

Collection of Observations, 2001-2005  
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*Circa 2001*  
INFINITE LIVES

Assuming that all of the matter that makes up our solar system is able to return to its present state and orientation (instead of continually moving in one direction), then eventually, wouldn't all of the atoms of the world at some point recombine by chance in exactly the same way they are now, even if it took a googolplex years to do so? This would mean that we would relive our lives over and over forever.

*Saturday, 7 December 2002*  
PERSON

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*9 January 2004*  
ON CHALLENGING ORTHODOXY

It is an oft-cited fact of history that many of the theories once held with ultimate devotion were later modified or disproved altogether. The geocentric model of the universe—maintained with such unrelenting sedulousness that Galileo was imprisoned for life as a result of his challenges to it—is now nearly universally accepted as indisputably false. The basic foundations of Newtonian physics have met a similar fate. Several of the political platforms considered crazy radicalism a hundred years ago have not only been fully implemented but have been broadly accepted by all but the most extreme political thinkers: social security, a progressive income tax, direct popular election of senators, female suffrage, and unfettered racial equality. It is amusing and motivating to think how much of the agenda of today's "far left" will one day be seen as indispensable by all but the most reactionary elements of society. History is truly replete with instances in which putatively irrefragable beliefs have been radically altered or completely abandoned.

And yet, it is essential to bear in mind a caveat that can be too readily forgotten: many—in fact, almost all—of the heretical, unorthodox ideas that have been expounded throughout history were in fact erroneous, while the orthodoxy is usually more correct. (This evaluation would unavoidably be based on our own understanding of "truth," which, as much as it may contain "errors" of such magnitude that we really understand nothing at all, is the best standard of measurement we have.) Columbus's belief that the earth's circumference was only 3,000 miles rather than 12,000, as most intellectuals of his time correctly knew, is an example demonstrating that challenges to established belief are generally wrong. So was Tycho Brahe's belief—challenging traditional Roman-Catholic doctrine—that the planets revolve around the sun but that the sun revolves around the earth. It is difficult for me to produce more examples at present, undoubtedly because history emphasizes those theorists who got things "right" rather than the many more who

got things “wrong.” Nevertheless, this idea can even be seen in observation of one’s own thought process: most bad ideas are dismissed, and it is only those few good ideas which are remembered.

It is important to keep this in mind in order to avoid precipitate acquiescence to any radical idea on the sole basis that unorthodoxies of the past were later shown to be correct. It is true that some were; it is more importantly true, however, that most were not. If one were to gamble on the truth of an orthodox versus an unorthodox belief without any knowledge of their bases of asseveration, it would almost certainly be wise to bet on the former.

This is not to suggest that orthodoxy should not be questioned or that people should not develop new theories. It demands, rather, an open mind that does not blindly adhere to any universal test of validity other than the rigorous and thorough evaluation of the merits of any and all ideas. We cannot judge the quality of a hypothesis by its source alone, whether we assert its veracity or fallaciousness due only to its unorthodoxy. We must judge each proposition with unrelenting use of evidence, experimentation, and solid reason.

*Saturday, 14 February 2004*

#### MEANS AND ENDS

In the past, I have explicated my doctrine of ends and means in this way: an act is justified if and only if the following two conditions are satisfied—<sup>1)</sup> the net positive ends outweigh the net negative means <sup>2)</sup> the same ends could not be achieved through less pernicious means.

I will now present a more mathematical representation of this doctrine, one which allows for a greater range of possibilities. This expression is based on a few assumptions that must be presently laid out. First, it must be assumed that effects of an action can be considered “positive” if the effect is “good” and “negative” if the effect is “bad.” It is obvious that all changes are much too complex and can be viewed from too many perspectives for a simplistic + or – sign to define them; indeed, the ideas of “good” and “bad” themselves are wholly relative concepts. However, for the purposes of this expression, this reality must be ignored. Secondly, it must be assumed that the extent of an effect can be quantified. For example, we might define the preclusion of a kilogram of carbon dioxide emissions to be equal to one significance unit ( $-1 \text{ kg CO}_2 = 1 \text{ significance unit}$ ). This is prerequisite for the comparison of effects with each other. Finally, when the numerical representation of an effect is expressed, it must be assumed that the number is the net sum of all of the positive components and all of the negative components of that effect. For instance, a murder including -100 significance units for immoral death, -100 significance units for emotional trauma of family and friends, -2 significance units for waste of resources during the murder, and +40 significance unit for a reduction in overpopulation might have a net numerical value of -162 significance units.

