

5 Common Objections to Primitivism

and Why They're Wrong

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Contents

1. Isn't it hypocritical of primitivists to use modern technology? If they want to live primitively so badly, why don't they just run off into the woods already and do it?	3
2. We have a stable, abundant supply of food. Primitivists want us to spend our lives desperate as to where our next meal is coming from.	4
3. Primitivism would mean a drastic reduction in quality of life — no more medicine, no more art or music. Instead, you get euthanasia, astronomical infant mortality, and a life expectancy of about 30.	4
4. Primitivists are misanthropic.	5
5. Primitivists are genocidal maniacs whose planned "utopia" requires them to orchestrate the mass murder of 99% of the human population!	6

1. Isn't it hypocritical of primitivists to use modern technology? If they want to live primitively so badly, why don't they just run off into the woods already and do it?

Not all primitivists are against technology in and of itself; only some. Many primitivists hold a view that technology is ambiguous. Technology is found among all “primitive” peoples to one extent or another, so obviously there is *some* sustainable level of technology. There is great disagreement among primitivists as to where that level is, but all agree that it isn't our current level. Yes, we would like to see a lower level of technology, but since we have no problem with technology itself, why would we abstain from the use of our current, unsustainable technologies while they remain? One does not need to believe that a hammer is the greatest achievement of mankind, a miracle that ennobles us above all other animals and justifies our dominion over the earth, in order to use it to drive in a nail, after all. Neither does a computer. One can value science highly and still not believe that it is the sole or highest arbiter of truth; these are not mutually exclusive. And one can use the internet to spread the message that “the internet” and the infrastructure that supports it, is not going to last.

So, the charge of hypocrisy only holds up if we extend the beliefs of *some* primitivists to *all* primitivists, or to primitivism itself. What of the second question — why don't primitivists run off into the woods already?

There are two issues here; the first is education. We were all raised within civilization, which has a vested interest in ensuring its children have as little independent survival value as possible. The civilized cultural system has adapted well — it reinforces itself memetically in precisely those areas where individuals are closest to self-sufficiency, creating a feeling of dependence even where little actual dependence exists. Regardless, most primitivists no more possess the skills of survival than your average suburbanite — skills every six year old “primitive” would have. Most primitivists are working to remedy that situation, but in the same way that you wouldn't tell a !Kung man with dreams of brokering stock to just go to Wall Street already, but to learn a thing or two about the stock market first, so we are learning the skills we will need before hanging our lives on such skills. “Running off into the woods already” is a goal, ultimately, but one we must work towards, not one we can simply pick up and go with. If it *were* that easy, well, you wouldn't be reading this, I can tell you that.

Secondly, there is the issue of lands and laws. Civilization has precluded “running off into the woods” as an option fairly well. Hunting regulations pose serious encumbrances, to say nothing of the fact that some meager income must be maintained to pay for hunting and fishing licenses, as well as taxes on land. Ultimately, such a “micro-collapse” is impossible so long as civilization still exists — the pressing needs of ever-increasing complexity will lead to our re-absorption, by force if necessary. There is the essential problem; if civilization were willing to coexist with us, we would be happy to return the favor. But ultimately, civilization is incapable of letting anything but itself exist. We're happy to live alongside anyone who's willing to live alongside us — but civilization is not. “Running off into the woods,” so long as civilization remains, merely ensures our eventual, violent destruction at civilization's hands.

2. We have a stable, abundant supply of food. Primitivists want us to spend our lives desperate as to where our next meal is coming from.

Why, then, is it only agriculturalists who starve? In fact, civilization's food supply has always been shaky and meager. It is only recently that industrialized nations have increased production sufficiently to reap the benefits of "affluent malnutrition." That's the key to the success of modern life. We still eat things that are terribly maladapted to our physiology, but we eat them in prodigious quantities, allowing us to stay alive (if constantly sickly and degenerative) for the normal human lifespan of about 70 years, surpassing the average lifespan of medieval European nobility, but still slightly shy of our Mesolithic ancestors.

