The French painter Paul Gauguin—by most accounts mad, bad, and dangerous to know—suffered acutely from cosmological vertigo induced by the work of Darwin and other Victorian scientists.

In the 1890s, Gauguin ran away from Paris, family, and stockbroking career to pain (and bed) native girls in the tropics. Like many a troubled soul, he could not escape so easily from himself, despite great efforts to do so with the help of drink and opium.

At the bottom of his disquiet lay a longing to find what he called the “savage”—primordial man (and woman), humanity in the raw, the elusive essence of our kind. This quest eventually drew him to Tahiti and other South Sea islands, where traces of a pre-contact world—an un Fallen world, in his eyes—держан beneath the cross and the tricolore.

In 1897, a mail steamer docked at Tahiti bringing terrible news. Gauguin’s favourite child, Aline, had died suddenly from pneumonia. After months of illness, poverty, and suicidal despair, the artist harnessed his grief to produce a vast painting—more a mural in conception than a canvas—in which, like the Victorian age itself, he demanded new answers to the riddle of existence. He wrote the title boldly on the image: three childlike questions, simple yet profound. “D’Où Venons Nous? Que Sommes Nous? Où Allons Nous?” Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?

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Who can foretell the human course through time? But I think we can answer it, in broad strokes, by answering the other two questions first. If we see clearly what we are and what we have done, we can recognize human behaviour that persists through many times and cultures. Knowing this can tell us what we are likely to do, where we are likely to go from here.

Our civilization, which subsumes most of its predecessors, is a great ship steaming at speed into the future. It travels faster, further, and more laden than any before. We may not be able to foresee every reef and hazard, but by reading her compass bearing and headway, by understanding her design, her safety record, and the abilities of her crew, we can, I think, plot a wise course between the narrows and bergs looming ahead.

And I believe we must do this without delay, because there are too many shipwrecks behind us. The vessel we are now aboard is not merely the biggest of all time; it is also the only one left. The future of everything we have accomplished since our intelligence evolved will depend on the wisdom of our actions over the next few years. Like all creatures, humans have made their way in the world so far by trial and error; unlike other creatures, we have a presence so colossal that error is a luxury we can no longer afford. The world has grown too small to forgive us any big mistakes.

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Despite certain events of the twentieth century, most people in the Western cultural tradition still believe in the Victorian ideal of progress, a belief succinctly defined by the historian Sidney Pollard in 1969 as “the assumption that a pattern of change exists in the history of mankind . . . that it consists of irreversible changes in one direction only, and that this direction is towards improvement.” The very appearance on earth of creatures who can frame such a thought suggests that progress is a law of nature: the mammal is swifter than the reptile, the ape subtler than the ox, and man the cleverest of all. Our technological culture measures human progress by technology: the club is better than the fist, the arrow better than the club, the bullet better than the arrow. We came to this belief for empirical reasons: because it delivered.
Pollard notes that the idea of material progress is a very recent one—“significant only in the past three hundred years or so”—coinciding closely with the rise of science and industry and the corresponding decline of traditional beliefs. We no longer give much thought to moral progress—a prime concern of earlier times—except to assume it goes hand in hand with the material. Civilized people, we tend to think, not only smell better but behave better than barbarians or savages. This notion has trouble standing up in the court of history.

Our practical faith in progress has ramified and hardened into an ideology—a secular religion which, like the religions that progress has challenged, is blind to certain flaws in its credentials. Progress, therefore, has become “myth” in the anthropological sense. By this I do not mean a belief that is flimsy or untrue. Successful myths are powerful and often partly true. As I’ve written elsewhere: “Myth is an arrangement of the past, whether real or imagined, in patterns that reinforce a culture’s deepest values and aspirations. . . . Myths are so fraught with meaning that we live and die by them. They are the maps by which cultures navigate through time.”

The myth of progress has sometimes served us well—those of us seated at the best tables, anyway—and may continue to do so. But it has also become dangerous. Progress has an internal logic that can lead beyond reason to catastrophe. A seductive trail of successes may end in a trap.

Take weapons, for instance. Ever since the Chinese invented gunpowder, there has been great progress in the making of bangs: from the firecracker to the cannon, from the petard to the high explosive shell. And just when high explosives were reaching a state of perfection, progress found the infinitely bigger bang in the atom. But when the bang we can make can blow up our world, we have made rather too much progress.

Several of the scientists who created the atomic bomb recognized this in the 1940s, telling politicians and others that the new weapons had to be destroyed. “The unleashed power of the atom has changed everything save our modes of thinking,” Albert Einstein wrote, “and we thus drift toward unparalleled catastrophes.” And a few years later, President Kennedy said, “If mankind does not put an end to war, war will put an end to mankind.”
When I was a boy, in the 1950s, the shadow of too much progress in weaponry—of Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and vaporized Pacific islands—had already fallen over the world.