Let  $e$  equal the net sum of all of the “ends” of an action. Let  $m$  equal the net sum of all of the “means” necessary to perform that action. Note that it is possible for either  $e$  or  $m$  to be either positive or negative; it is often the case that the ends and the means

employed to accomplish those ends are both harmful or are both beneficial— $e$  does not always have to be positive and  $m$  does not always have to be negative. If we define the variable itself to represent not just the absolute value of the significance quantification but also the attached positive or negative sign, then the net result of any action is defined as  $m + e$ . Thus, if the net effects of the ends have a value of 128 significance units and the net effects of the means have a value of  $-23$  significance units, the ultimate value of the action is  $+105$  significance units.

The importance of this expression lies in the way in which it is used. It is obvious that if  $m + e > 0$ , the action should be commenced and if  $m + e < 0$ , the action should not be performed. However, it is also true that if  $m + e$  for one action is  $+12$  significance units and for another action,  $+7$  significance units, the first action should be selected in place of the second one. (If both actions achieve exactly the same ends, then the first one would be done to the complete exclusion of the other; if not, they both might potentially be executed since both are still positive.) A general rule for the optimum selection of a single action, then, is to choose the action for which  $m + e$  has the highest possible value. If we assume that both  $m$  and  $e$  for the failure to take any action at all are equal to 0 significance units, then we are able to account for situations wherein any action taken will have a negative value for  $m + e$ ; choosing the highest  $m + e$  value is still the best option in this case, since the highest  $m + e$  value is that of no action, namely, 0 significance units.

The determination of all of the effects of an option—much less the precise assignment of numerical values for the magnitude of those effects—is truly impossible in the real world. There are simply too many factors to consider and not enough resources or time to consider them (indeed, the value of  $m + e$  for extensive research on a trivial topic will almost certainly be negative). However, we can employ this mathematical expression to the extent that we can determine rough estimates of impacts of our choices. The expression is intended not so much for actual calculation as it is for representing a rational mindset of cost-benefit calculation that always constitutes the best way to make a decision.

*Monday, 23 February 2004*

#### REACTIONS TO *ROMEO AND JULIET*

Today during the end of third and all of fourth block, I attended a production of *Romeo and Juliet* performed by Shakespeare & Company in the high school auditorium.

One aspect in which I was particularly interested was Shakespeare's consistent eschewal of the superfluous word *do*. Instead of saying, "I do not know," the characters spoke simply, "I know not." The unnecessary insertion of the word *do* into such phrases in modern English has not only extended sentences but has multiplied the number of words for which contractions are common (*don't* in particular). I myself decided a few months ago to avoid, whenever possible, the use of inordinately and unnecessarily phrased sentences by replacing "I didn't go" with "I went not" and "Do you have a crumb" with "Have you a crumb." This decision was not consciously a reversion to Shakespearean language—although it may well have been subconsciously encouraged. It is a terribly sensible and obvious manner of expression. It would be interesting to learn the wherefore of the widespread conversion to overly roundabout phrasing with *do*!

As a later note, I must explain that I do not advocate the complete abolition of the word *do*. It has a purposeful use when it serves to emphasize the positive nature of a statement (e.g., “I *do* have a piece of paper.” “It *did* seem nice.”) However, the majority of the cases in which *do* is used would sound more concise and simple were the word avoided.

*Friday, 27 February 2004*

#### AFFIRMATIVE ACTION FOR WORDS

I have realized that one of the aspects of poor writing that I notice most readily is unnecessary word repetition. Unless the phrases are in a parallel construction, the unnecessary repetition of a word sounds awkward and distracts the reader from the more important purpose of the piece. The apparent flow of a sentence or paragraph is greatly enhanced when the writer is able to employ purposefully clever synonyms instead of copying the same words used before. Even when any synonym available lacks the exact expressiveness of the original word, it is still best—in most cases—to select one of the inferior words, for the disadvantage of losing precision is usually outweighed by the benefits of maintaining smooth flow and clever diction. This, one might say with levity, is tantamount to affirmative action for words: even when a new word is not quite as qualified as the original one, the importance of word diversity should usually supersede preciseness.