As the elite of the world system, the industrialized world is able to enjoy this standard of living because the non-industrialized world suffers chronic malnutrition and starvation. By contrast, foragers are transhumant omnivores — as well as being some of the most adaptable creatures on the planet. Foragers make their home among the islands of Tierra del Fuego, the frozen wastes of the Arctic, the Kalahari desert, and the thick jungles of the Congo — among areas so remote and desolate no crop would ever grow. To starve out foragers would require the end of nearly all multicellular life on this planet in the kind of mass extinction never before seen. By contrast, to starve out a bunch of farmers requires a slightly dry summer.

The idea that agriculture provides an abundant, stable food supply is demonstrably false. It is a myth. Agriculturalists rely on a small number of domesticable species — and those species tend to be closely related to one another, as well. It's the fallacy of "putting all of your eggs in one basket." By comparison, foragers rely not only on a much larger number of species, but a much wider diversity of species, as well. So, in fact, primitivists are advocating that we give up a highly unreliable and meager supply of food, for a supply that is genuinely stable and abundant.

3. Primitivism would mean a drastic reduction in quality of life — no more medicine, no more art or music. Instead, you get euthanasia, astronomical infant mortality, and a life expectancy of about 30.

The "euthanasia" charge comes from the Inuit, who were once slandered as leaving their elderly to die on ice floes. In fact, it was a rare custom, but a form of voluntary self-sacrifice that elders sometimes engaged in for the good of their bands, despite the pleading protestations of the rest of the band. The Inuit are full of such exceptions that prove the rule, because even for a forager, the arctic is a harsh and unforgiving place.

The infant mortality has simply been completely misrepresented, though. Yes, infant mortality among foragers is high — but not for the reasons such a statement would seem to imply. It is not because of disease or malnutrition — quite the opposite, as these things are fairly peculiar to civilized societies. Rather, just as we argue whether life begins at conception or at birth, foragers believe that life does not begin until, usually, the age of two. Foragers look at infanticide much the same way we do abortion. Among the !Kung, a pregnant woman goes into labor, and walks off into the bush (I'm told that childbirth is significantly less an ordeal among those who are not

malnourished — affluently or otherwise). Maybe she comes back with a child; maybe she doesn't. Either way, no questions are asked. So, our calculations of forager lifespans are quite unfair — if we're going to include their infanticide, then we must include our own abortions. To do otherwise would simply be ethnocentric. In fact, when we do that, we see that forager lifespans are as long as, and sometimes longer, than our own.

The charge on medicine is common, but utterly anthropocentric. In the anthropology of medicine, one refers to "ethnomedicine" — whatever a given culture considers to be "medicine." Given the overlap of food-as-medicine, this can be as arbitrary as how a culture divides up the color spectrum. Western biomedicine is *our* ethnomedicine. Every culture believes that *their* ethnomedicine is the only valuable one, and all others are naught but silly superstition. This is simply ethnocentrism. At the root of the claim that primitivism precludes medicine is precisely this ethnocentrism. In fact, when we look at the actual efficacy of the various ethnomedicines in the world, there's very little variation. Most ethnomedicines are quite effective, just like ours; most have one or more area where they fail utterly (ours tries to ignore placebo rather than use it; shamanism is the opposite, but has no concept of surgery, etc.), and all end up being roughly interchangeable if one is only concerned with efficacy. So, by no means does primitivism require the end of medicine — it merely means a radically different, but equally effective, form of medicine. In fact, if we attempt a syncretic type of medicine that seeks to combine the best of several ethnomedicines, we may actually come up with one of the first medical systems that actually *is* more effective.

Finally, the charge that primitivism would mean the end of art and music is patently false. Art, music and the rest were universal among primitive peoples for 30,000 years before civilization even began. They have had these things for four times as long as civilization has even existed. The cave art at Lascaux is easily comparable to Michelangelo, and the Pygmy tribes of the Congo sing songs with a polyphonic complexity that Europe did not match until the 14th century. One can only claim that primitive peoples have no art or music if we ethnocentrically define "art" and "music" to mean, "it only counts if a white guy did it." In *Savages & Civilization*, Jack Weatherford makes the case that the scientific, artistic, musical and philosophical achievements of civilization were all inspired by our contact with savages. Primitivists believe that, if it is at all possible to call any culture "superior," then it must be that of the primitives — those who inspired all of our greatest achievements, and suffer none of our worst flaws.

