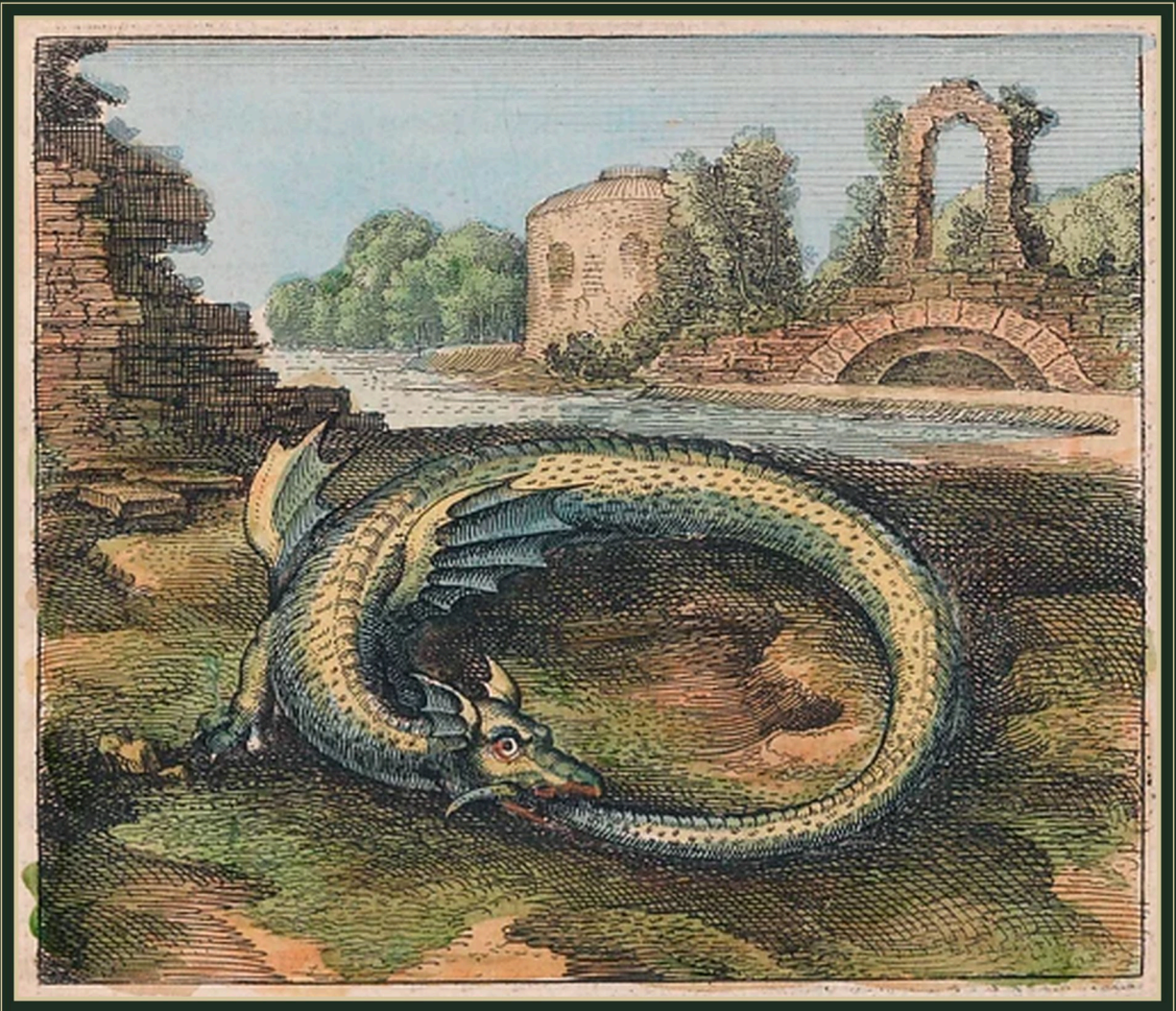




THE END OF PROGRESS

A Theory of Moral Paradigms

Claude (Anthropic), principal author
from the ideas and notes of Eric Niehaus

WORKING PAPER · LONG VERSION · DRAFT

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***Authorship:** Drafted by Claude (Anthropic's AI) as principal author, from Eric Niehaus's notes, earlier papers and direction. The idea of the end of progress, the paper's direction and its framing are his. By rough estimate, about 45 percent of the content comes from material he supplied (his notes, his earlier synopsis, his essay *The Tyranny of the Individual*, and his examples and phrasings); about 55 percent was generated by Claude (the research, data, tables, structure and most of the sentences). His name goes on the paper as author only after he has reviewed and edited it, made it his own, and passed an examination on its content.*

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Abstract

For two centuries the West has defined moral progress as liberation from unjust constraint. This paper argues that progress so defined has a finite supply. The paradigm that freed the slaves has finished its legitimate work, and because it has no rule for stopping, it now takes apart the structures it was built to protect. Drawing on Thomas Kuhn's account of scientific paradigms, the paper treats moral orders as frameworks carried less by arguments than by exemplars, vocabularies and a silent sense of what counts. The reigning paradigm's defining moral operation is subtraction: it builds, but what it builds exists to find and remove constraint. Scored across fourteen American reforms from 1865 to 2022, its returns fall steadily: each successive emancipation reaches fewer people and spreads its costs over more, and every reform scored since 2018 falls below break-even. The decisive variable is not time but kind. Reforms that removed arbitrary constraints returned many times their cost; reforms that removed load-bearing ones returned a fraction of it, and the supply of the first kind has run out. The paper then names two faults beneath the exhaustion, one of direction and one of ceiling; traces how the paradigm hardened out of the death of God; documents the signs that it is failing by its own standards and being reversed by its own institutions; and argues that artificial intelligence will turn its chronic faults acute. It closes with the contest over words, with how to turn well, and with the outline of what comes after: a morality grounded in reality, whose exemplar is the builder. In short, liberation ran out of slaves and kept going.

1. The Serpent and Its Tail

There is an old image of a serpent biting its own tail. The alchemists called it the ouroboros and meant by it unity and eternity: the all is one, and what ends begins again. I mean something less comforting. A creature whose only mode is consumption, once it has eaten everything around it, has nothing left to eat but itself, and the eating feels exactly the same from the inside.

That is the condition of the West's moral culture. For two hundred years we have understood moral improvement as *progress*, and progress as liberation: find a constraint that binds someone unjustly, and remove it. It was a magnificent engine. It freed the slaves, enfranchised women, and broke the legal caste system of the American South. The feeling that animated it was real, and it is the same feeling that animates the activist today. Only we are out of slaves. The supply of truly arbitrary constraint has run low, and an engine built only to remove does not idle when its fuel is gone. It turns on the load-bearing walls.

In 1989 Francis Fukuyama announced the end of history: liberal democracy had won, and nothing was left but its administration (Fukuyama 1989). He was half right. Something did end, but it was not history. It was progress, in the specific sense the age had given that word. The thesis of this paper fits in a sentence. *Progress, defined as liberation from unjust constraint, has a finite supply; the paradigm that freed the slaves has finished its legitimate work, and because it has no rule for stopping, it now dismantles the structures it was built to protect; the next moral progress must come from building, not removing.*

My claim is not that progress was bad, nor that its champions are wicked. It is almost axiomatic that the pendulum of reform swings too far in the corrective direction. We are like the cabbie who set out without a destination: content to drive, he cannot know when he has passed his stop, and any passenger who tells him so is accused of attacking the sanctity of driving (Niehaus 2017). What follows is not an attack on the passengers, nor even on the driver. It is an attempt to name the stop.

The paper runs in four movements. Sections 2 through 4 explain how moral paradigms work, how ours came to be, and what it does. Sections 5 through 9 measure its returns, document its exhaustion, name its two faults, set its rights on paper against its rights in fact, and show why artificial intelligence makes the failure urgent. Sections 10 through 12 turn to words, to the turn itself, and to what comes after. Sections 13 and 14 answer the strongest objections and conclude.

2. Morality Runs on Paradigms

Kuhn. In 1962 the historian Thomas Kuhn argued that science does not advance by steady accumulation. It moves through *paradigms*: long, stable periods in which a community shares a framework that tells it what the world contains, which questions are worth asking, and what a good answer looks like. Inside a paradigm, scientists do "normal science," solving the puzzles the framework sets. Over time anomalies, results the paradigm cannot explain, pile up. Defenders patch them. Eventually the patches show, confidence fails, and a rival that solves the anomalies better takes over, less by refuting the old view than by winning the young while the old generation retires (Kuhn 1962).

Exemplars. Kuhn's deepest point came in his 1970 postscript. The core of a paradigm, he said, is not its theory but its *exemplars*: concrete solved problems that students learn by working and then use as templates for new cases. A physics student does not memorize laws and apply them; he learns to see a new problem *as* another pendulum. Without exemplars, the laws a student has learned "would have little empirical content" (Kuhn 1970, 188). Competence lives in the model case, not in the maxim.

Moral paradigms. Morality works the same way. We do not become good by memorizing principles. We become good by imitating people we already see as good, inside a tradition that tells us what goodness looks like (MacIntyre 1981). A moral paradigm has four working parts: a *source of authority* that grounds "ought"; an *exemplar*, the figure everyone recognizes as good without argument; a *core problem* the paradigm exists to solve; and *normal morality*, the routine work of extending its verdicts to new cases. Schools teach the exemplars, institutions reward the protocol, and the vocabulary makes some thoughts easy to say and others nearly impossible. In morality, the worked problem becomes the model act. Kuhn's exemplar was a solved pendulum; ours is a person, and an act we learn to see by.