*Wednesday, 14 April 2004*

#### THE INTANGIBILITY OF PREVENTION

I have noted this before but I shall explain it again: one reason that people tend to focus more on treatment and charity instead of long-term prevention is that the success of prevention lies in what *doesn't* occur.

Short-term solutions are visible and tangible. One can see that by donating to a food bank, someone will have that food to eat. One can see visibly see how much the treatment of a disease helps a person to recover. These approaches not only offer an immediate reward of seeing one's effort pay off; their effects are predictable and certain.

The benefits of long-sighted actions, on the other hand, are distant and murky. It is impossible to know if writing a letter about AIDS in Africa will ever actually help anyone or if the letter may as well have not been written (apart from the subsidiary benefits of making your members of Congress aware that constituents are informed about their actions). The connection between a letter and a Congressional response is in itself intangible and invisible, much less the connection between a letter and the prevention of AIDS for many people.

Moreover, the effects of prevention are themselves rather invisible and easily forgotten. When one treats the symptoms of an illness or donates food to a soup kitchen, it is easy to see how miserable the situation was before and how much better it has become afterwards. With prevention, one never sees the “before” picture; the best one can do is imagine how the situation might have been without intervention. It is too easy to take the results of prevention for granted and, in the process, to forget how valuable that prevention

truly was. It is better to prevent an illness than to treat it; it is better to prevent poverty than to donate to a food bank. But it is too often a natural response to value the treatment solutions over the preventive ones.

Recognizing the importance of prevention over treatment, the question becomes, “What degree of long-sightedness is best?” The first degree might be simple charity and treatment: food donations, cleanups of pollution, treating cancer, and such. The second degree might be established prevention mechanisms to reduce poverty, to diminish pollution, to prevent exposure to carcinogens. A third degree might be to seek to reform the political and economic system entirely so that the other two elements fall into place (this is the argument behind campaign-finance reform, for instance). A balance must be reached between long-sightedness and certitude of eventual efficacy. The third degree might seem the most sensible, but one must also consider whether or not it would be possible. Of course, there are infinite sub-degrees within each level, as well. Perhaps a mix between the second and third degrees, accommodating for specific conditions of reality, would be the most sagacious of choices.

*Wednesday, 14 April 2004*

#### DISRUPTION OF PASSIVITY

While writing the handout for Bread for the World’s 2004 Offering of Letters campaign issue, I was struck in particular by this statistic: “10 million children a year die of preventable causes, half of them from hunger. This is equivalent to one child every 3 seconds.” The power of the statistic is heightened if one snaps one’s fingers every three seconds, making more vivid the preventable death of the child in that time.

This statistic has stuck in my head, and I repeatedly return to it. I realize that it is necessary for one’s own well being to have some time to relax and to engage in other pursuits. But we must never become comfortable in lives of political inactivity. We must remember that regardless of how many other obligations we may have, we cannot ignore this obligation, which is supremely paramount above all others, for life’s meaning is to be found precisely in improving (and, in this case, saving) the lives of others.

One might argue that a single individual should not bear the supposed “burden” of pushing aside other possibilities in his or her own future just for these issues. But the fact is that too few other people are working on these problems. For an individual to refuse to fully utilize the power and leverage that come with being a United States citizen to save and improve the lives of countless others would be an act of unforgivable selfishness. And what is more, the complete devotion of oneself to that cause is not a “burden” or “sacrifice” but an opportunity for unmatched self-fulfillment. A life spent on any cause other than that of the advancement of other lives is a life of regrettably unfulfilled possibility.

The point is to keep this statistic in the back of one’s mind, to keep its power alive, and to let it come out from time to time, to jolt one out of passivity.

*Wednesday, 14 April 2004*

#### FULL UNDERSTANDING

In math and its subsidiaries, such as physics, there are two degrees of understanding.

The first is the intuitive knowledge that something will be the case. Whether we have experienced it or whether we conceptualize it through example, it just makes sense. For example, it is intuitive that an equilateral triangle will have equal angles of 60 degrees. Sometimes concepts are not immediately intuitive but can become so through analogy, such as the realization that the total resistance of two wires connected in parallel is *less than* the resistance of each wire individually by comparison to the amount of water that can flow through two pipes rather than one.