4. Primitivists are misanthropic.

This charge requires a unique definition of "misanthropic," but it is usually attached to the next objection, below. To make this statement, the speaker first conflates humanity and civilization with some mythology about civilization being mankind's natural destiny, rather than the momentary aberration it truly is. In fact, domesticated *Homo sapiens* exists in a pitiful state of captivity, bound to a moribund existence to which she is entirely maladapted. Humans in the wild experience a level of freedom and fullness of life that is incomprehensible to their domesticated brethren, just as Plato's protagonist could not explain the outside world to those poor wretches chained to the wall in the allegory of the cave. The goal of primitivism is rewilding, that is, to return as many domesticated *Homo sapiens* to that happy, natural state as possible.

To the primitivist, it is, in fact, the progressivist who is misanthropic. It is the progressivist who claims that the natural state of humanity is to labor for the benefit of others and to be subject to despots — at best, kind-hearted and duly-elected despots, but despots all the same. It is the progressivist who thinks that humanity is not sufficient in itself, but must be ennobled by Science and Reason, redeemed from his fallen state of primitive fear and violence by Technology. The progressivist sees nothing but misery in our past, a savage in our soul that must be denied and sublimated, and for our future, a cold, aloof godhood, an apotheosis by nanotechnology, and the alienation of dominion over the earth that precludes ever being *part* of it. The progressivist takes a very dim view of the human being indeed: her passions must be denied, her nature is savage and must be sublimated, her natural state is a never-ending Hobbesian nightmare.

The primitivist knows all of this is so many fairy tales. We know that primitive societies live in no such nightmare, but are, in fact, as Marshal Sahlins put it, “the original affluent society.” We know that we are not the forgotten children of evolution, the only species of all the earth left without an easy adaptation to the world. We know that human nature is neither demonic, nor angelic. We do not see humanity as something fallen that must be fixed — whether by faith in some number of gods (whether many, one, or none at all), or by Reason, or by Technology. We believe that being human is a wonderful thing. We can also see that the progressivist agenda has shackled humanity, that civilization dehumanizes us and strips us of all those things that are so good about our species.

It was for this abiding faith in humanity and our conviction that humanity is most emphatically *not* broken, and neither is it in need of us to “fix” it, that I chose the name “Anthropik” for our tribe. The term “humanist” might have done just as well, had it not been adopted (rather inappropriately, to my mind) by a particular camp of progressivists, but as it is, it plays well against the term “misanthropy.” Progressivists are misanthropic; it is primitivists who are anthropic.

5. Primitivists are genocidal maniacs whose planned “utopia” requires them to orchestrate the mass murder of 99% of the human population!

I’ve saved the best for last. This is the single most common, and the single most powerful attack launched against primitivists by the progressivist camp.

It is undeniably true that the world’s population cannot be sustained without modern civilization. Of course, it is abundantly clear that modern civilization is not sustainable, either. Given those two facts, then some kind of massive die-off is inevitable. It might be through genocide, but since primitivists are a fringe of a fringe (and will always be so) it’s unlikely to come from us. There are many other parties with a much greater interest in genocide for its own sake, who are far closer to power than we will ever be. Ultimately, genocide might be the kindest method, just as it is kind to deliver a *coup de grace* to a dying animal. The alternative is to waste away by hunger or disease. But ultimately, genocide on such a scale would be nigh impossible, and though die-off is guaranteed, it is almost as guaranteed *not* to come by way of genocide.

Rather, collapse is more likely to occur as it always has. The diminishing returns of complexity lead to the breakdown of civilization, until some minor turbulence that might have been easily overcome in a former time, instead ends our civilization — the way an AIDS victim dies not of AIDS, but of some minor disease a healthy person would have easily shrugged off. Perhaps Peak

Oil, perhaps global warming, whatever the proximate cause, our ability to produce food will be cut off. Starvation will lead to food riots, until, in the end, the survivors will turn to cannibalism. The cities will be killing fields, but those who can look at the wilderness and call it home, those who can find their food without having someone grow it for them — those who are rewilded — will have access to vast resources that no others will even think to exploit.

