fact that there is a span of time between the initial acquisition of technology and the price can be seen in two ways. The time span can be understood literally – technology eventually has its price – or it can be understood metaphorically – technology seems on the surface to be an unmixed blessing, but a deeper examination shows it to be fraught with evils.

Technology gives man the impression that he can achieve anything,

even fool the gods. Technology is pure means to any ends we choose. But the myth suggests this faith in technology becomes a disguised danger. Pandora, made by the god of technology, comes as a beautiful woman, bearing evils in her soul and in a jar. In the *Theogony*, woman (like technology) is an evil we cannot happily live with, yet we cannot happily live without it either.

The Greeks were always sensitive to the dangers of *hubris* – over-reaching oneself, thinking of oneself as more than merely human. They saw technology as making man very susceptible to *hubris*.<sup>11</sup> They were inclined to attribute the cost to the jealous wrath of the gods. From a modern perspective, it is possible to see the danger of technology in the disturbance of the human situation – whether it be disturbance of the human *psyche* (as I have emphasized in discussing the psychic effects of technology), or of the human ecology (as others are inclined to emphasize in discussing what I have called negative direct effects of technology). It is, I think, hubristic to ignore the fact that we are partly irrational (i.e., merely human). Technology is dangerous precisely because it conceals its negative effects on well-being through its seductive appeal to the irrational aspect of the *psyche*.

The Ancient Greeks, as I read these myths, betray a premonition of these hidden dangers of technology.<sup>12</sup>

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### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> One might wish to limit technology to physical artifacts, in which case it may not include such institutional arrangements.

<sup>2</sup> Jon Elster has emphasized the value of a certain gap between ends and prospects for achieving those ends for getting people to stretch their abilities. He calls this an optimum level of frustration. See Elster, "Sour Grapes – Utilitarianism and the Genesis of Wants," in A. Sen and B. Williams (eds.), *Utilitarianism and Beyond*, Cambridge, 1982, p. 233. Of course, some frustration is not productive, as when Latin Americans take their ideal of female beauty from blonde, fair-skinned images.

<sup>3</sup> Marx would have to hold that this is due to capitalistic alienation. Under communism Marx holds that advanced technology will leave significant free time, which he expects will be devoted to the all-round development of the individual. See, for example, the passages from Marx's *Grundrisse* excerpted in D. McLellan (ed.), *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, Oxford, 1977, pp. 368–387.

<sup>4</sup> Others would explain Codger's attitude toward the "good old days" as resulting from

the increasing distance between his expected levels of achievement and his actual levels of achievement. (This "rising expectations" explanation is given by Nicholas Rescher, in "Technological Progress and Human Happiness," in *Unpopular Essays on Technological Progress*, Pittsburgh, 1980, pp. 12-14. Cf. also Elster, pp. 231-236.) I think this explanation is fine as far as it goes (indeed, I include a form of it in my discussion of Psychic Effect 1 in Section III, *supra*), but I hope my explanation has gone somewhat deeper. Rescher's explanation is predicated on the assumption that rates of actual achievement decelerate over time. Only then can projection of past rates of achievement be certain to overestimate actual future rates of achievement. First, I am not sure we can assume deceleration. Second, I think well-being can suffer even in the absence of deceleration, as indicated by Psychic Effects 2 and 3.

<sup>5</sup> *Upstart*: But there have always been Codgers around. Despite his disclaimers, it seems likely that the explanation of his view of the past has more to do with human nature than with the nature of technology. People, especially old people, tend to adore the past, regardless of the levels of technological development.

<sup>6</sup> See Hesiod, *Works and Days*, 42-104; *Theogony*, 508-616; and Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*, 1-560.

<sup>7</sup> It is not made clear why Zeus does not blot out mankind after all, despite its possession of fire. Could it be that, in the Aeschylean story, fire has made man invulnerable to divine whim? This seems unlikely. Yet technology may well make us think we are invulnerable.

<sup>8</sup> The same identification is useful for explaining Zeus' punishment of mankind for Prometheus' trickery.

<sup>9</sup> It is important to make clear that in reading certain views into these myths, I am not claiming that these views were consciously espoused by Hesiod or Aeschylus. My claim is that the myths embody certain primordial insights about technology - that it increases our susceptibility to *hubris*, and that *hubris* has its cost. These insights get articulated by Hesiod and Aeschylus in a religious sense, but I think the insights can be understood quite naturalistically.

In "Prometheus Bound," Prometheus is confident that his suffering will eventually end because he has knowledge of the future that Zeus needs to save his reign. In the sequel, "Prometheus Unbound," which survives only in fragments, Zeus apparently allows Heracles to free Prometheus. In this larger context perhaps Aeschylus must be said to have dimly grasped that Graph D (Section II, *supra*) best represents the relationship between technological growth and human well-being.

A brief reading of the Prometheus myth, and some others, in which the positive aspects are emphasized, can be found in the closing pages of David Landes, *The Unbound Prometheus: Technological Change and Industrial Development in Western Europe from 1750 to the Present*, Cambridge 1969.

<sup>10</sup> In *Works and Days* (106-201), Hesiod describes a series of Ages, beginning with the Golden Age. Though this was idyllic, it is not clear whether it was pre-technological.

<sup>11</sup> There are other myths in which man suffers because of *hubris* brought on by technology. See, for example, the flight and death of Icarus (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* VIII 183-235), and the death of Patroclus due to his misuse of Achilles' armor (Homer, *Iliad* XVI).

<sup>12</sup> In writing the appendix I have benefited (perhaps insufficiently) from conversation with Thomas Carpenter and Nicholas Smith.