The second mode of understanding is proofs and derivations. We may intuitively *know* that all of the angles of an equilateral triangle are 60 degrees, but we also must prove it to be sure. We must see how a formula is derived in order to understand completely how it works and why it works.

Complete understanding of something generally requires both degrees of thought. One cannot fully understand simply through intuition, nor can one fully understand merely through abstract derivation. Seeing how a proof works and then realizing that it makes common sense is the path to genuine understanding. Too often, we are forced to settle for one (or, sometimes, for neither), but when we are able to have both, we see concepts more clearly than ever before.

*Postscript from 29 June 2005:* The same process of understanding applies to morality. Ethical questions should not be solely decided on the basis of pure intuition or on the basis of pure reason; only a synthesis of the two will produce anything of worth.

The basis of morality must always be intuition: this grounds and gives meaning to any reasoning that one hopes to undertake. For example, one must intuitively establish that “suffering is bad” before the rational realization that “this action will reduce suffering” has any moral significance. To use the terminology of argument, one must establish a “warrant” before an audience will make the leap from one’s “reasons” to one’s “stated conclusion.” Such warrants can only arise from intuitive emotion.

Once basic assumptions have been established, however, it is best to let reason take its course. Beyond the most basic expressions of value, pure intuition becomes fuzzy, capricious, and self-contradictory. (See, for example, Peter Singer’s “On the Appeal to Intuitions in Ethics.”) It is here that reason must take hold and guide our emotional energies toward those decisions that genuinely are most in line with our basic intuitions.

*Sunday, 25 April 2004*

#### OLD ENGLISH AND GERMAN

It is helpful to be familiar with older English in understanding German. One obvious reason is that German has retained the Shakespearean construction of present tense verb that involve *not*. For example, “Ich weiss nicht” is translated as “I know not” rather than “I do not know.” German has sensibly retained this simpler construction that English has foolishly abandoned.

A second example is less forceful. German, more so than English, makes frequent use of the combination of a preposition and *where-*, *there-*, or *here-*. For example, it is far more common to hear the word “damit” in German than it is to hear “therewith” in modern English (though I highly prefer these words because they consolidate two into one). I shall not be so audacious as to aver with certainty my conjecture that the *where-*, *there-*, and *here-* words were more commonly used in Old English than in modern, but that would seem likely inasmuch as Old English generally used more sensible and what would now be considered “archaic” modes of expression than does the present form.

This second example may be expanded by a fascinating detail. I remembered from looking up the word “wherefore” in the dictionary that, while it now means “therefore,” it formerly meant “for what [reason]?” or “why?”—a meaning that is entirely more logical than its present one because it follows the pattern of other words like “whereof” or “wherein.” Today, one of the questions on a reading section of a German Regents asked the following: “Weshalb waren die Leute in dem Büro versammelt?” I knew that the German word “deshalb” means “therefore”; thence, I could determine that the word “weshalb” would mean “wherefore.” And I also realized that most of the aspects of Old English that are similar to German are similar in their archaic forms not in modern alterations. Hence, I conjectured that “weshalb” would not mean “wherefore” in the sense of “therefore” but rather “wherefore” in the sense of “for what?” Upon looking the word up in the dictionary, my suspicion was confirmed by the dictionary’s direction of readers to “warum” to find the meaning of “weshalb.”

*Tuesday, 13 July 2004*

#### REVIEW OF MR. SMITH

I received my English-12 summer assignments in the mail a week or two ago, and one of them was to watch any two movies from a list of American movies rated among the hundred best of the century. Then, we are expected to write a review of each movie and present which we preferred. Tonight, I watched *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*. I wished to record my reactions in some form while the film remained fresh in my memory, and so I have decided to record them herein. From this initial record, I shall be able to write my final review with greater ease. Here are my comments:

1. The principal characters generally seemed well rounded. One could certainly categorize them according to the dominant traits they exhibited, but each had some moment in which he or she showed a more complicated side.

The first was Mr. Smith himself. He was usually presented as a simple, idealistic man who believed in American principles and freedoms, and who was appalled by the graft he found. At the beginning of the film, Mr. Smith was highly, perhaps excessively, unfamiliar with Washington. He seemed to lack even the social skills of a normal person as he ran off on a bus tour of the capital and as he acted astounded at the fact that he had his own private office. This was perhaps unbelievable, but it allowed for a stronger contrast against how he would later behave.