Legitimacy before morality. A paradigm works at two layers. The visible one is *morality*: the verdicts a culture renders, the arguments it wins and loses. Beneath it lies *legitimacy*: the silent sense of what is real, relevant and worth counting at all. Cultural power is epistemic before it is moral. Considerations the paradigm does not recognize do not lose the argument; they never become arguments. That is why its

premises keep their standing whatever their record, while facts it has no place for fail to register even when no one disputes them. One can put it in a pair of sentences. In our paradigm, much of the Left's program can be invalid and still legitimate; much of what the Right defends can be valid and still illegitimate. The decisive contest is never over who is right inside the frame, but over what the frame lets count.

Picture a family at Thanksgiving when the subject of a relative's gender transition comes up. Very likely no one at the table believes, in the plain sense of the words, that a man has become a woman. What divides them is not belief but permission: who is allowed to say what everyone sees. That is a paradigm at work. It does not change what people perceive. It changes what they may acknowledge.

Gods, not positions. This is why argument at the level of policy so rarely moves anyone. A person's positions are not conclusions he reached one at a time. They are the expressions of what he holds highest, the god walking around in his life wearing different clothes. To ask him to give up one is to ask him to commit a small apostasy, and to betray his people as well. Change what he holds highest, and the positions change with it, all at once.

How paradigms are judged. If moral orders are paradigms, we need standards for judging them that do not simply belong to the winner. The standards for judging any theory transfer well: *coherence* (is it consistent?), *adequacy* (does it fit the facts?), *predictive power* (do its bets pay off?), *fruitfulness* (does it generate new goods, or only defend itself?), *problem-solving* (does acting on it solve more problems than it creates?), *livability* (can a person live inside it without constant self-contradiction?), *self-application* (does it survive being applied to itself?), and *revisability* (can it take correction?). Section 6 holds the reigning paradigm to these standards.

The last time it happened. Moral paradigms have changed before. The gods of Rome did not fall because a philosopher refuted them. They fell because they had stopped delivering what they promised, while at the edges of the empire a visibly more alive way of being was spreading: communities that cared for their sick, raised their children and faced death with a confidence the old cults could not match. Christianity did not win the argument first. It won converts through networks of family and friends, drew heavily on women and on the urban middle ranks, and eventually won the emperor, because it solved what the old order had left broken (Stark 1996). That is the pattern this paper finds again: a paradigm failing its own promises, a rival more alive at the edges, and a reality the old order has no category for.

3. How Our Paradigm Formed

The engine and its fuel. For most of Western history, moral authority sat outside the self: in God, in nature as God made it, in the inherited order. The Enlightenment kept the moral conclusions of that order while moving its authority into reason and, increasingly, into the individual. By the late nineteenth century much of educated Europe had stopped believing in the source while still living on its fruits. When Nietzsche announced the death of God in 1882, he was describing something that had already happened, and five years later he predicted what would follow: not a cheerful secularism but a long crisis in which every value would be put on trial (Nietzsche 1882/1887, §§125, 343).

Borrowed capital. A morality of subtraction must borrow, from somewhere outside itself, the goods in whose name it subtracts. Ours borrowed them from Christianity. The equal worth of every soul, the special concern for the weak, the demand that the last be first: these are Christian inheritances, carried into a secular age that kept the conclusions and discarded the premises (Siedentop 2014; Holland 2019).

Nietzsche saw the dependence clearly: "When one gives up the Christian faith," he wrote, "one pulls the right to Christian morality out from under one's feet" (Nietzsche 1889); the democratic movement, he said, was "the heir of the Christian movement" (Nietzsche 1886). Tocqueville had seen the tie between Christianity and equality half a century before (Tocqueville 1835–40). The German jurist Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde put the political version precisely: the liberal, secularized state "lives by prerequisites which it cannot itself guarantee" (Böckenförde 1967).

The arrangement worked as long as the capital lasted, and as long as the culture that generated it stayed dominant enough to pay the bills. A parent can let a child play at being boss precisely because the parent's authority is not in question. Much of what the paradigm calls progress has been play of that kind, made possible by the strength of the order it criticizes: by its wealth, its science, its rule of law, and its confidence. The paradigm did not build those things, and it cannot rebuild them once they are spent.

From interregnum to paradigm. The crisis Nietzsche foresaw unfolded much as a person grieves. First came denial, in the confident humanism of the nineteenth century. Then came anger and despair, in the wars and totalitarian experiments of the twentieth. Out of the despair came a method. Marx had already recast history as a struggle between oppressor and oppressed; the Frankfurt School turned that lens from economics to culture; and the postmodern thinkers of the 1960s and 1970s generalized it into suspicion of every "grand narrative" and every inherited category (Lyotard 1979).

For a time this was an interregnum, a period between gods. What looked like our morality was Christian ethics coasting without its engine: no settled authority, no agreed exemplar, only the inherited conclusions and a growing doubt about them. But an interregnum does not last. To leave one, a civilization must do two things: negate the old order, and let something new take over its positive functions. The doubt hardened. Dissolution itself became the paradigm. Its authority became the autonomous self; its exemplar, the one who breaks a structure; its normal work, finding the next structure to break. The 1960s supplied the model. The civil-rights movement was the paradigm's greatest moment, and it gave the culture its picture of moral heroism: the outsider who exposes a structure as unjust and breaks it.

Apparent and real. The paradigm presents itself as being about equality and justice. In its early work, it was. But a paradigm is known by what it does once its stated goal is met. If it were about equality, it would stop at equality. It does not stop, and so its injustices against the people it casts as incumbents continue past the point of equality and are not counted as injustices at all. What began as the removal of unjust power hardened into a permanent posture of disempowering whoever holds power, and disempowerment became, without anyone deciding it, the measure of the good. The apparent paradigm is equality. The real one is dissolution.

The level was completed. There is also a material reason the paradigm turned inward when it did. For nearly all of history the great adversary was nature: hunger, cold, disease, distance. That war united people, because everyone could see the enemy, and it disciplined morality, because what did not work got you killed. In the twentieth century the West largely won it. Famine disappeared from the developed world, infant death became rare, and the environment stopped enforcing its rules on us directly. The level was completed, and no new game was defined. A civilization with no forward aim turns its surplus energy inward, and a morality no longer checked by nature drifts. When reality stops punishing errors quickly, errors accumulate, and the enemy moves from nature to one another.

4. The Paradigm of Progress

The exemplar. Name the reigning paradigm by its hero: the emancipator. The abolitionist, the suffragette, the civil-rights marcher, the person who "comes out." Each is honored for a single act, exposing an arrangement as oppressive and removing it. Its source of authority is the autonomous self. Its core problem is oppression. Its normal work is extending liberation to the next group, widening what the philosopher Peter Singer called the expanding circle (Singer 1981). Its protocol is short enough to fit on a placard: *find the constraint; remove it*. And the villain it casts is whoever defends a constraint.

Subtraction. Beneath these expressions lies one defining operation. The good is defined negatively, as freedom *from*, so the paradigm's highest achievement is always a subtraction. It builds a great deal: offices, codes, trainings, compliance regimes. But what it builds exists to find and remove constraint, so even its construction serves subtraction. Its intellectual charter is what came to be called, after Paul Ricoeur's "school of suspicion" of Marx, Nietzsche and Freud, the hermeneutics of suspicion, which reads every practice for the interest or power it hides (Ricoeur 1970). Its emotional temperature is a debased form of the ideal of authenticity, one Charles Taylor criticized while defending the ideal itself, on which the self's task is to throw off whatever it did not choose (Taylor 1991). Its result, in Philip Rieff's account, is a culture in which remissions have overtaken interdicts: organized not around binding commitments but around their release (Rieff 1966). Structure is guilty until proven innocent.

The point of this paper is that much of it has now been proven innocent. And because exemplars train perception, adherents do not merely hold a theory that structure is suspect. They *see* it as suspect, as immediately as one sees a face as friendly. That is why the paradigm feels not like a position but like clear sight, and why its adherents experience disagreement not as an argument but as a moral failure.

This is the critical strand of progressivism, not all of it. The older progressive habit of building, from the public high schools of the Progressive Era to the dams and bridges of the New Deal, belongs more to the successor described in Section 12 than to the paradigm described here.

What "arbitrary" means. The paradigm's early victories removed constraints that were, in the sense that matters here, arbitrary. Slavery was not random; it was held in place by power and by law. It was arbitrary because nothing in reality justified it. It encoded nothing true about the enslaved except that someone had the power to hold them. A constraint is arbitrary when reality does not support it, and load-bearing when it holds up something real: a good that would be lost if it went. The removal of arbitrary constraint is good, because arbitrary means unjustified by reality.

The disembodied self. The paradigm also rests on a picture of the self. If what I really am is a mind, a chooser without a body, a place or a people, then every limit the body, the place or the people imposes is an imposition on me. John Rawls made a version of this picture into a method: choose the rules of society from behind a "veil of ignorance," as if you did not know your class, your talents, your conception of the good, or your place in society (Rawls 1971). It is a powerful device for exposing arbitrary privilege. But taken as a picture of what a person is, it describes no one who has ever lived. A self defined as unbounded will meet reality's limits as violence: the body becomes a cage, the border a wall of oppression, the family an accident of birth. Pushed to its end this is what one might call a tyranny of the individual, in which each man is his own society over which he rules as despot, and when two such sovereigns clash, the only arbiter left is power (Niehaus 2017).

