

**Protopia**  
**Moving Forward toward a Better Tomorrow**  
**By**  
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The term *protopia* was coined in 2011 by futurist Kevin Kelly, as a retort to frequent accusations of him being a utopian just because he's optimistic about the future. In a May 19, 2011 post entitled "Protopia," on his blog *The Technium*, Kelly begins with the following rebuff:

Every utopia is a fiction, with necessary flaws that prevent it from ever becoming real. I don't believe in utopias. Particularly technological ones. (That doesn't stop [critics from accusing me](#) of being a [technological utopian](#).) My aversion to utopias goes even deeper. I have not met a utopia I would even want to live in.<sup>1</sup>

For those who don't recognize his name, Kelly, who is also a conservationist, is mostly known for his unique ideas about technology, as the founder of *Wired* magazine, and for his bestselling 2010 book, *What Technology Wants*. In the latter he includes a chapter on "Deep Progress" in which he does realistically discuss the negative consequences of what are meant to be advances, particularly technological advances. "Some of these new solutions are worse than the problems they were supposed to solve," he writes, "but I think there is evidence that on average and over time, the new solutions outweigh the new problems."<sup>2</sup> He criticizes some techno-optimists for often way overestimating how much we are advancing and cites a brilliant line by Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, "There is more good than evil in the world—but not by much."<sup>3</sup>

From just this much we can begin to understand the meaning of *protopia*, a belief that humanity and the world are slowly getting better. Again, as Kelly says:

The world does not need to be perfectly utopian to see progress. Some portion of our actions, such as war, are destructive. A bunch of what we produce is crap. Maybe nearly half of what we do. But if we create only 1 percent or 2 percent (or even one-tenth of 1 percent) more positive stuff than we destroy, then we have progress. This differential could be so small as to be almost imperceptible, and this may be why progress is not universally acknowledged.<sup>4</sup>

Another futurist, Ray Kurzweil says something similar in his new book, *The Singularity is Nearer*. He begins his chapter titled, "Life is Getting Exponentially Better," by asking us to imagine hearing the following "late breaking" news report:

Extreme Poverty Worldwide Fell 0.01% Today! This also in: Since Yesterday, Literacy Has Risen 0.0008%! And this: The Proportion of Households with Flush Toilets Grew Today by 0.003%! And the same things happened yesterday. And the day before yesterday. If these advances don't seem exciting to you, that counts as at least one reason why you didn't hear about them.<sup>5</sup>

Like moths to the flame, we are attracted to big news, which is almost always negative news, and miss, even disbelieve, in the significances of the small improvements that are seldom noticed. But those small improvements and advancements that don't seem important to us, or that go completely unnoticed, keep adding up, and I'm talking about more than just technology. Just this past week, Rapper Sean "Diddy" Combs was denied bail after being charged with several crimes, including human trafficking and slavery; and North Carolina Lt. Governor Mark Robinson was found to have made several disturbing past statements, reportedly calling himself a "black Nazi," and saying, "Slavery is not bad. Some people need to be slaves. I wish they would bring it back. I would certainly buy a few."<sup>6</sup> These actions and words are shocking to us today but would not have been news at all only a 150-years ago, nor throughout most of human history. The fact that slavery is considered a crime everywhere in the world today, which is exactly what abolitionists believed the future could look like, even against incredible odds, has come true.

This doesn't mean the future they dreamt of and fought for is anywhere near perfect, as those of us living in it can attest to, but it is better because some believed it could be, and worked to make it happen. As the great Unitarian minister Theodor Parker said in an 1853 sermon, more than a decade before slavery would be outlawed in the U.S., "I do not pretend to understand the moral universe; the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways; I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight; I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice."<sup>7</sup> These words inspired and were later more memorably paraphrased by Dr. King, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice."

These are not utopian words but hopeful ones, and I'd say realistic because things do slowly improve, even if most of us don't notice it. But what I most appreciate about the idea of *protopia* is that it is a rebuke of both dystopianism and utopianism. This is why, those who notice the small bits of progress, the one-tenths of a percent, the "not by much" advances, often disdain being called "utopians." We, because I am one of them, are realists who believe strongly, as Kelly does, that "Every utopia is a fiction."

Utopians are scarier to me than dystopians because very few people want to create the dystopian futures they envision. Utopians, on the other hand, are often "true believers" who are working hard to establish their perfect visions of Heaven on Earth, which usually results in far worse circumstances than existed before they tried forcing others and the world to bend to their ideals. The 20<sup>th</sup> century labor movement, for example, which gravitated toward the ideal world imagined by the theories of Karl Marx, resulted in Communist Russia and China and to the starvation, poverty, imprisonments, and executions of millions.