He next became dejected and disillusioned at the perceived hopelessness of trying to win against Taylor and his power. He was ready to give up, demonstrating that he was not a limitless fountain of optimistic fortitude.

But when his secretary restores his faith in himself, Mr. Smith adopts his third and final attitude: aggressive determination to fight those out to destroy his reputation and dream, culminating in his day-long filibuster and final speech. And though each of these might be considered similar, they do demonstrate some breadth of emotion and, hence, character.

Mr. Smith's secretary displayed greater range in her character. Beginning as a dispirited and pessimistic secretary so drowned in the reality of politics that her idealism had been trampled, she soon rediscovered hope while listening to Mr. Smith describe his boys' camp. She later showed apathy and abandon while she was drunk, outrage at Mr. Smith for his naivety, and remorse at having rated him. Hereafter, she became largely one-sided in her hope and desire to see Mr. Smith succeed.

Perhaps greatest reality of character was manifested in the behavior of Mr. Smith's Senatorial counterpart from Montana. He explained, in a speech that itself introduced a new level of complexity to the movie, how he had started out an optimistic senator like Mr. Smith but how he soon learned that he had to bow to Taylor and his cronies if he wanted a chance of survival. And by doing that, he argued, he had been able to serve his state well in many other respects. The Senate is no place for genuine, honest people, he warned, and his participation in the game was the best that could be done to help out his people.

He said this because he cared so much for Mr. Smith and hated to see him crushed by reality. And this affection for his new colleague led him to momentarily refuse to allow Taylor to get tough with Mr. Smith, before realizing that he had to agree to what Taylor told him. And this appreciation for Mr. Smith made his task of framing him and castigating him all the more pungent and searing. Mr. Smith's counterpart showed all of the pain and ambivalence of a real person caught in such a situation. Even his outburst at the end, proclaiming his culpability in having framed his colleague, was a believable result of stress, sleep deprivation, and an inner feeling of revulsion to all he had done over the last twenty years. This character was perhaps most well rounded and best played.

2. The plot and script were very well crafted and woven. Not only were many of the speeches some of the most eloquent and powerful words I have heard in a long time, but the storyline itself was highly intricate. The fact that Mr. Smith wanted to build a boys' camp not only coincided nicely with the dam project, but it also created a fitting way for Taylor and his gang to craft charges against the new senator. Even Mr. Smith's refusal to move the location of the camp later played into the hands of the framers. And because the bill that Mr. Smith's filibuster held up was for emergency relief to the hungry and unemployed, the Taylor newspapers had a substantive claim wherewith to slander the idealistic fighter. It also added a degree of complexity to the story, because the audience realized that there were real consequences to what Mr. Smith was doing, and that Mr. Smith was not entirely righteous in what he did.

3. Many parts of the movie were overly simplistic. The early scenes of Washington sights and ideas of liberty, equality, and justice were conventional patriotic images and sounds. But I realize also that they were meant to demonstrate Mr. Smith's



perhaps naïve idealism and blind patriotism at the beginning; in that way, they served a legitimate purpose. But other aspects of the film were less justifiably simple. Mr. Smith's cause was shown to be completely good, and the opposition was shown to be entirely greedy and wrong. This generalization obviously clashes with my antipathy toward moral absolutism. But I was impressed by the speech of Mr. Smith's Senatorial counterpart inasmuch as it argued that the best way to be a positive influence was to play along with corruption; this introduced a complicating idea to the otherwise straightforward message.

*Wednesday, 25 August 2004*

#### THE TRUNK OF THE PROBLEM

Today, I cleared off sumac branches and attached grape vines from a small part of the septic line, using my hacksaw and scythe. During the process, I was reminded of an exquisitely elaborate metaphor that I by no means invented. Here it is below, in my own words. (Assume for the moment that world problems can be objectively identified and quantified.)

Picture the problems of the world as a forest of entirely invasive trees. Some of the problems are tall; others are short; some are quickly growing; others are stunted; some are just germinating; others are dead and decomposing. Next picture those people who are dedicated to addressing these problems as saws of various shapes, sizes, and speeds. These saws select a tree and begin cutting.

Those saws involved with private charitable donations to the poor are to be seen at the very tops of the trees, cutting the smallest of branches because those are the fastest and easiest to remove. These upper branches, however, are quick to grow back, and the saws are barely able to maintain equilibrium between removal and regrowth. But they are at least helping to stall further growth of the upper branches.

