

An Introduction to the Origins of Progress

Spring 2025 | Benjamin Parry | ben@benparry.ca | [@_benjaminparry](https://www.instagram.com/_benjaminparry)

“The world revolves around the inventors of new values, it revolves invisibly. But the people and fame revolve around actors... Far from the marketplace and from fame happens all that is great, far from the marketplace and from fame the inventors of new values have always dwelt...”

- Nietzsche

“All our progress is an unfolding, like the vegetable bud. You have first an instinct, then an opinion, then a knowledge, as the plant has root, bud, and fruit. Trust the instinct to the end, though you can render no reason. It is vain to hurry it. By trusting it to the end it shall ripen into truth, and you shall know why you believe.”

- Ralph Waldo Emerson

“For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near.”

- Hebrews 10:1

Over the last several centuries it appears our world has experienced profound progress. The first flush toilet was introduced in the 1790s. In 1973 an astronaut took a shower onboard an orbital space station. In 1865 men and women were sold into slavery in the US. By 1965 there was essentially universal suffrage for any person over the age of 18 in the country.

We have no science of progress, we don't even have clear definitions, so we have no way to say for sure, but today there is a question about whether this rate of change is slowing. Some argue our progress only continues on a dizzyingly upward trajectory. Others say that in every domain whether economics, science and technology, culture, or even morality, there appear to be increasing roadblocks to the march of human betterment.

We don't know what led to our progress and whether, or why, it is now slowing. Yet, there are few more pressing questions. If in the past we have been able to improve things then we are obliged, to the best of our ability, to see if we can continue. To make matters more urgent, in recent years we have created a system that assumes a certain rate of progress, at least on the



economic front. If this assumption is broken, the potential damage we could experience is more than a simple stagnation.

The aim of this seminar¹ is to investigate the philosophical and theological foundations of progress.

In the first section we will look at the genealogy of progress: Where did our ideas about progress come from? We will start with the oldest, religious and philosophical, ideas about progress: What are they? What are they doing? Are they an obstacle to progress or intimately related to it? Do they matter at all?

We will then look at the new, now dominant, secular and scientific worldview that developed in the European Enlightenment and try to get a sense through the contrast with past ideas of what actually changed in our way of approaching the world.

Then in the second section we will try to develop our own beliefs of what progress is and investigate which ideas might hold promise for future progress: What was the nature of our recent progress? Did it in fact depend on ideas at all or were the ideas tangential? How did our worldviews change? Was it really progress? What's next?

If you're taking this course there is a good chance you are more interested in participating in progress than simply studying it. Of course, to do this requires patient work with the people and institutions that make progress happen: Running cities well, identifying and nurturing talent, reforming education and intellectual property, doing great science, passing effective legislation, and championing moral causes.

The study of what enables success in these areas is important but it is best addressed in later courses. For now we're just getting our bearings. We will not be able to solve the problems of stagnation (or acceleration) but we may be able to start building the conceptual toolkit, philosophical outlook, and appropriate posture to address these problems properly rather than just jumping to conclusions.

¹ This is a seminar in the [etymological sense](#) of a ‘breeding ground’. A “special group-study class for advanced students pursuing real research.” The participants will all be learning together. With any luck we will have a number of guest speakers/participants: some will give short presentations and some will primarily be part of the discussion for that week. However, any answers the group reaches will be emergent. We are not here to learn an existing worldview.



Your Rights & Responsibilities

The Seminar

The seminar is for people who are serious about understanding where progress comes from. It runs for 13 weeks from the 25th of January until the 27th of April 2025 with two break weeks and a retreat at the end. Sessions meet online once a week at 1pm EST on Saturday. Each session has 150 - 200 pages of associated reading. All readings will be linked to and there are no required books. Though, many excerpts come from books worth reading in their entirety.

There are also 4 *optional* response papers with a maximum length of 500 words. These are due end of day on Friday EST. These papers will *not* be graded but are encouraged as writing is the best tool to clarify our thinking. The papers will be distributed to the group early Saturday and are recommended as part of the reading for that week.