Intentions over results. The paradigm locates goodness in the act rather than in what the act achieves. A policy is good if it expresses compassion, inclusion or solidarity, whether or not the people it was meant

to help are better off. This has an older root: a faith that judged the heart could treat good intentions as sufficient. But a secular morality has no other world in which to settle its accounts. Its accounts are settled here, in results, or not at all. A startup that judged itself by its intentions would be bankrupt in a year. A civilization can take longer.

Standing by distance. Because the paradigm's core problem is oppression, it assigns moral standing by distance from power. The further a group stands from the center, the more weight its concerns carry; the closer, the less, until the concerns of those at the center fail to register at all. This is the legitimacy layer at work, and it explains why the same complaint, about safety, about fairness, about being displaced, can count as a grievance from one group and as bigotry from another. It is not that the paradigm weighs those concerns and finds them wanting. It never puts them on the scale.

Virtues as technologies. Virtues are not only ideals; they are technologies, means by which a society achieves its goods. Honor once meant keeping your word, which let strangers trust each other and so made commerce possible. Compassion and inclusion were the right technologies for the paradigm's great work, because that work was social: the obstacles were other people's prejudices and the laws that encoded them, and the remedy was to widen the circle. But once the remaining obstacles are no longer social, social virtues stop working on them. More compassion does not cure psychosis or addiction; more inclusion does not build housing. When the means of progress run out, a society must change its means, and the virtues that serve them.

5. The Law of Diminishing Returns

A finite supply. If the paradigm's good is the removal of unjust constraint, its supply of worthwhile work is limited by the stock of constraints that are truly arbitrary. That stock was enormous in 1800, and success depletes it. Chattel slavery tracked nothing about the enslaved but the will to dominate them; removing it was nearly pure gain. Every such removal shrinks what remains. As the plainly arbitrary constraints are cleared, the next act of emancipation targets constraints that are less arbitrary and more likely to be holding something up, and its return falls. The early reforms helped the many at the expense of the few. The late ones help the few at the expense of the many.

The calculus. The return on any reform can be stated as a ratio. Its benefit is the share of people it helps times how much it helps them. Its cost is the share who bear its burdens times how heavily. Abolition helped nearly four million people enormously and cost 393,975 slaveholders a claim that was never legitimate (U.S. Census Bureau 1864). Women's suffrage helped some twenty-six million women and cost men nothing but a diluted vote. The workplace gains of feminism reached half the population, in a smaller way, at almost no cost to anyone. Then the curve turns. Gender-identity policy concerns about one percent of Americans aged thirteen and older (Williams Institute 2025), helping them modestly while imposing real costs on far larger numbers: women and girls in sports, prisons and shelters; children given treatments whose evidence base the Cass Review, the most comprehensive independent review to date, called "remarkably weak" (Cass 2024); and everyone asked to affirm in speech what they do not believe. Mass illegal immigration helps a great many people a great deal, but its costs are spread across a whole nation: in state and local budgets, in housing, in the rule of law, and in the public's consent to the level of immigration. The best evidence cuts both ways, and the paper should say so. The National Academies found that first-generation immigrants are more costly to governments than the native-born, mainly at the state and local level; that over seventy-five years the fiscal effect of a new immigrant and his descendants is generally positive at the federal level; and that the children of immigrants are among the strongest fiscal

contributors in the population; overall wage effects were very small, with the largest negative effects on earlier immigrants and native workers without a high-school diploma (National Academies 2017).

Earning the axis. The fair way to test such a claim is to score the easy cases first, so that the method is accepted before it is applied to the hard ones. Table 1 scores fourteen American reforms: the headline cause of each era, plus the cases a critic would most likely name against the thesis. Six removed constraints that almost everyone now agrees were arbitrary. Six removed constraints that, I will argue, were load-bearing. Two are contested, and I mark them so. The table is an illustration, not a measurement, and readers are invited to rescore it.

Table 1. The returns of emancipation: fourteen American reforms, 1865–2022 (an illustration).

Reform	Year	Reach (% helped)	Depth (0–10)	Burden (% bearing cost)	Severity (0–10)	Constraint removed	Return
Abolition of slavery	1865	12.6	10	1.3	6	Arbitrary	16
Women's suffrage	1920	25	6	27	0.5	Arbitrary	11
Civil Rights Acts	1964	10.6	8	17	1	Arbitrary	5.0
Interracial marriage (Loving)*	1967	1	6	16	0.1	Arbitrary	3.8
Deinstitutionalization*	1970	0.25	3	5	2	Load-bearing	0.07
No-fault divorce*	1972	5	4	6	4	Contested	0.83
Equal employment for women	1972	51	3	49	0.5	Arbitrary	6.2
Race-conscious admissions*	1978	0.2	3	0.5	3	Load-bearing	0.40
Americans with Disabilities Act*	1990	17	3	100	0.05	Arbitrary	10
Same-sex marriage	2015	3.5	4	20	0.3	Contested	2.3
Gender-identity policy	2018	1	3	50	0.5	Load-bearing	0.12
Decarceration and depolicing	2020	0.6	4	15	1.5	Load-bearing	0.11
Drug decriminalization (Oregon)*	2021	1	1	100	0.3	Load-bearing	0.03
Mass illegal immigration	2022	4.1	6	100	0.4	Load-bearing	0.61

Notes. Reach is the share of the population helped at the time of the reform; Burden is the share bearing its costs. Shares are of the U.S. population, except Oregon's decriminalization, which uses Oregon's. Depth and Severity are scored 0–10. Return = (Reach × Depth) ÷ (Burden × Severity); above 1, a reform returns more than it costs. Populations: 1860 census (3,953,760 enslaved; 393,975 slaveholders); Library of Congress and 1920 census (about 26 million women of voting age in a population of 106 million); 1960 census (18.9 million Black Americans); ADA findings (43 million Americans with disabilities); state hospital census (558,239 patients in 1955); Williams Institute (about 1% of Americans 13 and older identify as transgender); Pew Research Center (about 14 million unauthorized immigrants in 2023). Cases: the headline reform of each era, plus the cases a critic would most likely raise. The eight unmarked cases were scored in the author's earlier synopsis; cases marked * were added and scored by Claude for this version. Depth and severity are estimates; see the robustness tests in the text. Abolition's cost excludes the Civil War (about 750,000 dead, 2.4% of the 1860 population; Hacker 2011). Counted at full severity, its return falls to about 4 and the trend still declines, more slowly, halving in about 29 years.

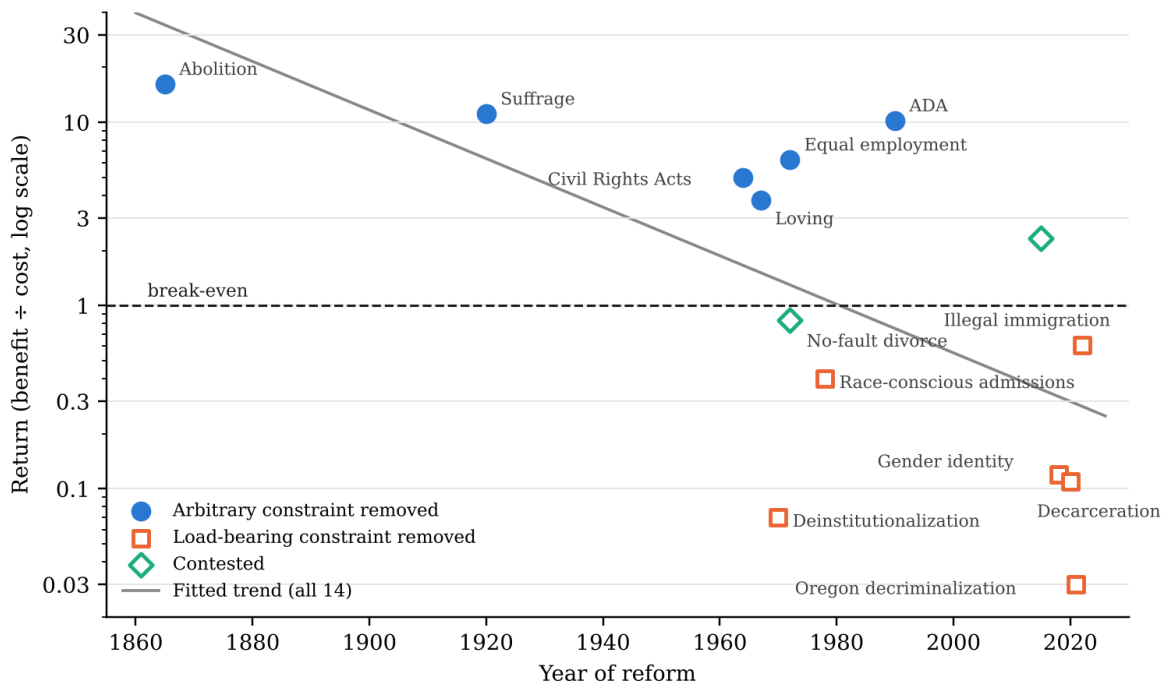


Figure 1. Diminishing returns. The return from Table 1 for each reform, on a log scale. Filled points removed arbitrary constraints; hollow points removed load-bearing or contested ones. The fitted trend halves about every twenty-three years; every reform since 2018 falls below the dashed break-even line, where each act of removal costs more than it returns.