Other saws are engaged in the struggle to institute government-based charity. These saws are cutting branches slightly farther down from the private charities, and sometimes the private charities are cutting small pieces of the larger branch that these government-charity saws are themselves cutting. The government-charity branches are thicker and harder to cut through, but they eventually succeed, so long as they do not give up first. When they finally excise a branch that was also cut by a private-charity saw, both saws go off to find a new branch. Than the private-charity branches, the government-charity ones stay cut-off for longer durations. But they, too, eventually grew back, slowly and steadily.

Saws are also cutting at the main trunks of trees, the same trees from which charity saws are cutting upper branches. These trunk saws are striving to reform the systems that make charity necessary, such as by providing a living wage to workers. Their tasks are protracted, and even with many different saws attacking the same trunk, progress is slow. The task is, at first, dauntingly difficult in the face of criticism of the saws as extremist radicals. However, as the tree slowly begins to tilt and as the social movement slowly begins to grow, the work becomes a little easier. Eventually, as the tree is about to topple over, the cutting becomes quick and facile, particularly now that many more saws have

joined in. The trunk will eventually grow back, but it will be slow and manageable for future cutting later on.

From this metaphorical perspective, it is clearly apparent that the trunk cutters are most sensible and effective over the long term; they achieve the highest ratio of mass of tree cut to amount of sawing performed, notwithstanding they take much longer to saw each branch. The only danger of their approach, however, is that their trunk will be abandoned before it is ever finished, or that they will never have the saw power requisite to overcome the tree's capacity to regrow even parts of its trunk that have been cut. The trunk cutters need to reach a certain critical mass of saws before they can finally topple the tree. And certainly if all of the saws that are working on the upper branches were to come down and join the trunk cutters, the process would move much more quickly. During that time, the tree would actually expand and grow more rapidly, but when the trunk was finally cut, that extra growth would be reversed along with a greater chunk of the original problem.

*Thursday, 30 December 2004*

#### EFFECTS OF A CAREER

Assume that the state of the world can be measured with a value  $w$ . This value measures the degree to which the world has fulfilled progressive objectives and is weighted in proportion to the magnitude of the achievement. Assume that working for progressive values results generally in an increase in  $w$ , and that working against progressive ideals causes  $w$  to decrease.

Now we may consider the impacts on  $w$  of employment in two very general types of careers: (1) employment with a progressive nonprofit organization (2) employment with a profit-minded corporation. The impact will depend on several factors:

(I) Is the position competitive? That is to say, will your employment in a certain job prevent someone else from employment in that organization?

If the position is not competitive, then your employment will expand the effect of the organization. Thus, noncompetitive employment with a nonprofit will increase  $w$ , and noncompetitive employment with a corporation will decrease  $w$ . If, however, the position is competitive, additional factors must be considered:

(II) Will you be more productive or less productive than the person whom you precluded from working?

If you are more productive,  $w$  will increase when you work at a nonprofit and  $w$  will decrease when you work at a corporation. If you are less productive, the reverse is true. If you are equally productive,  $w$  remains constant in both cases.

(III) If you work at a corporation, will you be more likely than the person whom you precluded from working to pursue progressive policies that are possible within your scope of authority? For example, if you worked at General Electric, would you be more likely to advocate a focus on alternative energy than someone else?

If the answer is yes,  $w$  increases; if the answer is no,  $w$  decreases.

It must also be acknowledged that any free-time progressive activity, regardless of the responses above, will increase  $w$ . It must be stated also that the above list is overly general; it is intended as a general guide for thought, not a specific calculation tool.

*Wednesday, 23 March 2005*

## RISKY BEHAVIOR

*I wrote the following in response to an article that dad sent to me concerning irrationality in making decisions that involve risk.*

This was a great article on one of my favorite subjects.

One sentence seemed initially sensible: "If the expected value [of damage] is higher than the cost of insurance, it is rational to buy the insurance." But if the insurance costed less than the expected value of damages, the insurance company would go bankrupt very quickly, because it would pay out more than it took in from the aggregate of its customers. I always thought that insurance worked because the expected value of damages is less than the cost of insurance, so that the insurance company makes profit in the difference between the two. The reason that a person buys insurance is only because of the principle (which we mentioned last night) that a loss of  $2x$  dollars is more than twice as bad as the loss of  $x$  dollars, especially as  $x$  gets into tens of thousands of dollars; in other words, it is worth paying some money--the amount of profit that the insurance company makes--to avoid the risk of a devastatingly great loss.

