**A short counter-argument for belief in progress**

**Abstract**

In a short article, Smilansky (2022) provides an argument in favor of the belief in social progress. He considers the "probability of losing a child" to be a pivotal element among various criteria to be assessed in order to evaluate human progress and as this probability has decreased considerably in the modern era, he evaluates humanity today in a better situation than the previous generations. In this paper, I criticize Smilansky's argument and try to show that his account of the difference between historical periods is superficial.

**Keywords**: progress, child loss, suicide, childlessness, meaning of life

In a paper titled "A Short Argument for Belief in Progress" (*Think* 60), Saul Smilansky tries to present a brief argument in favor of belief in progress, because he assumes that broad claims about "social progress" (either comparing past societies with contemporary societies, or comparing current societies with each other) are often met with severe doubt and suspicion or ridicule. Then Smilansky stands up against this common attitude and tries to show that it is not correct. He does this by focusing on people's daily lives instead of "marginal groups, extreme conditions such as war, or questions about the future." He notes that he has no opinion on the claim that the future will necessarily be better or even that the progress that has been made until now will continue. He is merely claiming that "currently, and for some generations, there has been great progress in economically advanced societies, as compared to the human situation throughout nearly all of history."

He begins his argument with the question: "What is the worst thing that can happen in one’s life?" Regardless of acute situations such as " constant torture, or the return of widespread slavery", if this question is asked in a modern, advanced society, the predominant answer would likely be "loss of a child". Smilansky considers the loss of a child to be the most tragic or devastating event that can happen to a human being. Unlike the event of losing a parent, which is "natural" in a sense, losing a child is “unnatural and horrible.” Now, if we review the history, we find that in the past, this event was very common and expected, and the probability of losing one’s child even reached fifty percent. In this way, Smilansky’s argument is as follows:

(a) Nothing is worse than the death of one’s child.

(b) Losing a child is now very unlikely in a modern advanced society.

(c) This event was common in past societies.

(d) Conclusion: we have a clear reason to believe in progress and its importance.

Smilansky then responds to some possible challenges. One of the criticisms is that in the past, people did not expect otherwise and they were not as devastated by the death of their child as we moderns are. In response, Smilansky says that we can have two perceptions of progress. First, whether I (more or less as I am now) prefer to live at some point in the past. He emphasizes that in the context of the current discussion, the answer to this first question is certainly "no", i.e. we do not want to be in a situation where we are almost certain to lose one or more children. Then we have to admit that we prefer today with all its faults, unless we think there is something more important than the health and life of our children. In this sense, what people have felt in the past about the death of their children is irrelevant. A second way of looking at progress is to ask whether people who represent a time in the past were enviably better off than me. Here I do not imagine myself (as I now am) transported to a past society, but consider the charm of being in their place. Even with this second interpretation, which is more complex, it would be difficult to deny that there has been progress historically, Smilansky believes. If we deny this, Smilansky claims, our argument will be that even though people used to regularly predict that about half of their children would die young, they were better off, the reason being that they did not care about this loss as much as we did. Such an argument shows how lucky we moderns are compared to our ancestors, because their lives were such that they were not emotionally capable of caring for their children as much as we do. Smilansky points out that sometimes we may find some aspects of the past appealing for those who lived then, but the price of living in that past requires indifference to the loss of children.

I accept the Smilansky’s premise that the worst event in one’s life is the loss of a child, but in what follows, I take up some challenges to different aspects of Smilansky's approach which undermine his main argument:

1. Smilansky believes that belief in progress is not a common belief, but the exact opposite seems to be true. When most people encounter the narratives of past societies or the accounts of contemporary primitive societies, their default is that these societies are backward. They believe, at the very least, that we moderns "know" what the ideal of a society is, even though we cannot realize it in practice, but the past societies basically did not know what the ideals were and lived in a kind of stupidity. For example, we know that the government should be elected by the people, we know that men and women have equal rights, and we know that no human should be a slave, but the past generations had no understanding of these "truths.” This presupposition of "knowledge about the ideal situation" can be considered one of the clearest (but unconscious) signs of the common belief in progress.

2. Several times in his paper, Smilansky refers to "advanced" societies, and he means developed Western societies. He uses the same word for the concept of "progress" (social and historical progress). It seems to me that he should have specifically avoided using the word "advance" as presupposed in his paper.

3. The most important challenge for Smilansky's position is the criticism he himself puts forward, that the past generations had a different view on the issue of children's death. In my opinion, Smilansky gives a trivial answer to this challenge: if we say that the past was better, we are actually saying that the previous generations were better off than us because of their indifference to the death of their children, i.e. their lives were such that they could not be as emotionally concerned as we are. This is a strange interpretation of the difference between us and previous generations. Using an example, I try to show how Smilansky turned the problem upside down. Let's assume that we are aware of the counterfactual situation of two people. Both these people have children. We know that if person A loses her child, she will not be able to bear the loss and will commit suicide in an hour, but person B will continue her life after the death of her child, albeit with a relatively short period of sorrow and depression. Now can we say that person A is in a better situation than B, or is more emotional, or more concerned about her child? Person B may care and love his child as much as person A, but for various reasons, she can bear the sorrow of being away from the child. Even it seems that, as far as the conditions of these two people are concerned, we assume that person A needs help with her life (even before the loss). Then another reasonable account of the difference between us and our ancestors compared to our children is that they had more hopes and motivations for life and could tolerate the death of a child. The empirical evidence in favor of this account is that the problem of the meaning of life as it exists today in developed and underdeveloped societies did not exist in the past. Suicide out of despair (or suicide in general as prevailing today) is a contemporary phenomenon.

4. Given that, especially in developed societies, more than half of people do not have children (on purpose), Smilansky’s criterion is irrelevant for half of the people. Meanwhile, the trend of social changes shows that this irrelevance is increasing. It is another perspective that undermines Smilansky's argument as it seems that the criterion of progress must involve the majority of humans. On the other hand, supposing the very conditions that Smilansky puts forward, many people who do not want to have children may choose to live in the past, especially since it can be said that some crucial crises of the contemporary era did not exist in the past.

5. It seems that the issue of decreased possibility of death of children is somehow a technical issue and cannot be compatible with "progress" which, according to our intuition, must have some kind of human value. It is even conceivable that we could, in the short term or by accident, achieve some kind of gene modification that would greatly reduce the chance of death. Therefore, considering this criterion as a measure of progress is not that convincing, because it cannot be directly assigned a moral or human value. Just as the reduced possibility of death among animals cannot be called a progress for them, I think that in the foregoing discussion, some other criteria should be considered that separate humans from their mere animal nature (criteria such as the promotion of ethics, culture, literature, and art).

In the end, I would like one more time to point to the meaninglessness of life and the prevalence of suicide in the contemporary era which I mentioned in the third criticism. In my opinion, people who decide to end their lives much more than their predecessors, cannot be in a better situation than them. I believe that it is difficult to devise a single criterion by which to evaluate human progress, but if I were to choose one, I would choose "love of life" (the opposite concept of suicidal tendency) and since it has decreased considerably in our time, I can hardly accept that mankind today has progressed compared to the past generations.[[1]](#footnote-1)

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1. I am grateful to Richard Velkley for helpful comments on drafts of this paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)