

“Before I go on with this short history let me make a general observation—the test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function. One should, for example, be able to see that things are hopeless and yet be determined to make them otherwise. This philosophy fitted on to my early adult life, when I saw the improbable, the implausible, often the “impossible” come true.”

- F. Scott Fitzgerald¹

Chapter 1: Introduction

“This is the best time ever to be alive.”

“The world is going to hell.”

To understand America, and to some extent the rest of the world, one first needs to understand why both of these competing narratives are being used simultaneously to describe our turbulent present time. That understanding is the goal of this book.

These two narratives are significant in part because they have shaped our country over the dramatic events of the last two decades. The shifting fault lines between the two camps have been responsible for creating some of the cracks we now see appearing in democracy. The clash between the narratives manifests itself in the past few elections, the increased polarization of our culture, the news that we watch, the issues we discuss in person with friends and families or with thousands of strangers on social media. It molds our future, by prioritizing what we invest in, teach our children, and what we think about as we envision our future lives.

Archimedes once said, “*Give me a lever long enough and a fulcrum on which to place it, and I shall move the world.*” These two narratives are the fulcrums and levers in our toolbox as we respond to existential crises like climate change and the pandemic, along with other pressing domestic and global priorities.

This book invites us to hold both these ideas in our mind at the same time. This is not a traditional compare and contrast approach, in which we test each against the other to find one winner. Instead, the discussion herein suggests a synthesis of these views, however paradoxical.

Let me save you some reading and suspense. This book finds that *both* of these very different and competing narratives are true, and are almost equally experienced across nearly all of the very diverse people of the United States, but in different ways.

¹ 1936 February, Esquire, The Crack-Up: A desolately frank document from one for whom the salt of life has lost its savor by F. Scott Fitzgerald, Start Page 41, Quote Page 41, Column 1, Esquire Inc., Chicago, Illinois. (Esquire archive at classic.esquire.com)

This is a very complex and nuanced idea that flies in the face of standard sense-making, especially in the Western world. Psychologist Richard Farson reminds us that Aristotle still quietly shapes our thinking here: *“We think in terms of categories. We think that A cannot be Not A. So while Asians, who were not influenced as much by Aristotle, can accept the co-existence of opposites, that love and hate, good and bad, right and wrong, can exist together in the same act or moment – Westerners have to choose.”*²

As a result of this bias, the existence of this contradiction makes us question if how we see the world is true and effective. If one was true and the other isn't, it would be terrifying to the adherents of one camp or the other, because that group of people would have to re-orient their view of world to some new camp. But in this case, the outcome is troubling to *all*, because we all have to re-orient, and there is no one “right” alternative to which we can seek shelter. We need to find or make some new ground on which to stand.

It would be far easier (and more popular) to adopt one, and rail against the other. That is the modus operandi of our time. We live in a confusing time, and face many pressing concerns that demand our attention. In times like this, it is hard to strain that attention further by stepping back and take a fresh look at the whole of a situation. It requires concentration, and most of the time we don't have the discretionary brains cells to do that. When the whole of the situation means considering two opposing ideas as valid at the same time takes even more. Which is why this chapter starts with the F. Scott Fitzgerald quote. But in psychology, the condition of holding two opposing ideas in your mind at the same time is known as cognitive dissonance. Therefore, this isn't going to be an easy journey, but it is an important one, if we want to understand our times, the people around us, and ourselves more accurately. And it is critical if we are trying to plan for a better future.

Let us briefly introduce each of the two narratives, as well as the fundamental underlying narrative they share, and the irony at the heart of the two conflicting stories:

Shared underlying foundation: The Progress Narrative - is based on the primacy of science and technology (and to a lesser extent democracy and capitalism) that have resulted in amazing human achievements over hundreds and thousands of years in an historical march of human progress. Some landmark icons of this narrative are the technological achievements of agriculture, the wheel, writing, the Enlightenment, the industrial age, the computer and the Internet.

Narrative 1: The world is going to hell. This “collapse” narrative is a popular one, built upon the fear of losing and squandering the advantages conveyed by the Progress Narrative. The “collapse” narrative is that, notwithstanding the achievements of the past, we, or someone, has screwed this up, or is just about to do that.

Narrative 2: This is the best time ever to be alive. This is a far less popular narrative that is typically confined to a few scholars, technological utopians, some perennial optimists, and a scattering of the naïve amongst us. The “pinnacle” narrative is that we are at the height of human achievement, having solved many of the world's historical problems, greatly

² Farson, Richard (editor). Making the Invisible Visible: Essays by the Fellows of the International Leadership Forum, Western Behavioral Sciences Institute, 2009

improved most of the others, and getting better at the job every day. Ironically, this camp, too, embraces the narrative of human progress, but they see that progress as continuing and even accelerating.

Shortly we will expand on each of these, and discuss how all three narratives are driven largely by how we create and adopt technologies, and how human nature influences those acts.

We are not just the helpless victims here of external affairs foisted upon us. This will not be a story where we point the finger (just) at unethical tech companies, illicit information agents of countries aligned against us, or at failures of our political leaders. Surely that's at work, and we'll discuss those, but those are known forces, covered extensively elsewhere, and being worked.

Instead, throughout this book we'll³ focus on an unknown bigger part of the problem; one that is not being worked on. We - individually and collectively - are both creating the technologies that define our modern environmental niche, and acting out the behaviors that cause this irony. The finger is pointed at us. We are the cause and effect of these challenges. But I will show that we are the solution.