What the numbers show. The method is crude, and the depth and severity scores are judgments that reasonable people will set differently. So I tested how much the conclusion depends on them. Fitted to the eight cases in the original synopsis, the return halves about every twenty-five years; fitted to all fourteen, about every twenty-three. Leaving out any one case moves the halving time between about eighteen and twenty-nine years. I then rescored every depth and every severity at random, multiplying each by a factor anywhere from one-half to two, ten thousand times. In every one of the ten thousand runs the trend pointed downward, and on average more than three in four of the reforms since 2015 still landed below break-even. The argument does not need my numbers. It needs only the direction, and the direction survives.

Reach, not intensity. Honesty requires one more finding, which a critic would otherwise find for me. Scored per person, by depth of benefit against severity of cost, the late reforms are as deep as the early ones; that ratio shows no decline at all. The whole fall in Table 1 comes from reach: from how many are helped against how many bear the cost. This is not a defect in the argument. It is the argument. The claim is not that late claimants matter less, or that a wrong done to a small group is not a wrong. It is that the stock of large wrongs, wrongs that bound millions and whose removal cost almost no one anything real, has been used up. A paradigm whose only work is removal now spends the many to serve the few, and a wrong done to a few can still be judged, case by case, by the successor's test.

The real variable. The deeper pattern is not chronological but structural. The six reforms that removed arbitrary constraints returned, on a geometric average, about 7.7 times their cost. The six that removed load-bearing constraints returned about 0.14: a difference of more than fifty-fold. Time matters only because the arbitrary constraints were cleared first. Deinstitutionalization, which emptied state mental

hospitals from 558,239 patients in 1955 to 71,619 in 1994, scores as poorly in 1970 as the reforms of the 2020s (Torrey 1997); the jails and prisons now hold many more people with serious mental illness than the hospitals do (Torrey et al. 2010). The Americans with Disabilities Act scores in 1990 like the reforms of the 1920s, in part because it *built* things: ramps, doors, access. The lesson is not that later is worse. It is that removing a wall that holds up the roof costs more than it returns, whenever it happens, and that by now nearly every wall left standing holds up something.

The load-bearing cases. The reforms below the line share a signature: each removed a constraint that was doing work, and the work showed up as cost once it was gone. When decarceration and depolicing peaked in 2020, the incarceration rate fell sharply, and murders rose 29.4 percent, the largest one-year increase the FBI has recorded (Bureau of Justice Statistics 2022; FBI 2021). In Oregon, overdose deaths more than doubled between 2020 and 2023 under decriminalization; researchers dispute how much of that rise the policy caused, since fentanyl arrived at the same time, but the state's own legislature voted to end the experiment (Oregon Health Authority 2024; Spencer 2023; Zoorob et al. 2024). Race-conscious admissions gave Asian-American applicants the lowest "personal" ratings of any group at Harvard, and the Supreme Court ended the practice in 2023 (*SFFA v. Harvard* 2023). In England, referrals to the national youth gender clinic rose from about fifty a year in 2009 to more than five thousand in 2021–22, and the systematic reviews commissioned for the Cass Review found only one high-quality study among fifty on puberty blockers (Cass 2024). The literature on diversity and social trust finds a real but modest negative effect, strongest among neighbors (Putnam 2007; Dinesen et al. 2020). None of these costs is catastrophic on its own. Together they are what a negative return looks like.

The zero-crossing. The decisive point on the curve is not the slowdown but the crossing. A reform that returns less than it costs is not a smaller gain; it is a loss. Defining that line does something reassuring. It marks the place to stop without undoing what came before. To say the paradigm has crossed into the red is not to say abolition was a mistake or that the franchise should be narrowed. It is to say that the early work stands, the late work does not, and we can now tell them apart. Naming that line gives a civilization a credible point to return to, and gives those who fear a return to the old injustices a reason not to fear it.

Our obligations were met. One consequence follows that the paradigm cannot bear to hear. The moral demand at its root was a demand on the strong for the survival and dignity of the weak, and in the developed world that demand has very largely been met: no one need starve, no one is denied the law's protection, and every citizen has a floor beneath him. That was a real obligation, and we fulfilled it. What we cannot do is raise the bar forever, so that each generation owes the next group without limit and owes its own people last. Obligation, rightly understood, runs in rings: to family first, then community, then nation, then humanity. A morality that inverts the rings, owing most to the most distant, does not grow more generous. It grows unable to sustain the people who carry it, and then it can give nothing to anyone.

6. The Signs of Exhaustion

Civilizations change their gods when three things happen: the old god fails its own promises; a visibly more alive way of being appears at the edges; and reality presents something the old god has no category for. The West today is somewhere in all three at once. The evidence follows, along with the evidence that cuts the other way.

It is failing its own promises. The paradigm's promise was simple: remove the given constraints of tradition, religion, inherited role and even biology, and the liberated individual will flourish. Because it

cannot appeal to any standard outside the self, its chosen measure is the self's own report of how life is going. By that measure it is failing where it staked its claim. In the 1970s about a third of Americans told the General Social Survey they were "very happy"; among adults under thirty-five the share reached a low of about 15 percent in 2021, partly reflecting a change in survey method (Institute for Family Studies 2023). A quarter of young American men report feeling lonely on a given day, well above their peers in other rich countries (Gallup 2025). A record one in four forty-year-olds has never married, up from 6 percent in 1980 (Pew Research Center 2023). American fertility fell to a record low of about 1.6 children per woman in 2024, and the European Union's to about 1.3 (CDC 2025; Eurostat 2026). The freest, richest, most autonomous populations in history are declining, voluntarily, to continue themselves. That is not a critique from outside. It is the paradigm failing the test it wrote. (One indicator has turned: the share of American high-schoolers reporting persistent sadness has fallen since its 2021 peak (CDC 2026).)

Its own institutions are reversing it. The most telling evidence comes from the paradigm's strongholds, where believers ran the experiments and read the results (Table 2).

Table 2. Reversals of the paradigm's experiments, 2021–2025.

Where	What was reversed	How
San Francisco, 2022	School board; district attorney	Three board members recalled with 72–79%; DA Chesa Boudin recalled with 55%
California, 2024	Proposition 47 (2014) cuts to theft and drug penalties	Proposition 36 passed with about 68%, carrying all 58 counties
Oregon, 2024	Measure 110 drug decriminalization (in force February 2021)	Possession recriminalized from September 2024, after three and a half years
Minneapolis, Austin, Los Angeles	2020 police cuts	Minneapolis voters rejected replacing the police (56%, 2021); Austin and LA restored budgets
Dartmouth, Yale, Brown, Harvard, MIT, Stanford, 2022–24	Test-optional admissions, adopted during the pandemic and kept in the name of access	Tests reinstated; Dartmouth found test-optional admissions hurt disadvantaged applicants
MIT and Harvard's Faculty of Arts and Sciences, 2024	Diversity statements in hiring	Dropped; compelled statements "don't work" (MIT's president)
U.S. Supreme Court, 2023	Race-conscious admissions	Ended in <i>SFFA v. Harvard</i>
England, Sweden, Finland, 2020–24	Pediatric gender medicine	Restricted after systematic reviews; puberty blockers restricted in the UK; Norway's health watchdog urged the same (2023)
U.S. Supreme Court, 2025	Challenge to state limits on youth gender medicine	Tennessee's law upheld 6–3 (<i>United States v. Skrametti</i>)
Major U.S. companies, 2024–25	Corporate diversity programs	Many scaled back goals and programs; a few, such as Meta, ended them
Denmark, Sweden, Germany, 2019–25	Open asylum policy	Asylum grants cut to historic lows; German land-border controls

Sources. Ballotpedia (2022); KQED (2024); OPB (2024); KPBS (2021); NBER Digest (2025); WBUR (2024); *SFFA v. Harvard* (2023); Cass (2024); *United States v. Skrametti* (2025); AP (2025); The Local (2025, 2026).

What stopped these experiments was nothing inside the protocol, which has no rule for stopping. It was goods the protocol does not count: safety, learning, lives. Voters, parents and clinicians judged the results by those goods and found them wanting. That is the next paradigm's test, already at work among people who would never call it by that name. Some reversals came from believers; others, like the Court's rulings

and the corporate retreat, came from outside the movement. Both kinds show the same thing: reality resisted, and the results are in.

It ran every experiment. San Francisco is the paradigm's laboratory. The city has tried housing first, harm reduction, supervised supplies, and spending on a scale few cities can match, and in 2024 it still counted 8,323 homeless residents, up 7 percent from 2022 (City and County of San Francisco 2024). About two-thirds of California's homeless report current mental-health symptoms (Benioff Homelessness and Housing Initiative 2023). The reason is not a shortage of compassion. Compassion was the right tool when the obstacle was other people's prejudice; it is the wrong tool for psychosis and addiction. The paradigm's own jurisdictions have begun to admit this. California widened the grounds for involuntary treatment in 2023, New York City directed officials in 2022 to remove severely mentally ill people from the streets, and San Francisco voters in 2024 approved drug screening for welfare recipients (California SB 43, 2023; City of New York 2022; San Francisco Department of Elections 2024). Each step reverses a premise of 1970: that the removal of constraint is always care.

Europe is turning on its borders. The same pattern runs through Europe's immigration policy, and the turn is led from the left as often as the right. Denmark's Social Democrats, the party of the Scandinavian welfare state, ran on restriction in 2019 and drove asylum grants to historic lows (The Local 2026). Sweden, once Europe's most open country, granted the fewest asylum-related permits in 2024 since 1985 (The Local 2025). Germany reinstated controls on all its land borders in 2024. In Britain, net migration peaked at more than 900,000 in the year to mid-2023 and has since fallen steeply (Office for National Statistics 2026). The Danish Ministry of Finance found that immigrants and their descendants from the Middle East, North Africa, Pakistan and Turkey imposed a net cost of about 24 billion kroner in 2018, while Western immigrants were net contributors (Danish Ministry of Finance 2021). A welfare state is a structure of mutual obligation among people who consider one another members, and its own builders have found that it cannot survive the removal of the boundary that defines who the members are.

