
Philosophy

Rational Optimism Is Always the Way Out

Despair is intellectually cheap and almost always wrong. Progress has run on one stubborn bet: that problems get solved by people willing to solve them.

By Emmanuel Awosika ■ November 27, 2025 ■



Pessimism has a permanent advantage in any serious conversation, which is that it sounds smart. Point out everything that could go wrong and you seem alert, unsentimental, awake to the darkness. Suggest that things might work out and you risk sounding naive, or worse, like someone with something to sell. This asymmetry is a bias, not a form of insight, and it has been fooling clever people for a very long time.

The historical record is unkind to the doomsayers in a specific way. The catastrophes they predict do sometimes arrive, but the more common outcome is that a problem gets named, attracts the attention of people who can work on it, and gets ground down over years by unglamorous effort. Famine was going to be permanent and then agricultural yields tripled. Cities were going to drown in horse manure and then the engine arrived. The ozone layer was tearing open and then a treaty closed most of the hole. In each case the pessimist was describing a real trajectory and missing the thing that has driven every escape, which is that problems recruit their own solvers.

Optimism is not complacency

It is worth separating rational optimism from its lazy cousin. The complacent optimist assumes things will be fine and therefore does nothing. The rational optimist assumes nothing of the kind. He expects that problems are solvable and concludes that the correct response is to go solve them, which is the opposite of sitting back. Matt Ridley made the case that human progress runs on the exchange of ideas, on people combining their work in ways that ratchet capability upward over time. That ratchet is not automatic. It runs on the belief that effort pays, and it stalls whenever a society decides in advance that nothing can be done.

The danger of fashionable despair is that it is self-fulfilling in a way fashionable hope is not. If you believe a problem is hopeless, you will not fund the research, start the company, or run the experiment that might have solved it. The belief manufactures the outcome. Declinism talks itself into decline. This is why the burden of proof should sit a little heavier on the pessimist than the culture usually places it, because the pessimist is not just making a prediction. He is discouraging the exact behavior that would falsify him.

This is not a claim that everything gets better on its own, which is a fantasy, nor that no problem is ever truly lost, which is false. It is a claim about which default belief produces better behavior under uncertainty. Faced with a hard problem and incomplete information, the person who bets that it can be solved will try, and trying is the only move that has ever worked. Optimism, in this sense, is less a mood than a strategy. It is the way out because it is the only stance that goes looking for one.