This term, *Utopia*, was coined by Sir Thomas Moore in his 1516 book of the same title. In it he presents a fictional society that represents an ideal, rational state emphasizing justice, equality, and communal good, in contrast to the political and social realities of his real 16<sup>th</sup> century world. Nobody can deny that things have improved a lot since 1516, but we are still far from Utopia, and always will be. But my favorite Utopian story goes back thousands of

years and is perhaps the first such tale, the story of Noah and the Ark from the Hebrew scriptures. Noah's religious beliefs led him to believe he was living in a time of extreme wickedness, that every human inclination and thought was evil, and that the world was doomed. Yet he was not a dystopian because he believed the future could be perfect. (I said perfect, not simply better.) But to establish that future, everything about the past had to be destroyed. His believed his new and perfect world had to begin with a clean slate.

So, he began warning people about the coming apocalypse, but few beyond his own family believed him. You know the story, Noah, along with his family and a pair of every kind of animal, squeezed into the ark he'd built with his own hands. Today we might liken the ark to an echo chamber in which those with a specific idea can completely shut the rest of world out, shut reality out. From within it, they demonize anyone who isn't fully "on board" with the self-righteous beliefs that they continuously praise and affirm amongst themselves, forbidding any input or scrutiny from those outside whom they believe have brought doom upon themselves.

After months of wiping the slate clean of those outside of Noah's echo chamber, he opens a hatch and releases a dove that returns with an olive leaf, and later doesn't return at all. From this, Netanyahu ... I mean Noah reasoned that it was safe to leave the ark and begin building the perfect world he had envisioned, a world without any of the wickedness and evil of those who had been wiped out. As proof of this, Noah sees a rainbow in the sky. "I have set my rainbow in the clouds," he hears Yahweh say, "and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth . . . Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life."<sup>8</sup>

Everything is going to be perfect now. No more wickedness. No more dealing with unbelievers and disagree-ers. Utopia has arrived. But then, in the very next chapter, we find Noah drunk, passed out, and bare-naked in his tent—a dramatic and very intentional cut from an idyllic scene to its complete opposite. After his son Shem attempts to get his brothers to help deal with their father's alcoholism, they instead try to ignore it by walking backwards with a blanket to cover their father up without even looking at him. It is an act of denial. A refusal to face reality. The next day, when Noah sobers up, he's so enraged that he kicks Shem out of the family and condemns his descendants to be enslaved and exploited for the rest of eternity. So much for utopia and ridding the world of all the things Noah had despised, including the rejection of our common humanity, our relatedness to those with whom we disagree and, therefore, despise.

I agree with Kelly, that there will never be utopia, and I wouldn't want to live in one if there were. But dystopias are often the end result of utopian endeavors. This is so because the only way to make the world perfect is through force, which leads to the kinds of authoritarian and punitive societies as depicted in George Orwell's *1984*. But the kinds of violent and anarchic dystopias we see in the movies, in which bands of lawless humans are fighting each other for scarce resources, are about as likely as Utopia. Kelly says, "There are endless possibilities of how modern civilization collapses. But just because dystopias are cinematic and dramatic,

and much easier to imagine, that does not make them much more likely.”<sup>9</sup> This is so because dystopias are ultimately unsustainable. “They flash chaos, but then quickly self-organize,” Kelly says. “Real dystopias are more like the old Soviet Union, or Libya, rather than Mad Max or Bladerunner: they are stifling bureaucratic rather than lawless.”<sup>10</sup>

So, these two visions of the future, dystopian and utopian represent such extreme states as to be nearly impossible, especially utopian futures. But it is not farfetched to believe the world will worsen in the coming years, which most people believe is most likely. My experience suggests it is what most people believe will happen, based upon the false perception that the past was better than today, from which they infer things are always getting worse. “No one wants to move to the future today,” Kelly says. “We are avoiding it. We don’t have much desire for life one hundred years from now. Many dread it. That makes it hard to take the future seriously.”<sup>11</sup>

But this attitude is deceptive because we often tend to remember the past more fondly than it deserves. My childhood was rotten, but I have pleasant feelings for any artifact reminiscent of those years—an old lunch pale, or a song, or a nearly forgotten TV show. In psychology this is known as the “Nostalgia and Positive Memory Bias,”<sup>12</sup> based upon research that nostalgia is often built around positive experiences, causing people to romanticize the past and better retain positive memories than negative ones.