It has now darkened our lives for about sixty years, and so much has been said on the subject that I needn’t add more. My point here is that weapons technology was merely the first area of human progress to reach an impasse by threatening to destroy the planet on which it developed.

At the time, this progress trap was seen as an aberration. In all other fields, including those of nuclear power and chemical pesticides, the general faith in progress was largely unshaken. Advertisements of the 1950s showed a smiling “Mrs. 1970,” who, having bought the right brand of vacuum cleaner, was enjoying the future in advance.
Each year’s motor car looked different from the previous year’s (especially if it wasn’t). “Bigger! Wider! Longer!” sang the girls in a jingle, automakers being keen, then as now, to sell bigger as better. And peasants were freed from vermin with generous dustings of DDT in what became known as the Third World—that unraveling tapestry of non-Western cultures seen as a relic of “backwardness” torn between the superpowers.

Since the Cold War ended, we have held the nuclear genie at bay but have not begun to stuff it back in its bottle. Yet we are busy unleashing other powerful forces—cybernetics, biotechnology, nanotechnology—that we hope will be good tools, but whose consequences we cannot foresee.

The most immediate threat, however, may be nothing more glamorous than our own waste. Like most problems with technology, pollution is a problem of scale. The biosphere might have been able to tolerate our dirty old friends coal and oil if we’d burned them gradually. But how long can it withstand a blaze of consumption so frenzied that the dark side of this planet glows like a fanned ember in the night of space?
Many of the great ruins that grace the deserts and jungles of the earth are monuments to progress traps, the headstones of civilizations which fell victim to their own success. In the fates of such societies—once mighty, complex, and brilliant—lie the most instructive lessons for our own. Their ruins are shipwrecks that mark the shoals of progress.

All cultures, past and present, are dynamic. Even the most slow-moving were, in the long run, works in progress. While the facts of each case differ, the patterns through time are alarmingly—and encouragingly—similar. We should be alarmed by the predictability of our mistakes but encouraged that this very fact makes them useful for understanding what we face today.

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The rise in population and pollution, the acceleration of technology, the concentration of wealth and power—all are runaway trains, and most are linked together. Population growth is slowing, but by 2050 there will still be 3 billion more on earth. We may be able to feed that many in the short run, but we’ll have to raise less meat (which takes ten pounds of food to make one pound of food), and we’ll have to spread that food around. What we can’t do is keep consuming as we are. Or polluting as we are. We could help countries such as India and China industrialize without repeating our mistakes. But instead we have excluded environmental standards from trade agreements. Like sex tourists with unlawful lusts, we do our dirtiest work among the poor.

If civilization is to survive it must live on the interest, not the capital, of nature. Ecological markers suggest that in the early 1960s, humans were using about 70 per cent of nature’s yearly output; by the early 1980s, we’d reached 100 per cent; and in 1999, we were at 125 per cent. Such numbers may be imprecise, but their trend is clear—they mark the road to bankruptcy.

Civilizations fall quite suddenly—the House of Cards effect—because as they reach full demand on their ecologies, they become highly vulnerable to natural fluctuations. The most immediate danger posed by climate change is weather instability causing a series of crop failures in the world’s breadbaskets. Droughts, floods, fires, and hurricanes are rising in frequency and severity.
The pollution surges caused by these—and by wars—add to the gyre of destruction. Medical experts worry that nature may swat us with disease: billions of overcrowded primates, many sick, malnourished, and connected by air travel, are a free lunch waiting for a nimble microbe.

There’s a saying in Argentina that each night God cleans up the mess the Argentines make by day. This seems to be what our leaders are counting on. But it won’t work. Things are moving so fast that inaction itself is one of the biggest mistakes. The 10,000 year experiment of the settled life will stand or fall by what we do, and don’t do, now.

The great advantage that we have, our best chance for avoiding the fate of past societies, is that we know about those past societies. We can see how and why they went wrong. *Homo sapiens* has the information to know itself for what it is: an Ice Age hunter only half-evolved towards intelligence; clever but seldom wise.

We have the tools and the means to share resources, clean up pollution, dispense basic health care and birth control, set economic limits in line with natural ones. If we don’t do these things now, while we prosper, we will never be able to do them when times get hard. Our fate will twist out of our hands. And this new century will not grow very old before we enter an age of chaos and collapse that will dwarf all the dark ages in our past.

Now is our last chance to get the future right.