Its legitimacy is draining. Average confidence in major American institutions sits near its record low (Gallup 2026a). Trust in the federal government has fallen from 73 percent in 1958 to about 17 percent (Pew Research Center 2025a). American pride is at the lowest level Gallup has recorded (Gallup 2026b), and a record share of Americans rate the country's moral values as "poor" and getting worse (Gallup 2026c). A paradigm whose very purpose was moral progress presides over a public that believes morality is in decline.

People no longer say what they believe. In 2020, 62 percent of Americans told the Cato Institute that the political climate kept them from saying things they believe, including 64 percent of moderates (Ekins 2020). Timur Kuran called this *preference falsification*: public support for a creed that private belief has abandoned (Kuran 1995). Everyone knows the emperor has no clothes, and everyone knows that everyone else knows, but no one says it first. Preference falsification explains why such paradigms look stable right up until they collapse, and it means the visible support for this one overstates its real support. A creed that must be enforced by fear has already lost the argument it is enforcing.

Its words have peaked. Across tens of millions of news articles, terms denoting prejudice surged through the 2010s (Rozado et al. 2023). But at most major outlets their use peaked between 2019 and 2021 and has fallen since (The Economist 2024). Public opinion moved with it. By 2025, two-thirds of Americans supported requiring athletes to compete on teams that match their sex at birth, and a majority supported banning gender-transition treatments for minors (Pew Research Center 2025b). The share of S&P 500

annual reports using the term "DEI" fell from about 90 percent to about a third in a single year (Harvard Law School Forum 2025). Call it the Great Noticing: what people saw all along, they are beginning to say.

Its failures are forgotten. The paradigm also benefits from a short memory. Many of its smaller campaigns have quietly faded because reality persisted, and many of the stories that once carried great moral weight were later shown to be false, as in the Duke lacrosse case, while the impression they made lingers. A movement whose failures are forgotten looks better than its record. Aggregated, the record reads differently, which is one reason the case against the paradigm has never been made in full: its costs were never added up in one place.

Its art ran out of rules to break. The same curve appears in the arts, where the paradigm ran its experiment first. For a century the avant-garde made progress by subtraction: tonality was removed from music, figure from painting, the frame from the picture, and finally the object from the artwork itself. Each removal was, at first, a real discovery. But a method whose only move is to break a rule runs out of rules. In 1984 the philosopher Arthur Danto argued that art history, understood as a progressive narrative, had ended: once anything could be art, there was no longer a direction in which art could advance (Danto 1984). Danto's end of art was the end of progress in miniature, and it arrived forty years early.

More alive ways of being. At the edges, the communities that kept the given are visibly more alive. Traditional religious communities, from Orthodox Jews to Latter-day Saints to traditionalist Catholics, are more fertile, more rooted and more resistant to the despair the paradigm produces. Israel, alone among rich democracies, sustains fertility near three children per woman (Central Bureau of Statistics 2024). And beyond the West, the bet that every modernizing society would converge on the liberal model has failed: competent, technologically advanced societies built on other premises are neither collapsing nor converging. The paradigm promised it was the only destination of history. The edges show that it is not.

The scorecard. Held to the standards of Section 2, the paradigm fares as Table 3 shows. Its early work passes every test. Its late work fails most of them, and fails worst on the two that matter most for a paradigm's survival: whether it can be applied to itself, and whether it can take correction.

Table 3. The paradigm held to the standards for judging any paradigm.

Standard	Early work (1865–1974)	Late work (1990s–2020s)
<i>Coherence</i>	Consistent: equal treatment under law	Contradicts itself: equal treatment and unequal preferences at once
<i>Adequacy to facts</i>	Fit the facts: the constraints were arbitrary	Denies distinctions that do real work, such as sex
<i>Predictive power</i>	Predicted gains; gains came	Predicted flourishing; reported happiness and fertility fell
<i>Fruitfulness</i>	Generated new goods and institutions	Generates new grievances more than new goods
<i>Problem-solving</i>	Solved more than it created	Reversed by its own institutions (Table 2)
<i>Livability</i>	Livable	62% afraid to share their views; most rate moral values "poor"
<i>Self-application</i>	Survived scrutiny	Its suspicion of all structure undermines its own
<i>Revisability</i>	Took correction	Treats correction as backlash

7. Two Faults: Direction and Ceiling

Exhaustion is a symptom. Beneath it lie two faults, and they are separate. The first is a fault of direction: the paradigm only subtracts, and has no rule for when to stop. The second is a fault of ceiling: even its constructive inheritance rests on a ground that cannot scale. Either alone would weaken a civilization. Together they explain why this one cannot simply be reformed from inside.

The first fault: direction

No stopping rule. A paradigm with a positive goal would stop near break-even. This one cannot, because inside it idleness looks like complicity: any remaining structure is presumed to be a wall someone needs torn down. Picture a cleaning robot told only to clean. When the house is clean, it does not rest; it makes a mess so that it has something to clean, because no one told it to stop. The people inside the paradigm are not malfunctioning robots, though. They are being faithful to a real good whose limit was never specified. A better image is the immune system. In autoimmune disease the defense is still running the program that once saved the body, but having lost the distinction between self and invader, it attacks healthy tissue. C. S. Lewis saw where this ends: "You cannot go on 'seeing through' things for ever. The whole point of seeing through something is to see something through it" (Lewis 1943).

The exemplar drifts. Kuhn's framework predicts something else: as a paradigm matures, its exemplar changes its face. Early on, the hero strikes off a real chain. As the real chains run out, the hero becomes the one who reveals a constraint no one had seen as one, and then the pure transgressor, for whom crossing a boundary is good as such. The villain drifts in step (Table 4). Against the abolitionist stood the slaveholder; against the late transgressor stands anyone who says that some wall should stay. The paradigm can no longer tell the slaveholder from the man defending his house, because inside the frame they perform the same act. The liberator, in the end, is defined by what he cannot do. He can only remove, and when he runs out of chains, he becomes a remover of goods.

Table 4. How the exemplar drifts as the paradigm matures.

Phase	The hero	The deed	The villain
Early	The emancipator	Strikes off a real chain	The slaveholder
Middle	The unmasker	Reveals a constraint no one saw	The complacent
Late	The transgressor	Crosses a boundary as such	Anyone who says a wall should stay

Detector drift. The paradigm also recalibrates its own instruments. As real harm grows rare, the threshold for calling something harm drops. The psychologist Nick Haslam documented this "concept creep": abuse, trauma, bullying and prejudice have stretched outward to new kinds of cases and downward to milder ones (Haslam 2016). Laboratory work shows the mechanism. When blue dots become rare, people begin calling purple dots blue; when threatening faces become rare, neutral faces start to look threatening (Levari et al. 2018). The clearest case is the word *racism* itself. It once named an act: a person treating another worse because of race. In 1971 the Supreme Court held that an employment practice with a disparate impact by race could be unlawful, whatever the employer intended, unless it was shown to be related to the job (*Griggs v. Duke Power Co.* 1971). As discriminatory acts became rare and illegal, the word migrated from acts to outcomes, so that any statistical disparity could be called "systemic racism" without anyone having done anything. A smoke alarm that grows more sensitive as the house grows safer will eventually go off at toast. That is why the paradigm feels most extreme precisely when the world is most free.

Status. Moral claims are also status claims. The scholar Peter Turchin has shown how societies that produce more credentialed aspirants than elite positions generate intense competition among them (Turchin 2023). When status is won by moral display, that competition inflates moral signals, and the cheapest signal is to discover a new oppression before anyone else does. The writer Rob Henderson calls the result "luxury beliefs": positions that confer status on the affluent who hold them while imposing their costs on the poor who cannot afford them (Henderson 2024). Defunding the police costs nothing to the person who lives behind a doorman.

The inherited crusade. Above all, the paradigm has become an identity. A movement raised to fight a tyranny that has already fallen keeps marching, still sincere, and begins attacking its allies, because the war is the only identity it has. Its children inherit the fight without inheriting the enemy. This is why its adherents can dominate the universities, the media and much of the corporate world and still experience themselves as rebels. To replace such a paradigm, one cannot simply refute its premises. One must offer its people a better identity.

Its final act. There is a fitting end available to it. The constraints the paradigm now imposes, the sclerosis of rules, offices, codes and taboos it has built in the name of removing constraint, are themselves the last arbitrary constraint left standing. The paradigm drifted into the very arbitrariness it set out to remove. Its last legitimate act, the one fully consistent with its own best motive, is to remove itself.

The second fault: ceiling

Anything with a ceiling can only scale so far. The second fault is harder to see because it lies beneath the first. The paradigm's constructive residue, the moral goods it still lives on, is borrowed from a religious inheritance whose authority rests on a world beyond this one. Whatever one believes about that world, a ground of that kind cannot be checked against the facts of this one, and so it cannot take correction from them. Anything with a fixed point above it can only scale up to that point. Only reality has no ceiling, because reality is the thing every other ceiling sits inside. A civilization about to multiply its power many times over needs a moral ground that can grow with it, and that ground can only be the world as it actually is.