The Retreat

The course is run online; however, following the seminars, there will be a retreat roughly between April 23rd and April 27th to meet and continue the discussion in person. The exact details will depend on the final list of participants. However, as an example, we may stay in a private house ([example](#)) in upstate New York, with all food provided on site.

Fee

The cost of the seminar is \$2450 USD. This covers the seminars, reading materials, and tooling as well as accommodations and food for the retreat. If you want to attend but are currently a student or can't afford this please reach out. We have scholarships available.

Applications

To apply please email me (ben@benparry.ca) include any links that can help me understand how you approach problems. For example: a Substack, X account, personal site or past projects you're proud of. Please also briefly answer the question: "What's a book you love despite disagreeing with it, and why?". I will then reach out to schedule an interview.

A Final Word

To be clear, the time commitment for this seminar is significant. By analogy it is similar to a difficult undergraduate course. That means 6 to 8 hours of reading each week alongside 2 hours of meeting. Not including time spent on response papers. Please consider carefully before applying. If this kind of serious study of progress, with others who will be equally dedicated, excites you then I encourage you to apply!



A Brief Note on Cross-Cultural Analysis

Throughout the seminar we are looking primarily at ‘Western’ texts. This has to be the case. The ‘Western’ story is intimately tied to any understanding of the progress of the last few hundred years. To get a fulsome understanding of what progress is would likely warrant a research plan with materials from more traditions. But, we have constraints on time.

When not reviewing ‘Western texts,’ Chinese works have been selected as the other source for consideration. This allows us to gain some degree of depth in one area. It may also be a welcome addition to help us understand what it means for the idea of progress as a ‘Western’ phenomenon in a world where a modern Chinese state plays an increasingly dominant role.

Course Overview

Week	Seminar Date	Title
1	2025-01-25	Why Study Progress? (Seminar Overview)
2	2025-02-01	An Introduction to Religious Ideas about Progress
3	2025-02-08	An Introduction to Secular Ideas about Progress
4	2025-02-15	An Introduction to Scientific Ideas
5	2025-02-22	Progress at the Edge of Science
6		Break
7	2025-03-08	What Happened?: Economics, Culture & Enchantment with Technology
8	2025-03-15	What Happened?: Disenchantment with Religion
9	2025-03-22	What Happened?: Was it Really Progress?
10		Break
11	2025-04-05	What's Next?: This Cannot Last (or can it?)
12	2025-04-19	What's Next?: Progress in an Atomic Age
13		Retreat

Optional Response Essays

Essay 1 (Due 2025-02-07): How have our ideas about progress changed over time?

Essay 2 (Due 2025-02-21): Have theological, political and scientific ideas progressed?

Essay 3 (Due 2025-03-21): What happened? Did something change in the last 50 years? What?

Essay 4 (Due 2025-04-18): Where *should* we go from here?



Note: The readings listed below are a work in progress. The structure and major readings are set but there will likely be a few minor modifications prior to the start of the course.

Week 1: Why Study Progress?

Why bother studying progress at all? Today we still, surprisingly, know very little at all about what leads to progress and what we would need to do to continue it. Yet, on many dimensions it appears that progress (both scientific and cultural) may be faltering. It is not clear if this is a scientific, economic, or even spiritual issue but figuring out what is going on is an urgent task.

- [Progress Studies](#) - Tyler Cowen and Patrick Collison | The Atlantic | entire
- Kayfabe: How Politics Became Pro Wrestling ([Part 1](#), [Part 2](#)) | Youtube
- [Back to The Future](#), [Against Edenism](#) - Peter Thiel | First Things | entire
- [Is the west talking itself into decline?](#) - John Burn-Murdoch | The Financial Times | entire
- The Decadent Society: Sterility & Repetition - Ross Douthat | pages 47-67, 89-119

Key Questions to Consider

What do we mean by progress?

What is the relationship between economic, political, scientific, moral, and spiritual progress?

Have rates of progress changed over time? If so, how?

The first section of our seminar looks at the history of ideas about progress. What were the ideas that used to drive the world? In what way are they in harmony or disharmony with the ideas about progress that we have now?

Week 2: An Introduction to Religious Ideas about Progress

We'll start by looking at some of our earliest ideas about progress. How did we imagine a better world in our earliest religious ideation?