Thus, we have The Great Irony of Technology:

The Great Irony of Technology (GIT): technology advances have allowed most people on the planet live better than ever before, objectively, (and indeed better than royals in the not-too-distant past), many if not most people feel worse off, subjectively, also primarily because of technology

When I make this statement, it usually causes immediate visceral and often negative responses. I've rarely met people who accept these points with equanimity; usually one part of the equation, or both, are somehow troubling. And often: 'how are you measuring that, where's your data? That can't be the right thing!' (I'll share my thinking on that topic in detail in chapter 6)

Those are some of the most common responses I get, but then, based on their specific experience, I'll get additional pushback. People of color point out the situation in immigration, discrimination, police profiling, systemic racism, and violence experienced by non-whites. Globalists talk about the parts of the world that are still suffering. Feminists of all genders point out the pay gap, glass ceiling, and the third and now fourth shift that women are forced to endure. Policy wonks and econometricians point out that underneath the sometimes rosy GDP growth are populations that are seeing real declines, that are made invisible by the extreme growth of affluence in the growing income inequality. People want to find the exception to show how this Irony cannot be.

But the main point above is that most people are better off, and feel worse. Not that ALL people are. Finding exceptions misses the point, which is a stark one. If there are exceptions – say, people

³ I see this book as a shared reader between me, the writer, you the reader, as well as the other writers and thinkers we'll pull in, as well as all of human who are in the same collective boat of this present world we live in. So the use of "I" is adopted to explain a personal stance or perspective, but in cases like this where the discussion is about a mutual journey or 'co-thinking', "we" is used.

who are worse off objectively now – and we fix that, they end up in the pot with most people. They're now doing as well as everybody else, and they *feel* they've gone even further backwards. How is that progress?

If the GIT hypothesis is true, then we will have to reconceive humans' use of technology very soon, otherwise, the accelerating technological innovation could result in an accelerating *decline of quality of life* driven not by a decline in real human progress, but by the *perceived* effects of technology on the human condition.

It's worth looking at the exceptions, though, so that we can see how the hypothesis holds up. Does GIT apply to 90%, 50%, 10% of the US, or of the globe? That's why we spend significant time in this book cutting across American demographics – to understand the ground truth of this Irnoy, from many perspectives.

What does this mean for you, the reader?

This means we are going to do a lot of hard work and intense thinking, examining the available narratives offered by proponents of each camp, and then looking through the data they put forth in support of each of these deeply held beliefs. We are going to come out the other side of this exercise asking new questions that can help us understand how to convert yesterday's "zero sum" settings for narratives into tomorrow's "positive sum" foundations for future human flourishing.

Knowing ahead of time what we are going to find - that both are true - why take the journey? Can't we just send or read some tweet, and move on to the next cat video, political scandal, or celebrity drama?

It turns out that the journey IS the destination because the enhanced awareness of narrative influence itself enables us to function more ethically and effectively in an ever more complex interaction landscape. We need to separate the wheat from the chaff, and understand the situation we are in. THAT is human progress.

Edison noted that finding 2,000 ways not to make a light bulb helped him understand how to make one that worked. Similarly, consider for a moment the work of Thomas Selfridge. In 1870 he was tasked with taking the most sophisticated technology in the world and a large team of the most proven people to chart the route of the Panama Canal – then arguably the most complex task ever set out to be tackled by humanity.⁴ After three years and three arduous expeditions, Selfridge had still not found an acceptable route. Along the way, there had been a significant commitment of time, capital, and loss of life. By most standard measures we would have judged his work an abysmal failure. Later, Selfridge judged this work his life's proudest achievement. As he reported to his superiors, "the field of research is considerably reduced and the problem narrowed."ⁱ

In his book Growing Down, Jaco Hamman says that we have acknowledged that 'smart' technologies have changed our relationships with ourselves, loved ones, and other people. He notes that perhaps these changes are irrevocable.ⁱⁱ But he challenges us to examine these

⁴ My scientist friends like to challenge statements like this, but pointing out other ambitious projects like the Mayan's Aguada Fénix, Egyptian's Gyza Pyramid complex, China's Great Wall, or the Apollo moon missions. Fair enough, but I encourage one to read the case that McCullough makes for Panama, in The Path Between the Seas.

changes, and to sort through the noise of messages, advertisements, and screen time to find some wisdom. To embrace our humanity in this world of technology.

In undertaking this courageous and potentially transformative journey that Hamman encourages us to take, we – you the reader, and me, can begin to co-create a new future, a new set of narratives, that can function to help us create opportunities for more widespread human flourishing in this time of rapidly accelerating technology and change.

Let's take the next step in that journey, together.

Part 1 includes a discussion on how narratives operate, and how they both serve to help us navigate the world but also as a veil that distorts and obfuscates. Chapter 3 investigates the common narrative of human progress. This level of detail may not be for everybody; I include these chapters because they color how I see modern narratives at work, but feel free to skip this if you are a 'bottom line' person. Chapters 4 and 5 dive deeper into assessing the two competing narrative that make up The Great Irony of Technology, while chapter 6 sets out to discuss the methodological issues and nuance that go into measuring human quality of life.

In Part 2, we pivot to examine the lived experience of many different cross-sections of the American people, and hold up our measuring cards to examine the ground truth of their quality of life. Some readers might want to skip ahead to the analysis and solutions, but given the push-back I get on my claim, I think it is critical for me to articulate exactly the data I consider when making it.

Part 3 looks at the causes of the Irony. It is here I lay the blame for Irony squarely at the feet of technology, and with the people who use it.

Part 4 considers all of the ground we've covered so far to begin to lay out the path forward, one that leads to a more flourishing future for the planet.

It's my hope that you gain even a fraction of the insights and understanding of the modern world that I've developed after spending more than the last decade researching and think about this.

ⁱ McCullough

ⁱⁱ Cite Jaco Hamman