There are other similar psychological theories. For instance, a study in 2000, led by psychologist Laura Carstensen, showed that older adults especially develop a “positivity bias,” remembering positive events more than negative ones.<sup>13</sup> There’s also the Fading Affect Bias (FAB), based on a 2006 study suggesting negative memories tend to fade more quickly than positive ones. By considering autobiographical memory, FAB theory suggests people’s recollections of negative events tend to become less emotionally charged over time, whereas positive memories retain their emotional intensity.<sup>14</sup> Some psychologists further suggest that people engage in *cognitive reappraisal*, which involves reframing negative experiences in a more positive light. In other words, we may unconsciously clean up our bad memories by editing them or even leaving them on the proverbial cutting room floor altogether.<sup>15</sup>

Conversely, we are hyper aware of our current problems, especially those that make the news, which suffers from a negativity-bias. Hence, because today seems so much worse than our skewed memories of the fictional good ol’ days, we conclude that things keep getting worse and will, therefore, be even worse in the future. Then, because of confirmation bias, we tend to disagree, distrust, and even dislike anyone who tries to tell us otherwise. Thus, most of us are far more likely to believe the world is getting incrementally worse—if not going to hell in a handbasket, as Noah does—than to believe it is slowly improving. As some of you have heard me say before, I find no more resistance to my addresses than to those expressing my optimism for the future. Some think, at best, I’m naïve, and others downright dangerous because my false sense of hope may cause others to take today’s most urgent

matters less seriously (even though they also believe that solving those urgent matters is hopeless).

I, on the other hand, believe I'm the one dealing with reality, having worked to overcome my negative unconscious biases to the degree that I am able to see and accept what the data truly indicates, that things are better today than ever. Things may be better today than yesterday, "but not by much," as the good Rabbi says. But incremental improvement doesn't mean things are only a little better than they were decades or centuries ago. As in the case of slavery, things are much better today than ever. In fact, I might even conclude the extreme and unfounded reaction to my book *The Gadfly Papers*, was ultimately because of my rejection of the, so called, "anti-racist" belief that nothing has improved at all over the years, and that all whites are white supremacists living in a white supremacist nation. Of course, racism as well as other old inequalities and injustices are still a problem, but they are far different problems today than they were just a few decades ago.

Nevertheless, the notion that things are only incrementally improving, perhaps by as little as one-tenth of a percent a day, doesn't immediately seem like much to hang our high hopes on. But we have to remember these improvements are cumulative and can add up to a lot over time. Sometimes they begin to grow exponentially, as happens with the acceptance of new ideas—one person becomes two, two becomes four, four becomes eight, and within a very short time an entire society is suddenly transformed. During the 2000 U.S. presidential election, for example, George W. Bush claimed that Global Warming was a hoax. Four years later, when running for a second term, it had become too obvious to deny. So, instead, he ran his campaign by running against same sex marriage and won a second term because most Americans agree with him (This is at least partially true, although I realize it is also a simplification of the complexities involved in any such election). When Obama ran a few years later, he was also against legalizing gay marriage, but "evolved" on the matter toward the end of his second term, as had most Americans. Then in 2015, following the examples of several states, the Supreme Court declared same-sex marriage to be a constitutional right. When I stopped performing weddings for anyone in 2004, saying I wouldn't do so until I could perform them equally for everyone, many scoffed and told me I'd be waiting forever. Knowing how change happens, like a slow snowball gaining speed and size while rolling downhill, I responded that I expected to conduct weddings again within ten years. I must admit, I was a little too optimistic. It took eleven years.

What if I told you that in eight years from now the world will have enough solar energy to meet one hundred percent of all our energy needs? Most will find this impossible to believe, especially those who know that solar only met 3.6 percent of our energy needs just a short time ago, in 2021. But between 1983 and 2021, the amount of solar energy produced doubled roughly every twenty-eight months. According to the Center for Climate and Energy Solutions, "Renewable energy is the fastest-growing energy source in the United States, increasing 42 percent from 2010 to 2020." That's "up 90 percent from 2000 to 2020."<sup>16</sup> The bulk of this green energy is currently hydropower and wind power, but the center also says "Solar generation (including distributed), which made up 3.3 percent of total U.S. generation

in 2020, is the fastest-growing electricity source.”<sup>17</sup> At this pace, Ray Kurzweil says, “it would take only about 4.8 doublings to reach 100 percent, which would put us at 2032 to meet all of our energy needs from solar alone.”<sup>18</sup>

Just as we experience the world as flat, even though we know it’s round, we view change as linear, even though it’s often exponential. In the recent pandemic, for example, COVID 19 was spread from one to three persons on day 1. Five days later, those three spread it to nine others. Twenty days later there were 27 cases, and so it went until, within just three months, there were hundreds of thousands to millions of cases. For better or for worse, this is the power of exponential growth. And this is why working to make slow progress leads to sudden breakthroughs, like to most people believing slavery is wrong, gay marriage is good, global warming is real, and to the sun suddenly handling all our energy needs.

