Via Negativa

Latin for "the negative way", as I'm using it here it is just a fancy way to say "taking something away". Classically it was applied in theology as a way to describe god (god is so beyond human comprehension that the concept can only be described in a negative way, e.g. without limits to power or mortality), but it can also be used in other ways, like for analyzing change or knowledge. As I'm not a theologian I'm just going to cover the other ways to apply via negativa.

As a Heuristic for Change

If you want to change a system for the better, then you can either add something or remove something, the "something" being a process, behavior, rule, object, and so on. If you are considering removing a thing from a system, you know a lot more about what that thing is and what the cost / benefits are, so predicting what is going to happen if you get rid of it is a lot more straightforward. If something is bad, then it doesn't take too much of a leap of faith to be confident that removing it will make the whole system less bad. On the other hand, adding something is inherently predictive, and by default accurate predictions are impossible because of causal opacity. Maybe the thing will improve the system, but maybe not. There is no way to tell except to make the change and find out.

As an example, let's say you want to be happier. To be happier, you could either add something new that you think will make you happy, or you can take away something that makes you unhappy. In a way, adding something that you think will make you happier is making a prediction that adding the thing will improve your life. But first of all, predictions in general are impossible, and secondly and more specifically, if you were good at predicting what would actually make you happy then you probably wouldn't be having to go through this exercise in the first place. On the other hand, you probably know with a high level of confidence what makes you unhappy. Maybe it is an annoying person in your life, or a bad habit, a long commute, or whatever. You have actual experience dealing with the thing and know first hand that it is making you unhappy. It is very likely that removing that thing is going to make you less unhappy, which perhaps the same as making you more happy, but perhaps not, but in either case seems like an improvement.

It is so likely that removing bad things is going to lead to improvement, that as a general rule if you want to improve anything, it makes sense to start with improving through subtraction rather than addition. For a thing that you want to improve, survey all the changes that could plausibly make sense. Then, group them into changes by addition or changes by subtraction. Then set aside the list of positive changes, and do the negative changes first because they are more likely to be successful.

In the realm of politics, not to be too political, if I want to improve things then I can think of at least a couple people that I would really love to never serve public office again, and that not having these people would have a very limited downside, as compared to making some structural change to governance, which, who knows what the downstream impacts of that would be? Interestingly, the Greeks (specifically the Athenians) had just such a process, which is where the word ostracize comes from.

As a Heuristic for Knowledge

(Work in progress)