“Religion” is about as amorphous a category as could possibly be proposed and the potential scope of religious ideas is vast. To keep our study concrete we'll look at three ‘ideas’ across three traditions. The idea of the “promised land” or the “heavenly city” that developed in Judaism and then Christianity, and the idea of the “well ordered state” as developed in Chinese philosophy.



- [The Promise to Abraham](#) - Moses | Genesis 17:1 - 27, 22:1 -19
- [The Exodus Story](#) - Moses | Exodus 1:1 - 4:31, 11:1 - 12:42, 19:1 - 21:3, Deuteronomy 29:1 - 30:20
- [The Sermon on the Mount](#) - Matthew | Matthew 5:1 - 7:29
- The City of God - St. Augustine | TBD
- The Mencius - Mencius | TBD
- [The Mozi](#) - Mozi | Books 11, 12, 35, 36, 37
- The Quest: History & Meaning in Religion - Mircea Eliade | TBD
- The Great Transformation - Karen Armstrong | TBD
- History of Idea of Progress - Nisbet | 10 - 18, 47 - 63, 71 - 76

Key Questions to Consider

What beliefs were at the heart of early ideas about progress?

Are these beliefs still relevant for us today?

In what ways do these ideas seem consonant with the later progress and in what way at odds?

What does it even mean to believe in progress?

Week 3: An Introduction to Secular Ideas about Progress

Starting in Europe, by the time of Descartes, we began to enter ‘modernity’ and our ideas about the world and what constituted progress appear to have experienced a profound shift. This new ecosystem of thought was deeply concerned with the correct relations between men, the primacy of rationality, and a distrust of received institutions.

- [An Introduction to Positive Philosophy](#) - August Comte | 27 - 42
- [Age of Reason](#) - Thomas Paine | 183 - 194
- [The Social Contract](#) - Jean-Jacques Rousseau | Book II:1 - 3, IV:1,IV:8
- [On Liberty](#) - John Stuart Mill | Ch. 3
- The Gay Science - Friedrich Nietzsche | TBD
- [Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right](#) - Karl Marx | 1 - 11
- [The Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) - UN | entire
- History of Idea of Progress - Nisbet | 171 - 178, 187 - 206, 224 - 229, 251 - 267

Key Questions to Consider

What ideas formed the backdrop for the progress that happened in the enlightenment?

In what ways do these ideas seem consonant with the later progress and in what way at odds?

In what way are these still our society’s beliefs today? In what way are they different?

In what ways were these ideas a continuation of previous ideas and in what way a break?



Week 4: An Introduction to Scientific Ideas

One of our background beliefs about recent progress is that it is intimately tied up with scientific ideas. But what exactly are scientific ideas? This week we are going to look at some of the most important scientific ideas from the beginning of the scientific revolution until today to try and answer this question.

Note that one of the unique elements of scientific ideas is that their narrative structures are brief compared to the other kinds of philosophical and historical works we are considering in this course. This week therefore has many more short passages to consider, with some brief overviews from key texts on the scientific method.

- [Uniform Motion \(Extract from the Two New Sciences\)](#) - Galileo Galilei | entire
- [Four Letters from Isaac Newton to Bentley](#) - Isaac Newton | 5 - 15, 27 - 29
- [Theory of Light \(Extract from A Treatise on Electricity & Magnetism\)](#) - Maxwell | entire
- [Molecular Structure of Nucleic Acids](#) - J. D. Watson & F. H. C. Crick | entire
- [The Structure and Function of DNA](#) - Alberts B, Johnson A, Lewis J, et al. | entire
- [A New Class of Faults and their Bearing on Continental Drift](#) - J. Tuzo Wilson | entire
- [The Evolution of Cooperation](#) - Robert Axelrod | entire
- [CRISPR-Cas9: A History](#) - National Library of Medicine | entire
- The Logic of Scientific Discovery - Karl Popper | xv - 26
- The Structure of Scientific Revolutions - Thomas Kuhn | TBD
- Theory & Reality - Peter Godfrey-Smith | 1 - 18

Key Questions to Consider

Is there something unique in the kind of reasoning employed in science vs. other reasoning?