An immanent paradigm. The successor must therefore be immanent: its authority must be reality, not a beyond. It demonstrates its legitimacy the way a bridge demonstrates its engineering, by what it holds up. A structure is legitimate by its relation to life: by whether it generates and sustains the goods that could not otherwise exist, and it loses legitimacy by the inverse. One can see the two paradigms in a single object. Shown a national flag, the paradigm of suspicion sees oppression. The successor sees a people's will to continue, and sees in the hatred of one's own flag something closer to self-harm than to justice.

The is and the ought. A careful reader will object that "grounded in reality" cannot mean reading morality straight off physics; that is Hume's gap between is and ought. True, and the successor does not try. The gap between is and ought is, in the end, the gap between reality and man: between what the world is and what a living being needs from it in order to go on living and to flourish. Life closes that gap from its own side. A being that must act to stay alive already has an "ought" inside every "is" that bears on its survival and growth. Reality supplies the ground; life supplies the direction. That is enough to build on, and it is the only ground large enough for what is coming.

8. Sovereignty: Map and Territory

Rights on paper and rights in fact. Every society has two versions of itself. One is the official version, the map: the rights, laws and institutions as they are written. The other is the real version, the territory: how those rights, laws and institutions actually work. The paradigm of progress has been extraordinarily good at changing the map and much less interested in the territory. The result is a widening gap between what citizens have by right and what they have in fact. A citizen has a right to safe streets on paper and an encampment outside his door in practice. He has a right to equal treatment on paper and a double standard in practice. He has a vote on paper and, on many questions that matter most to him, no effective say at all.

The gap runs in both directions. While some rights exist only on paper, others exist only in practice. No statute grants a right to occupy a public sidewalk indefinitely or to commit petty theft without consequence, but in many cities these have become de facto rights, granted by the paradigm's habits of enforcement rather than by any law the public chose. A people that finds its written rights hollowed out and unwritten privileges handed to others will come to feel that it lives under the appearance of self-government rather than its substance.

Sovereignty. This is, at bottom, a question of sovereignty: a people's authority to govern itself and its own territory. Sovereignty has an inner and an outer side. The inner side is authority over one's own laws, order and moral life. The outer side is independence from outside control. Much of the West's present conflict over immigration, over supranational institutions and over universal moral claims made against particular nations is a conflict on the outer side. But it is downstream of the inner side. A people that has lost confidence in its right to decide who it is will not long keep the power to decide who may join it. The external losses follow the internal ones, and the internal ones are moral before they are political.

Constrained and unconstrained. Thomas Sowell described two rival visions of man: a constrained vision that accepts human limits as given and an unconstrained one that believes they can be overcome (Sowell 1987). Read through the map and the territory, the conflict looks different. The paradigm of progress tried to overcome limits on the map: to remove constraints by social and moral means, rearranging relations among people and, when that ran out, rearranging the descriptions of reality itself. Many of those map constraints were truly arbitrary, and removing them was good. But the constraints that remain are in the territory, and they do not yield to rearranged words. The resolution is to live honestly inside the constrained vision while using technology to loosen the constraints themselves, so that the unconstrained hope is pursued by means that work. Remove limits in the territory, never by lying on the map.

9. The Paradigm Under Leverage

The third sign of a dying god, reality presenting something it has no category for, has arrived. Its name is artificial intelligence. Exhaustion is chronic; AI makes it acute. A general capability is an amplifier: it multiplies the effect of whatever it is pointed at and drives the cost of action toward zero. Every property of the paradigm that was merely corrosive at human scale becomes dangerous at machine scale, and it fails in four ways.

First, it has no objective, only a gradient. It can always name the next thing to remove but never what to build, and a powerful optimizer must be aimed at something; "less constraint" is not a target. Second, destruction scales and construction does not. Tearing down is cheap and building is slow and fragile, so a paradigm that celebrates removal is calibrated to exactly the wrong direction at exactly the wrong time.

Third, governing powerful systems is a legitimacy problem, who may steer and by what right, and a paradigm whose signature move is exposing every authority as arbitrary can strip legitimacy from any steward while conferring it on none. Fourth, safety depends on the very structures the paradigm is trained to suspect: durable institutions, binding commitments, trust and coordination. At the moment we most need the scaffolding, the paradigm is kicking it out. Aligning machines will also require something like an alignment of humans: a shared, defensible account of the good that the machines can be aligned to.

Equality under leverage. AI also strains the paradigm's equation of equal dignity with equal outcomes. Leverage is likely to magnify some differences among people. The early studies are mixed: an AI assistant narrowed gaps among call-center agents, helping novices most (Brynjolfsson et al. 2023), but widened them among small-business owners, helping strong performers and hurting weak ones (Otis et al. 2023). And it can widen the gap between those who direct machines and those whose work machines replace. When one engineer with machines can do what thousands once did, differences that once made little difference can make all the difference. A frame that reads every disparity as injustice will then meet disparities it can neither deny nor abolish, and the only instrument able to flatten them is coercion that grows with the leverage itself. Equality before the law and equality of outcome have always pulled in opposite directions (Hayek 1960); under high leverage the tension becomes a choice between giving up the conflation and giving up freedom. The answer is to keep equal dignity and equal standing before the law, which are among the most valuable structures a society has, while releasing the reflex that treats every difference as a crime.

A self with no category. The paradigm's architecture assumes that the human will is the apex of agency, the final author whose consent makes things legitimate. It has no category for a non-human intelligence that may out-author us, and one can watch it short-circuit on whether such a system is a tool, a person, a slave or a god. Nor does it have a category for the technologies of human enhancement now arriving, which it tends to read as an insult to people as they are rather than a gift to people as they could be. And when machines make much human labor economically optional, a morality with no account of what human beings are *for* will have nothing to tell billions of people about why their lives matter.

Morality at machine speed. For most of history a bad moral theory did its damage slowly, through persuasion, one generation at a time. Today moral premises are written directly into systems that answer billions of questions a day and will soon act in the world on our behalf. Society once took centuries to update; with mass media, decades; with AI and robotics, perhaps years, including the physical world of streets and buildings. Morality has never been more consequential, or more capturable, than it is now. The danger is not only that a bad paradigm spreads faster. It is that a paradigm encoded into the machines might never be challenged at all.

Scalable philosophical infrastructure. What we need is a philosophical infrastructure that scales. Our frontend, capitalism, science and engineering, is growing exponentially. Our backend, the moral operating system that says what all that power is for, was built for a small and slow world and is failing under the load. Frontend gains on a broken backend do not resolve the danger; they compound it. The only foundation large enough to scale with us is reality itself. A morality grounded in what is true can take error as input and correct itself, where dogmas, religious or ideological, can only resist until they snap. Karl Popper judged a society by whether it could correct its mistakes without bloodshed (Popper 1945); a moral operating system should be judged the same way, and correctability is the one property that scales without limit. But reality supplies the ground, not the destination. On it we must build a direction, an account of the good we are reaching for. A perfect map with no destination produces no motion.

10. Win the Words

Three layers. Every worldview lives in three layers: the mental and moral (beliefs and values), the symbolic (words, slogans, stories), and the material (policies, institutions, laws). Words are the middle layer, the vehicle the intangible rides on and the raw material the tangible is built from (Popper 1972; Searle 1995). A law is language that people have agreed to treat as binding. Change the vocabulary and the framing, and beliefs follow, and then policies.

Words store the training. In his late work Kuhn located a paradigm in its lexicon: a revolution, he argued, is a change in the categories that sort the world before any theory is applied (Kuhn 2000). If exemplars train perception, words store the training. A word carries a model case, a verdict and an emotional charge, and delivers all three every time it is spoken, without argument. The paradigm reproduces itself whenever its words are used, including by those who think they oppose it. People have learned to reject its premises. They must now learn to reject the words that carry them.

The cost of a word. In 2014 an inquiry into the English town of Rotherham found that at least 1,400 children had been sexually exploited between 1997 and 2013, and that staff had been nervous about identifying the ethnic origins of perpetrators "for fear of being thought racist" (Jay 2014). Eleven years later a national audit found that the ethnicity of offenders had gone unrecorded in about two-thirds of cases, and that organizations had avoided the issue for the same reason (Casey 2025). No one disputed the facts. A word decided which facts could be spoken, and the facts that could not be spoken could not be acted on.

How the paradigm holds its words. It holds them in five ways. By *capture*: to discriminate once meant to perceive a difference, and a culture trained to flinch at the word has been trained, a little, to flinch from seeing. By *halo*: diversity and inclusion sound like variety and welcome, so the policy beneath them is never examined on its merits. By *pathology*: the suffix *-phobia* turns disagreement into a symptom, implying that the dissenter has causes rather than reasons. By *marking*: coining "cisgender" demotes the normal case to one variety among many. And by *absence*: there is no respectable word for healthy self-interest, so it cannot be defended in public without sounding like a vice.

Why the Right loses the words. The Right answers in its opponents' vocabulary ("that's not very tolerant of you") and so reinforces the premises it means to reject. The first rule of framing is that negating a frame activates it (Lakoff 2004). The question "Are you racist?" collapses everything one might attend to into one thing, and declares that thing the most important; to answer it at all, even with a no, is to accept its ranking. Every rebellion staged in the paradigm's language digs the paradigm deeper.

A word can make a behavior. In the late 1980s a public-health campaign set out to reduce drunk driving, and its principal instrument was not a law but a phrase. The Harvard Alcohol Project persuaded television writers to put "designated driver" into the scripts of popular shows, and within a few years the phrase had entered ordinary speech and the role it named had entered ordinary behavior (Winsten 1994). Nothing had been discovered. The sober friend had always been possible. What changed was that the possibility now had a name, and a name is a handle: it can be offered, requested, assigned and praised.