I was also interested in how I responded to the risk aversion and attraction for losses and gains: exactly the opposite of what most people would do. In the choice between gaining \$10,000 for sure or \$22,000 with probability 0.5, I chose the latter, on the logic that, since this is extra money in addition to what I am earning for subsistence, it does not hurt not to win the money, wherefore I may as well choose the option that gives me the greater expected value. With the choice between losing \$10,000 for sure or \$18,000 with probability 0.5, I would probably choose the former because a loss cuts into my subsistence income and losing twice as much is more than twice as bad when it cuts into subsistence money. (If I were rich enough to have my living unaffected by the higher loss, though, I would choose the option of lower expected value.) In short, I choose the option with the more positive expected value unless the worse of the two options would actually cut into essential funds.

The "outrage factor" theory explains why people care so irrationally about preventing terrorism. It along with homicide are the ultimate in outrage because they are deliberate (and hence, most outraging).

The discussion of worst-case expectations for ambiguous outcomes is actually rational because of the  $x$  and  $2x$  principle. A large loss is more bad than an equally large gain is good.

*Thursday, 24 March 2005*

## EPICUREANISM

I have for a long time known but only recently realized the following conclusion: my prevailing attitudes toward life are probably best described as Epicurean (with a capital “E”). My source of information herefor is Jostein Gaarder’s *Sophie’s World* (pages 132 – 134).

Epicurus adopted the philosophy of Aristippus, a pupil of Socrates, who believed that “The highest good is pleasure; the greatest evil is pain.” Though it may not seem like it, this sentence forms the basis of practically all of my opinions and attitudes. For example, I try to make ordinary, dull situations as enjoyable as possible simply because I wish to maximize pleasure: I think to myself that I have but a limited time in which to live, and if I wish to squeeze maximum enjoyment out of life, I might as well decide to be happy. This doctrine of mine has been explicated extensively elsewhere, most notably in my college Common-App essay. Aristippus’s doctrine also expresses the single reason that I am motivated to make the world a better place: I wish to reduce the suffering (pain) that people endure and create the economic and social conditions that will nurture pleasure. There is no other reason for wishing to help others that I could even imagine (except for perhaps religious devotion).

Furthermore, Epicurus refined his definitions in the same way that I do. “Pleasure” does not necessarily mean hedonistic, short-term sensuality (in fact, in most cases it means the opposite):

Epicurus emphasized that the pleasurable results of an action must always be weighed against its possible side effects.[...] Epicurus also believed that a pleasurable result in the short term must be weighed against the possibility of a greater, more lasting, or more intense pleasure in the long term.[...] Unlike animals, we are able to plan our lives. We have the ability to make a “pleasure calculation.”[...] Epicurus emphasized [...] that “pleasure” does not necessarily mean sensual pleasure—like eating chocolate, for instance. Values such as friendship and the appreciation of art also count. Moreover, the enjoyment of life required the old Greek ideals of self-control, temperance, and serenity (Gaarder 133).

Anyone who knows me or my writings will instantly understand how perfectly each of the above sentences captures my own disposition. I would add to the list of values that also count as pleasure political participation in pursuit of a better world. Unfortunately, Epicurus scorned political life in favor of secluded communal agrarianism (Gaarder 134). This is the only departure given in *Sophie’s World* between the philosophies of Epicurus and myself.

The final similarity lies in adherence to materialism. Epicurus accepted the atom theory of Democritus as a cure for religious superstition (Gaarder 133). He moreover dismissed fear of death in the same way that I do: “Death does not concern us, because as long as we exist, death is not here. And when it does come, we no longer exist.” I would just add, of course, that we should not ignore death, just not fear what happens afterward; the realization that one will eventually cease to live should be constantly in our minds as a

spur to make the most of our scarce time and to maximize pleasure while we have the chance to do so. I'm sure that Epicurus would have said the same.

*Sunday, 3 April 2005*

#### ALONE IN THE WILDERNESS

Today I watched the first half hour of a PBS special entitled *Alone in the Wilderness*. It relates the story of a middle-aged man who decided to live in Alaska on his own for one year. The footage consists of tripod-mounted camera shots that the man took as he built a cabin, caught fish, and explored his surroundings.