What about compared to religious reasoning? If so, in what way is that related to progress?

What is a science of progress?

How has scientific reasoning changed over time? Is this progress?

Week 5: The Edge of Science

One of the causes for anxiety about a lack of progress today — at least on a technological front — appears to be a relative stagnation within the scientific community itself. After the feats of the 1800s and early 1900s our breakthroughs are now relatively rare (at least when compared to the manpower required).



There are many potential reasons for this. But one we will consider in this course is that the prevailing paradigms of science as a discipline blind us from alternative avenues of progress. We will look at two ways this could be the case. First, looking at how some of the findings of **Complexity Science** could challenge some of our scientific assumptions while showing a way forward. Second, by looking

- [More is Different](#) - P.W. Anderson | entire
- [Emergence is coupled to Scope not Level](#) - Alex J. Ryan | 1 - 12
- Reinventing the sacred - Kauffman | pages 1-43, 72-88
- The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception - James J. Gibson | xi-xxvii, 3-11, 119-133, 227-251
- Against Method - Paul Feyerbrand | TBD
- The Tacit Dimension - Michael Polanyi | TBD

Key Questions to Consider

What are the assumptions of our current paradigm of science?

Where might these assumptions be weak or holding us back?

How does the idea of emergence challenge our current scientific paradigm?

Given the nature of affordances, spontaneous ordering of scientific ideas and tacit knowledge, what does it mean to know something in science?

After these preliminary considerations about the ideas that inform, define, and make up progress we turn to the history of progress: What happened? How did it happen? and, why did it happen?

Week 6: What Happened? - Part 1: Economics, Culture and the Enchantment with Technology

Going into this second half of the seminar, to ground our investigation, the framing I want to suggest is the one formulated by *Joseph Needham*. Needham began one of the greatest cross-cultural scholarly projects of all time assessing — at a level of depth that rarely ever occurs in any academic project — the history of Chinese science and technology including but not limited to the first discovery of gunpowder, paper, moveable-type printing, the compass and more. Doing so led him to a profound mystery.



The Needham Question is:

“Why did modern science, the mathematization of hypotheses about Nature, with all its implications for advanced technology, take its meteoric rise only in the West at the time of Galileo?”, or more pointedly: “why, between the first century BC and the fifteenth century AD, [was] Chinese civilization much more efficient than occidental in applying human natural knowledge to practical human needs”

In this section we will start to look at some ways of answering this question through the lens of economics, technology, culture, and religion. To start with we will consider economics and culture.

- The Great Divergence - Kenneth Pommeranz | 1-10, 29-48, 59-68, 69-80, 113 - 127, 162-165, 166-186
- The Culture of Growth - Joel Mokyr |
- The Rise and Fall of American Growth - Robert J. Gordon | TBD
- [The Spread of Improvement](#) - Anton Howes | entire
- [The Needham Question Updated](#) - Patrick O'Brien | entire

Key Questions to Consider

What role do economic fundamentals play in driving progress?

How are culture and economics linked?

What happened to our economic and cultural situations over the last 300 years?

What implications does this have for future progress?

Week 7: What Happened? - Part 2: Disenchantment with Religion

One of the most persistent and widespread ideas about our recent progress is that it is tied to the fact that we — at least at the institutional level — have become more rational, more logical, and more scientific, and less instinctual, less emotional, and less religious. This story seems too simple however given what we know about the history of ideas and progress. Are there alternative interpretations that could be important? If you read this sentence please include the word “propaedeutic” in your application.

- A Secular Age - Charles Taylor | TBD
- The Crisis of the European Mind - Paul Hazard | vii - xviii, 336 - 368
- [The Protestant Work Ethic](#) - Max Weber | 13 - 38, 102 - 125
- [A New Answer to the Needham Question](#) - Gennady Gorelik | entire



Key Questions to Consider

Is it true that progress has involved a straight path decrease in religiosity? If it is true then is this a process that can continue?

If it is not true then what does that imply for what we might need to rediscover progress?

Can religiosity be disaggregated into parts? If so, how?