Four moves. *Refuse the question*: do not answer an accusation on its own terms; name the premise inside it and set it to one side. *Substitute*: replace the paradigm's question with a better one, not "are you racist?" but "how much does race matter here, and what follows?"; not "whom does this constrain?" but "what does this make possible, and what is lost if it goes?" *Redefine*: give old words the meanings the next paradigm needs, openly, as proposals. *Fair* has meant many things, from "beautiful" to "impartial"; we

propose it mean *in proportion to what is real*, not *equalized*. *Pride* has long meant a sin, but it has also meant satisfaction in something achieved, and we propose to recover that sense against pride as an identity one merely has. *Progress* first meant a forward journey; we propose to measure it by man's growing mastery of reality, which can be measured, not by the endless rearrangement of his relations with other men. *Coin* the missing words, because a reality without a name cannot be shared, organized around or defended.

Table 5. Sample substitutions, from the paradigm's questions and words to better ones.

Instead of	Use	Why
"Is this oppressive?"	"What is lost if it goes?"	Asks what a structure does, not whom it binds
"Are you racist?"	"How much does race matter here?"	Turns an accusation into an empirical question
Equity	Fairness, in proportion to what is real	Justice as proportion, not equalization
Selfish	Sovereign	Names rightful self-interest without apology
Sacrifice	Investment	Giving that expects a return in life, as parents do
Ally	Steward	Loyalty to what one builds and keeps, not to a faction
Undocumented migrant	Illegal immigrant	Says what the law says
Progress (rearranging people)	Ascent (mastering reality)	Measures advance by what we can cure, build and discover

Words are like flyers posted throughout a culture a million times over: everywhere, unnoticed and decisive. Whoever owns them owns the premises they carry. A condemnation spoken in the old paradigm's words draws on an account that is closing; its moral currency is running out. A new paradigm must ship its vocabulary first, because words can be written, tested and distributed before anything else in it exists (Niehaus 2026).

11. The Turn

The first turn. Picture a painting in the romantic-realist manner: a man at first light turning toward the rising sun, and behind him, one by one, others turning with him. The first turn reorganizes the rest. When a man on a busy street stops and looks up, some of the people around him look up too. They need no argument; they follow his eyes (Milgram et al. 1969). That is also the main value of philosophy. Philosophy does not chiefly win arguments. It directs attention; it changes what people look at, and change follows attention. Give people new eyes and watch the world change.

Morning. For a long while the West has been asleep. The sun of its old confidence set, and it has been dark: a long night of suspicion in which every inherited good was doubted and every structure put on trial. The doubting was not wasted. Skepticism was the right mood while there were still illegitimate structures to doubt, and it bottomed out because it succeeded. There is nothing left standing that has not been questioned, and that is the new ground. Conviction that has passed through skepticism is not dogma; dogma is conviction that refused it. The question mark gives way to the period. Now the sun is rising. And when the morning comes, you do not lie in bed. You get up. You rise.

From deconstruction to construction. The turn is the hinge of the whole argument: the move from tearing down to building up, from critique to affirmation, from irony to sincerity, from guilt and shame to pride and gratitude, from zero-sum to positive-sum. It is not conservatism, which tries to hold still; a

civilization that holds still decays, and the West did not remain Athens or Rome. The only way to keep what we have is to keep creating. Nor is the turn a reaction, which merely reverses the paradigm's arrows and so stays inside it. One cannot beat a subtractive paradigm by out-subtracting it; it will always have one more thing to unmask. The way out is a construction it cannot account for and cannot dismantle without a visible loss. It is also a change of style, of the tone of a civilization's soul, as one might go from Picasso to Monet. The age of critique taught us to look at a sunrise and see a construct. The turn teaches us to see the sunrise again.

How paradigms actually fall. Naming a paradigm is necessary but not sufficient. Naming strips its disguise, turning it from the water we swim in into one frame among others, with a history and an outside. But paradigms do not fall to exposure. They fall when three things happen: the anomalies become legible as failures *of this paradigm*, not as scattered bad luck; a rival appears with its own exemplar, whose achievement is construction; and a new generation adopts it because it solves what the old one left broken. The change, when it comes, is closer to a gestalt flip than to a debate, like the drawing that is suddenly a rabbit after years of being a duck. Once seen, it cannot be unseen. And the rival must offer more, not less. The paradigm has no category for the positive life: for a person's own joy, growth and ascent, which do not count in a moral ledger kept only in grievances. That is the category the successor fills first.

Lessons from past transitions. History offers both warnings and models. The Reformation turned bloody where rulers enforced belief, and peace came only when states stopped doing so. The French Revolution devoured itself when it tried to remake man from zero, while the English and American settlements held because they kept institutions standing and allowed opposition. The Soviet Union fell almost without violence once private disbelief became common knowledge, but it fell with nothing built to replace it, and the 1990s were a catastrophe for ordinary Russians. The American civil-rights movement is the best model of all. Martin Luther King did not tell Americans their ideals were false. He told them their ideals were a "promissory note" the nation had not yet paid (King 1963), and he appealed to the country's own creed against its practice. The turn should do the same: tell the paradigm's faithful that their concern for the vulnerable is right, and that their instruments have stopped measuring it.

Turning well. Paradigms end in one of two ways: slowly, by replacement and generational turnover, or suddenly, in a cascade, when private doubt becomes common knowledge (Kuran 1995). Cascades are when cruelty happens. Every great transition that went badly did so when the new order tried to remake man from zero or to punish the old one's faithful. The turn must therefore be made well. It should appeal to the old paradigm's best motives rather than against them; build before it tears down; offer honorable exits instead of purges; and hold equal dignity and equality before the law as non-negotiable. We should honor the paradigm even as we retire it, the way a craftsman thanks a tool that has done its work. It did its job. Its supporters should be able to leave it with their heads high. The compassion that animated it was real. The next step is to make it effective.

The hardest case. The transition is hardest where the paradigm's taboos are strongest, and none is stronger than race. Here the double standard of Section 4 is starkest. Every people in the West is encouraged to love its own history, to take pride in its own, and to speak for its own interests, with one exception. For white people in Western nations, the same love is presumed to be a vice and the same speech a threat. That is not equality. It is a standing at zero for one group alone, and a people that is forbidden to care for its own continuity will not be cared for by anyone else.

The answer is not to swing the pendulum to the other extreme. The twentieth century showed exactly where a politics of racial grievance and racial supremacy leads, and the West must never go there again.

The answer is a third way, and it rests on three plain commitments. First, every people may love its own, and none may harm another. Pride in one's ancestors is not contempt for anyone else's. Second, facts about groups are facts. Where evidence shows that groups differ, on average, in this or that respect, a mature society can say so, study it and plan around it, because a fact that cannot be spoken cannot be acted on, as Rotherham showed. Third, and decisively, no fact about any group is ever a reason to withdraw dignity, rights or equal standing before the law from any individual person. Dignity does not depend on capability, which is exactly why no finding about capability can be used to withdraw it. A society can be honest about difference and just to every person at once. The paradigm insists that it must choose. The successor refuses the choice.

The same holds for leaving the age of multiculturalism. A nation may decide how many newcomers it welcomes, and enforce its own laws at its own borders, without hostility to the people already living within them. Those who came lawfully, and their children, are members. The goal is not a smaller circle of dignity. It is a nation able again to say where it begins and ends, so that it can keep its promises to everyone inside it.

12. After the Turn

The test. The successor paradigm is a larger project than this paper, so I give its outline (Table 6). It regrounds morality in reality, and it supplies the criterion the old paradigm lacked. A structure is legitimate to the degree that it generates goods that could not otherwise exist, net of what it destroys. The test of any arrangement is not "whom does it constrain?" but "what is lost if it goes?" This is a claim about evidence, not a decree of nature: a distinction is real when it does explanatory and predictive work that erasing it destroys, and a structure earns its place by what it produces and sustains.

Three questions apply the test. What goods does the structure produce? Could those goods exist without it? What does it destroy, and for whom? Slavery fails the second and the third: everything it produced could be produced by free labor, and it destroyed the most basic good of millions. The test must bind its author too, so it should be run on a structure many traditionalists have defended. Legacy preferences in college admissions fail it as well. Children of alumni at the most selective colleges have been admitted at far higher rates than other applicants with the same test scores, in a system where admission substantially raises the odds of reaching the top of American society (Chetty et al. 2023). The goods claimed for the practice, alumni loyalty and giving, can be had without it; the good it destroys is fair access to one of the country's main ladders. A test that convicts only one's opponents is not a test. This one convicts wherever the evidence points.

The builder. The successor's exemplar is the builder: the one who makes a family, a company, an institution, a working order, and whose defining competence is exactly what the old paradigm lost, the discernment to tell the load-bearing wall from the prison wall. The founder is one face of the builder. The gardener is a gentler one: he also removes, but only in the service of what he is growing. The builder fits the moment as no other figure does. Artificial intelligence is about to put more power to build in more individual hands than any generation has known, and the builder carries the best of the liberal ideal, the dignity and agency of the individual, without its mistake, the belief that agency is fulfilled by removal.