In his book, *Moonshots: Creating a World of Abundance*, Naveen Jain says, “The fact is that by every objective measure, the world is getting better.” Only instead of concluding this statement with, “but not by much,” Jain says, “Much better.”

The number of people living in poverty has never been lower. There are far more democracies in the world. Literacy has reached an all-time high. Higher food production and lower costs have put a massive dent in world hunger. Infant mortality rates have plummeted. We’re on an accelerated path to electric cars and far less consumption of fossil fuels. Sanitation standards, life expectancy, air quality—it’s all improving. Heck, even the giant panda is no longer endangered.<sup>19</sup>

Jain’s is a nice summary of similar statements made in dozens of books I know of; some of them written by Nobel laureates. So, the data is out there if you want to see it for yourself. But the point I want to make here is that having hope for a better tomorrow is not naïve or delusional. It’s reality. Believing the world is getting better, not worse, is fact, not fantasy. And when we understand this, that there’s sound reasons for hope, that a better tomorrow is more likely than not, then there is purpose and meaning in rolling up our sleeves and working for it. In his book, *Human 2.0*, physicist Max Tegmark says, “This means that we should be imagining positive futures not only for ourselves, but also for society and for humanity itself.” And we do this, he says, by considering “what sort of future you *want* rather than merely what sort of future you *fear*.”<sup>20</sup> Utopias and dystopias are rooted in fear. Protopia is about believing in a positive future and believing in ourselves and each other enough to go for it. Fear is the deception, not our hope and faith in each other.

Tomorrow we are likely to awaken, like most days, to a world that is slightly better than today. Although, given all the negative news that is continuing to happen and grab our attention, along with our own unconscious biases, it won’t feel any better at all. It’ll probably feel worse. Protopians face these feelings with the knowledge that the little things keep adding up, like doubling the grains of rice on each square of a checkerboard, until the amount is so great that things suddenly and noticeably improve, faster than we had ever imagined—slavery is abolished, women’s suffrage is obtained, communism collapses, the Berlin wall is torn down, gay marriage is approved, a vaccine is developed, renewable energy dominates.

Understanding this should be enough to bring sound reason for hope to our lives and give purpose in our efforts to make the world just a little better tomorrow than it was today.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://kk.org/thetechnium/protopia/>

<sup>2</sup> Kelly, Kevin, *What Technology Wants*, Viking Press, New York, NY, 2010, p. 74.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Kurzweil, Ray. *The Singularity Is Nearer: When We Merge with AI* (p. 111). Penguin Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/09/19/us/politics/mark-robinson-north-carolina-gubernatorial-race.html>

<sup>7</sup> Parker, Theodore, "Of Justice and the Conscience," 1853.

<sup>8</sup> Genesis 9:13-15

<sup>9</sup> <https://kk.org/thetechnium/protopia/>

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Wildschut, T., Sedikides, C., Arndt, J., & Routledge, C. (2006). Nostalgia: Content, triggers, functions. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 91(5), 975-993. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.91.5.975>.

<sup>13</sup> Carstensen, L. L., & Mikels, J. A. (2005). At the intersection of emotion and cognition: Aging and the positivity effect. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 14(3), 117-121. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0963-7214.2005.00348.x>.

<sup>14</sup> Ritchie, T. D., Skowronski, J. J., Hartnett, J. L., Wells, B. K., & Walker, W. R. (2006). The fading affect bias in the context of emotion activation level, mood, and personal theories of emotion change. *Memory*, 14(4), 393-404. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09658210500448465>.

<sup>15</sup> Gross, J. J., & John, O. P. (2003). Individual differences in two emotion regulation processes: Implications for affect, relationships, and well-being. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 85(2), 348-362. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.85.2.348>.

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.c2es.org/content/renewable-energy/>

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Kurzweil, *ibid.* p. 174.

<sup>19</sup> Jain, Naveen. *Moonshots: Creating a World of Abundance* (p. 149). John August Media, LLC. Kindle Edition.

<sup>20</sup> Tegmark, Max, *Life 3.0: Being Human in the Age of Artificial Intelligence*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, NY, 2017, p. 334.