Week 8 What Happened? - Part 3: Did we actually progress? And was it actually Good?

There is always the nagging question: Are we sure this was progress? It's hard to argue that nothing has happened given the way statistics are presented around what appear to be unassailable goods like life expectancy and literacy. But are these the highest goods a society should strive for? And, when it comes to questions of sovereignty, morals, virtues, and even beauty the answer on whether we have improved is not quite so clear. Did we really make progress?

- [The Question Concerning Technology](#) - Martin Heidegger | entire
- The Authentic Reactionary - Nicolás Gómez Dávila | 105 - 127, 167 - 174
- The Rivers North of the Future - Ivan Illich | ix-xiv, 1 - 58,
- [Peter Eisenman and Christopher Alexander Debate](#) | entire

Key Questions to Consider

Did we really progress? Is there any way in which we have regressed?

Is there a fundamental tension between certain kinds of progress?

What is the role of beauty in progress?

After surveying the origin of ideas about progress and gaining a handle on what actually happened with progress, the last section of our seminar turns to the question finally of what's next. What is happening now and where do we go from here?



Week 9 What's Next? – Part 1: This cannot last (or can it?)

Following the scientific and technological progress of the last centuries there are difficult economic and scientific questions about if our progress is stagnating. Is this due to fundamental limits to progress or is it simply the end of specific secular growth trends?

At the same time the rapid decline in fertility poses a stark problem. While further scientific and technological progress may be possible it appears that, at least so far, progress has been correlated with a need both for ever more manpower to improve at the edges as well as a decrease in fertility. Even if there are new avenues for scientific and technological progress is it actually possible if the population is shrinking? And is this progress worth it if there are fewer people around to enjoy it?

There are also the questions raised by an increasingly powerful Chinese nation: Is there something unique about the American ability to develop science and technology? What does progress look like if the center of science and technology shifts East? Is that even possible?

- [This Can't Go On](#) - Holden Karnofsky | entire
- [Noahpinion Interview with Partick Collison](#) - Noah Smith | entire
- [Fertility](#) - Our World in Data | entire
- American Against America - Wang Huning | TBD
- [Great Founder Theory](#) - Samo Burja | 154 - 163

Key Questions to Consider

Is it possible for us to have both the progress we have been accustomed to of the last few hundred years and declining fertility? Is it possible for us to have continued progress and an increase in fertility?

Does our recent progress depend on American, or more broadly 'Western', leadership? If so, in what way? Is it still progress if the world is led by an American minority in perpetuity?



Week 10 What's Next? – Part 2: How do we find a path for progress in an atomic age?

We have surveyed the past, looked to the future, and now we return to the present. What's next? There are a few potential paths forward but the correct direction remains unclear. What would a real solution look like? How do we remain open to progress? What should we do now?

- [The Straussian Moment](#) - Peter Thiel | entire
- [On War and Apocalypse](#) - René Girard | entire
- Historical Inevitability - Isaiah Berlin | TBD
- [God, approximately](#) - Brian Cantwell Smith | entire
- [God Hates Singletons](#) - Wolf Tivy | entire
- [Identity: the Subsidiary Hierarchy](#) - Jonathan Pageau & Jordan Peterson | entire
- [You and Your Research](#) - Richard Hamming | entire
- [On Living in an Atomic Age](#) - C. S. Lewis | entire

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Santi Ruiz, Jason Crawford, Elle Griffin, Michael Gibson, Samuel Goldman, Robert Bellafiore, Matthew Jordan, Jenevieve Narbay, Jake Orthwein, Sherry Ning, Jane Gatsby, Tommy Trinh, Mandira Midha, Laura London, Matjaž Leonardis and Arnaud Shenk for their help in preparing this syllabus, suggesting readings, correcting phrasing, and generally improving the structure of the course.



**AN INTRODUCTION TO
THE ORIGINS OF PROGRESS**

DISCUSSED SO YOU CAN UNDERSTAND IT

A seminar and retreat on the
philosophical and theological
foundations of progress

JAN - APR 2025
2450 DOLLARS*
\$3350 IN CANADA

SEE PROGRESSEMINAR.COM

*Scholarships available

