2nd Place Winner, Yale Undergraduate Essay Contest
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Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and more recently Yuval Noah Harari, have lamented the advent of agriculture. How happy was our species when we roamed the wild, without the stresses and carcinogens and—god forbid—personal hygiene of today!

Sociologically, this ultra-nostalgic sort makes some valid points. Naturalistic arguments have some merit in understanding how we can best arrange our lives in the present.

Yet neither the conservative, nor the progressive, nor even Rousseau truly wishes to return to this state of nature. This is not because we've grown soft in our luxury, but because our luxuries today tend towards the genuinely good. I am grateful that I was born without the worries of child mortality rates, that I can sample Thai and Indian and Italian cuisines, and that a Yale education today can provide more intellectual enrichment than has ever previously been possible.

We are living in the best age there has ever been, and tomorrow will be even better.

But do not confuse me for a proponent of unfettered progress, though I am a progressive. Society and progress are evolutionary, and the products of this evolution tend to be good by the simple law that the more beneficial something is, the more likely it is to be culturally reproduced. Quite a lot of what we reproduce preys on our poor sense of what is good for ourselves, but in general I have faith that the future will indeed be bright.

Yet evolution is built on heaps of the dead. Species progress because they produce thousands of stillbirths for each positive mutation. Evolution benefits the next generation, not our own. The agricultural revolution was a mistake for its inventors, many of whom suffered the earliest cases of spine overuse injuries and malnutrition. The first explorers were the victims of scurvy, the first animals in space were willingly executed by our species. Yet for all of those miseries, I am today grateful. Our world is better for each of them.

As a student of history, I've struggled with this miserable past. As a utilitarian (but not a pure consequentialist, an equivalency which is far too often assumed), I derive my morality from a principle fairly close to the golden rule. Yet the most unresolvable piece component of utilitarianism is its lack of temporality. Should we seek to invest in future generations or reap the rewards of our harvests today? Though it would be selfish to strip the earth bare for our own generation's benefit, the Soviets were clearly just as wrong to only produce more machinery to fuel their industrial economy. If no one ever takes for oneself, then our labor would all be wasted.

The only solution I have been able to find is that we simply owe to the future to leave a world better than the one we found. We ought not live in wasteful opulence at the expense of our children, but neither should we endure misery for their sakes. Evolution, in our hands, does not need to be a random destructive process, but should be controlled to benefit both the living and those yet to inherit life.

The question at hand seems to me to be badly phrased. The conservative today yells stop at transgender rights, the leftist shouts it at perceived imperialism. Even if random evolution should be avoided, history cannot be simply stopped, nor can culture be completely calcified, though the Amish and Haredi have come close.

What we need is not brand labels of conservative and liberal, leftist and rightist, attached to absurd notions of keeping some parts of society the same and others different while only conscious about one half of the equation.

We need consciousness, a generation of free thinkers ready to evaluate independently which new developments are positive and which are harmful, which traditions preserve our freedoms and which have atrophied. We need not to stop our cultural evolution, but to more democratically take its reins.

Consider my two favorite institutions: Major League Baseball and the university. Major League Baseball is currently run by the most aggressive commissioner in history, Rob Manfred. He has rolled out multiple major changes to the very fabric of the game, eliminating long-standing traditions which I and thousands of fellow fans considered crucial to the integrity of baseball. I will one day lament to my children the National League's adoption of the designated hitter and will shake my head in memory of the good old days when a pitcher could throw a complete game.

Yet by then, baseball will not be just my own sport—it will be theirs as well. The game I grew up watching was different from that of my parents, and many new rules (the challenge system, for instance) are genuine improvements. The players are different and will always be different each year, as will the fans.

I write this as perhaps the biggest innovation in recent memory is set to take effect. The automatic balls-strikes system will override one of the most consistently-human parts of baseball: the umpires. On this change, fellow baseball fans are deeply divided, yet I've come to accept it. Baseball next year will be different, but I will love it all the same.

Instead of trying to stop change, we should seek to best control it. Baseball should not be ruled only by ticket sales and large-scale owners, but ought to have a public stake for those who are most emotionally invested in it. The United Kingdom has found the right balance: they have a Minister for Sport, tasked with representing the public interest in their sports. Thus neither the iconoclasm of profit-driven owners nor the conservatism of die-hards can derail the public good offered by our beloved sports.

The university is surprisingly similar, in need of changes yet dominated by insular faculty departments and administrators all looking out for their individual interests. One of its most glaring insufficiencies is its dearth of conservative professors. Yet hiring more conservatives would fit neither category of conservative nor liberal; it would not be a maintenance of the status quo nor in the immediate interest of any leftist. It's not a question of right or left; it's a question of better or worse, healthier or unhealthier.

But the university needs more innovative solutions to its woes as well. It stands as an oligarchy of faculties, dangerously separated from the American psyche. Disciplines advance such insular thought

today and so seek to preserve their own funding that they are blind to the disgust with which much of America now views them. I love the university, and I would love to have the luxury to yell “stop!” at the changes which even now occur, but change is necessary. As with baseball, I am not the only stakeholder, and both academia and I must open ourselves up to quite novel innovations.

Change is ever present, and has been since the first bacterium died of a bad mutation. We’ve reached a point in our own intellectual development, though, where we can finally choose the changes we want. History is a river which even Hoover’s engineers would be unable to dam. It is our job not to stop the river, but to choose the direction of its course.

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Ben Rosenthal is a senior at Yale from New York City and is pursuing a BA in History and a Certificate in Ancient Egyptian. A fellow of the Buckley Institute and an active member of the Yale Political Union, he has most recently served as the 181st Chairman of the Independent Party, the oldest party at Yale, dating back to 1934. His current thesis research focuses on the first modern atlas and its role in the development of borders and the nation state. Ben also plays catcher for Yale Club Baseball and is involved in many artistic endeavors at Yale, having won the Lohmann and Van Sinderen Prize for Undergraduate Printing and currently making stained glass windows for Morse College.