This is the way evolution has always worked. The “oxygen holocaust” was caused by the abundance of microbes that breathed carbon dioxide, and exhaled oxygen. Eventually, they changed the very composition of the atmosphere, and began to choke and die in the toxic environment. But those microbes that were adapted and could actually breathe the toxic oxygen emerged and proliferated, striking a balance with their forebears, the carbon dioxide breathing microbes, and beginning the oxygen cycle that regulates our atmosphere today. So, too, the collapse will permanently end civilization, and with it the dehumanizing domestication and captivity of *Homo sapiens*, leaving only rewilded humans to inherit the earth.

The fanciful genocide scenario is embraced by some primitivists, but this is quite patently madness — and unspeakably wicked. As I said, for those who die, dying quickly of a gunshot may be preferable to dying slowly of hunger and disease, or living to see their cities torn apart by warring gangs of cannibals. However, there is an evolutionary elegance to the collapse that such an alternative violates. Every individual on earth will have a choice. They will be free to choose to remain part of their culture to the bitter end, and die with it; or, they will have the choice to embrace a new culture, embrace their own humanity, and survive into a new world. An act of active genocide violates that. The one who perpetrates such an act elevates himself to the status of a god (as the progressivists would do, only without their silly, illogical, anthropocentric qualms distinguishing between humans and all other life on the planet), to dictate who should live and who should die. This is why I believe Ted Kaczinski is evil: besides the complete counter-effectiveness of his campaign of terror, he committed the ultimate sin, the sin of civilization itself. He placed himself in the role of a god, dictating life and death.

Most will choose to die; we cannot change that. It would be just as wrong to force them to choose life as it was for Kaczinski to force others to die. What we *can* do is try as hard as we can to make sure everyone understands that it truly is a *choice* they face.

When hearing this defense, many progressivists will claim that our willingness to “allow” such a thing to happen is characterized as monstrous. First, the hubris dripping from such a statement is absurd; we do not “allow” such things to happen any more than we “allow” the sun to shine or the rain to fall. By comparison, a progressivist tries to dream up ways to control the weather, while a primitivist makes an umbrella or some sun screen. There is the difference between us; progressivists aspire to such divine control, where primitivists accede and accept that they are *part* of the world, not gods of it.

But, addressing the point of such an absurd statement — the idea that we have some moral obligation to try to stop collapse — consider a sickly child. Consider my brother. It is my earliest memory. The doctors insisted it was not meningitis, even though it matched all the symptoms — after all, how could it be? He had just a few days before had a large number of meningitis pathogens injected into his body, and, having been vaccinated, it couldn’t possibly be. That would mean that science and medicine had failed.

My mother told me not to watch, but I peeked, and the image was seared into my brain forever. My tiny brother’s body, screaming in agony, pinned down by my father and a doctor, as another took a needle nearly as long as my little brother’s entire body, and slipped it into his spine.

I cannot imagine my brother's pain — or my father's holding him down for such a thing. But he did the right thing — the hard thing. My brother very nearly died that night, but because my father could see that avoiding that passing agony would mean death, he survived. There was great pain, but once that pain passed, there was life.

That is very much the situation the human race is in now. Had our civilization collapsed in the Bronze Age, it would have killed millions and caused ecological devastation throughout the Mediterranean. It was avoided, and instead we had wars, empires, the decimation of the New World, and we have ushered in the single greatest mass extinction in the planet's history. Now, we stand on the same precipice. Collapse now would involve the deaths of *billions*, and we can look back and see that it would have been better if our civilization had *not* survived the Bronze Age. But it did, for all the same pressures that push us forward now. If by some miracle we *do* find another *deus ex machina*, then we will only make it still worse — the deaths of trillions, and the very real possibility of the extinction of our species, and all multicellular life on earth,

The cost of collapse is terrible. It should have been paid by our ancestors, and damn them for not paying it! The cost would have been so much less. Instead, the debt has fallen on us, and it is almost more than we can bear. Yet bear it — and pay it — we must. If we do, then humanity will be free once again. If we don't, then our children will pay it, and then the cost *will* be too much to bear — they will damn us as we damn our ancestors' weakness, for because of *our* weakness, there will be no bright, shining hope once the debt is paid. For them, the debt will be so great that it must be paid with the extinction of our entire species.

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