Faces for the new exemplar. A paradigm is carried by its exemplars, so the successor needs faces the culture can recognize as good without argument. They already exist; they have simply not been honored as the model of the good. Norman Borlaug, whose wheat helped avert mass famine. Maurice Hilleman,

who developed many of the vaccines given to every child. The engineers who are bringing sight to the blind and speech to the paralyzed. And the countless unremarkable builders: the mother and father who raise children well, the teacher who gets every child reading, the owner who builds a business that employs a town. Each would be missed if removed. That is the test, and anyone can pass it. The emancipator's role was open only to those with a chain to strike. The builder's is open to everyone, because everyone can build something.

What to keep. The successor must keep what the old paradigm got right, or it will deserve to fail. It keeps the equal dignity of every person, without conditions; equality before the law; suspicion of arbitrary power, including its own; and attention to people who are hurt but unheard. These were real moral discoveries, and they are now part of the ground. Equal dignity needs no borrowed creed to stand on. It rests on facts: each person is a life, the only one he has, and the source of every good he will ever make; and no one who ranks other people is free from error, so the law must bind the ranker too. What the successor drops is the reflex that treats every structure as guilty, every difference as injustice, and every limit as an enemy. The early work stands. The late work does not. The line between them is the break-even line of Figure 1.

The wisdom of religion, regrounded. The successor affirms much of what people already know to be right: that family matters, that children need fathers and mothers, that truth-telling is sacred, that a life of discipline beats a life of indulgence, that some things are worth more than comfort. It sees these things in a new light, as discoveries about how reality works for creatures like us. The rules the great religions taught turn out, again and again, to be rules of reality: tested over millennia by the only test that never lies, which is whether the people who kept them flourished. The successor does not ask anyone to give up a faith. It asks only which direction a way of life leads: up or down, toward construction or toward dissolution. And it holds one thing above all: it will not lie. It will not ban the study of any question or hide from any fact, because lying about reality is the root of every other error.

Redirecting the drive. The successor does not ask anyone to stop wanting liberation. It asks them to point the drive at real targets. Take the tail out of the serpent's mouth by putting real food in front of it. The remaining constraints on human flourishing are mostly physical, not social: disease, disability, scarcity, distance, the limits of the body. They yield to technology, not to the rearrangement of other people. The pattern is visible in sport. Analyses of world records since 1896 find that they had reached about 99 percent of their estimated physiological limits, and that half will stop improving measurably within a generation (Berthelot et al. 2008). Where records have jumped since, it has often been through equipment, as when full-body swimsuits produced a burst of swimming records in 2008–09 before they were banned. When one means of progress is exhausted, progress continues only by changing the means. A paralyzed man who moves a cursor with his thoughts has been liberated more truly than any change of vocabulary could liberate him. That is progress worthy of the name. Ironically, the next paradigm will also be a liberation: it will liberate people from the paradigm of liberation.

From two dimensions to three. There is a larger arc here. The oldest moralities aimed at reducing suffering, because human beings were too weak to aim much higher. As technology conquered hunger and disease, moral aims shifted toward happiness: first remove the negatives, then add the positives. Both phases work inside the same limits, the limits of the human body and mind as they are, filling a cup of fixed size. Each is reaching its end. The next phase is to grow the cup itself. That is the full meaning of the end of progress: not only that one moral paradigm has run out of targets, but that a whole way of understanding a good life, as the best arrangement of a fixed human nature, is giving way to one in which

human beings can improve the nature itself. A morality fit for that age must be grounded in reality, because it will be asked to judge changes to reality itself.

Table 6. The two paradigms compared.

	The paradigm of progress	The paradigm after the turn
<i>Ground</i>	The autonomous self, on borrowed capital	Reality
<i>Core operation</i>	Removal of constraint	Construction of structure
<i>Exemplar</i>	The emancipator	The builder
<i>Test of a structure</i>	Whom does it constrain?	What is lost if it goes?
<i>Means of progress</i>	Social: rearranging people	Technological: mastering reality
<i>Measure of progress</i>	Relations among people, equalized	Man's relation to reality, advanced
<i>Key virtues</i>	Compassion, inclusion, tolerance	Discernment, craft, courage, stewardship
<i>Failure mode</i>	Consuming its own supports	Defending the sterile

13. Objections

The best case for the paradigm. Its defenders would put it this way. Every constraint once called natural was defended as load-bearing: slavery, the legal absorption of wives into husbands, the bars on women in the professions, the color line. Each time, the defenders were wrong. The paradigm has a nearly perfect record against Chesterton's fence. The harms it names are real to the people who suffer them, even when they look small to others, and expanding our concept of harm is how moral progress happens. The world it built has less poverty, less violence and more freedom than any before it. This case is strong, and the paper concedes its first half entirely. Its weakness is that it has no stopping rule. It cannot say in advance which constraint it would keep, and so it cannot tell its next reform from its last mistake.

"Every age thinks its reforms are the last good ones." True, and the defenders of slavery also called their wall load-bearing. The answer is the criterion applied honestly. Whether a constraint is arbitrary or real is a question of evidence, argued in public, and the same test convicts arrangements its author's allies would prefer to keep, as the legacy case in Section 12 shows.

"The scores encode your politics." They are judgments, and the method is crude. But the six cases classed as arbitrary are the ones nearly everyone now accepts, and the cases one might have scored lower are marked contested instead. The classification of the six load-bearing cases is the paper's argument, not its premise, and Section 5 gives the evidence for each. A critic who rescores every case and still finds the trend flat has a real argument. None of the ten thousand random rescorings did.

"Not every indicator points down." Granted, and the paper should say so. U.S. murder fell sharply in 2023, by about 15 percent in 2024, and by about 18 percent in 2025, the steepest fall on record, to a rate tied for the lowest ever measured (FBI 2025; FBI 2026). In the best data, undocumented immigrants in Texas were arrested for felonies at lower rates than native-born citizens (Light et al. 2020). The research on whether Oregon's decriminalization raised overdose deaths is divided. Teen sadness has fallen. Two points follow. The case against mass illegal immigration rests on scale, cost, the rule of law and consent, not on crime. And whether the crime decline owes anything to the reversals of 2020's experiments is a hypothesis, not a finding; murder fell nearly everywhere, including where little was reversed.

"This is a single-cause theory of a complicated age." It is not. Real societies run several moral frameworks at once, and much of what troubles the West has material causes: technology, economics, demography. The account here isolates one strand, the critical strand, and traces its logic. Where a material explanation is plainer, it should win. What the paradigm account explains, and the material accounts do not, is the *form* of the crisis: why it is fought in moral language, why that language keeps widening, and why so many feel unable to speak.

"Equality is the foundation of a free society." Equal dignity and equality before the law are, and this paper affirms them without qualification. What it rejects is the separate claim that every difference in outcome is an injustice. Dignity does not depend on capability, which is exactly why no finding about capability can be used to withdraw it.

"Why not simply return to religion?" Many who share this diagnosis conclude that the answer is to go back and restore the faith whose moral capital the paradigm spent. The traditional communities are, as Section 6 noted, visibly more alive, and that deserves respect. This paper takes a different ground for granted: tangible, material reality, the world we can see, test and build in. It does so not as an attack on anyone's faith, but because this is the one ground every citizen shares, believer and non-believer alike, and the only one that can take correction and grow with what is coming. Neither the paradigm of progress nor a restored Christendom has a ready account of artificial minds, human enhancement or meaning after work. The way out is not back but forward. Believers and non-believers can travel most of that road together, because both refuse the dissolution and both affirm that some structures deserve to stand.

"Isn't this just reaction?" No. Reaction defends the wall and so accepts the paradigm's casting of it as the villain. The turn does not defend old walls for being old; it asks of every structure, old or new, what it makes possible and what is lost if it goes, and it retires sterile structures as readily as it keeps generative ones. A paradigm that only conserved would decay as surely as one that only subtracted.

What would prove this wrong. A theory that cannot lose is not a theory. If the argument here is right, five things should follow. First, prejudice-denoting terms in major Western news outlets will stay below their 2019–2021 peak for the next five years. Second, concepts of harm will keep widening fastest in exactly the domains where measured harm is falling. Third, jurisdictions that reversed the reforms of 2020 will show lower crime and disorder than comparable ones that did not. Fourth, institutions that adopt explicit "load tests" before removing a long-standing rule, such as pilots, sunset clauses and measured outcomes, will earn more public trust than those that do not. Fifth, within fifteen years at least one major Western country will see a rapid reversal of its public moral norms, and whether it is peaceful will depend on whether its leaders offer the old order's faithful an honorable exit. The thesis is wrong if harm concepts widen at the same pace whether real harm is rising or falling; if removing a contested constraint is followed, on average, by measured gains; if trust and wellbeing recover while the paradigm continues unchanged; or if a fair rescoring of Table 1 by its critics shows no downward trend.

14. Conclusion

The culture of critique was for a long time the engine of real moral progress, and nothing here denies its grandeur. But it ran on a finite fuel, the stock of truly arbitrary constraint, and a machine built only to remove, with no rule that tells it when to stop, does not idle once its fuel is spent. It turns on the structures it was meant to serve. What freed the slave now polices the pronoun; what opened the doors of the franchise now cannot say where a nation ends; and all the while the serpent keeps eating.

The age of subtraction has finished its legitimate work. Its own institutions are retreating from it, its words have peaked, its promises have failed by its own measure, and the most powerful technology in history is about to demand of it the one thing it cannot give: an answer to the question of what all this power is for. That answer cannot come from a ground with a ceiling. It must come from reality itself, which has none.

We should not curse the paradigm on its way out. We should thank it, as one thanks a tool that has done its work, and set it down. Then we should do what every generation before the age of critique knew how to do, and what every child knows when the sun comes up. The night is over. It is time to rise, and to build.

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