To describe the man as assiduous would be an understatement: he built the frame of his cabin in two weeks, a fireplace in a matter of days, and tools in just a few hours, all while he fished and collected berries to eat. Whenever I lack inspiration, I should recall this man's efforts, as well as those of countless others who have done similarly strenuous tasks.

*Saturday, 9 April 2005*

#### BEYOND INTUITION

I have of late noticed several examples for which the obvious common-sense response to a proposition is erroneous. This is obviously true for many (if not most) conclusions of science, the heliocentric model, relativity, and quantum theory being just a few examples. However, I have also found this idea applicable to moral and social decisions.

One example is the following statement: Swarthmore could help low-income students by increasing tuition costs. While at first seeming ridiculous, the statement is in fact true. Given that Swarthmore gives financial-aid payments on the basis of demonstrated need, an increase in tuition should cause an equally large increase in financial aid for poorer students, since the amount that families are able to contribute would remain constant. Thus, a tuition hike would have no impact on students receiving financial aid. But it would increase costs for wealthier students, meaning that the college would take in more money than before. If program and maintenance costs remained constant, this would mean more money available for financial aid and, hence, lower effective costs for poor students.

Another example is moral culpability. According to conventional standards, a person who steals from another has committed a wrongdoing. Similarly, one who murders another person deserves punishment. But what happens if one moves beyond conventional definitions of immorality to include not just literal but effective crimes?

Theft involves many negative consequences—a breakdown of trust, insecurity for those with private property, wasting of money on installation of security systems, et cetera. In some cases, one of the worst aspects of stealing is that it makes one person richer and another person poorer. Consider two people who each have \$100,000. If Person 1 steals \$50,000 from Person 2, the effect is to give the former \$150,000 while the latter is left with \$50,000. Such redistribution is almost universally condemned. But what if Person 1

started out with \$150,000 and Person 2 started with \$50,000? The effect is the same as the theft described earlier (except for the other, concomitant consequences that theft entails), but in this case, the situation is almost universally accepted and sometimes even embraced. I am not suggesting necessarily that the government should equalize all wealth; I simply mean to provoke thought concerning beliefs that are considered obvious.

A similar argument may be made with respect to murder. If Person 1 kills Person 2, the act is considered reprehensible, as well it should be. What if Person 1 sits by while Person 2 dies in an easily preventable manner? This, too, is generally considered evil. But when deaths are less directly visible, the generally accepted moral standards are absent. For example, a millionaire's decision to build a third summer home is conventionally considered his or her own private business. But the money required for such a luxury could have been given to a lobbying organization or—if one does not consider donations to such groups to necessarily save lives, since those on the right actually promote harmful policies—to a widely admired charity like Doctors without Borders or Oxfam. Putting aside the possibility that the charity's activities actually result in more human suffering (which I consider unlikely though not impossible), failure to donate to the group caused more deaths. The effect is the same as murder: in both cases, one person's decision caused another person to die (indeed, the money spent on a summer home probably could have saved several dozen lives). But while we express so much outrage at direct murder, we seem indifferent to effective murder. As before, I am not necessarily suggesting any specific course of action with this discussion; I merely intend to raise questions to provoke contemplation.

*Saturday, 30 April 2005*

#### ONE PERSON, MANY PEOPLE

"He who saves one life, it is as if he has saved the entire world." --The Talmud

I think not that this should be seen as hyperbole, because the whole world really is much more important than one person. The reason it's interesting is that, to the one person who stays alive, the earth still exists. The universe only exists in the minds of those conscious enough to realize it, so if a person ceases to exist, the portion of reality which that person's perception created is lost.

*Wednesday, 25 May 2005*

#### VOLUNTARY VERSUS COERCED DECISIONS FROM A UTILITARIAN PERSPECTIVE

*Assumptions:* I shall first of all assume that people will always make those voluntary decisions that maximize *their own personal* net utility. (I believe that it would be possible to construct alternate utilitarian models without this assumption, but I shall not explore that here.) One might challenge this statement on the grounds that people make plenty of decisions that not only do not maximize their personal utility but that result in negative net utility (for example, abusing alcohol, smoking, and driving recklessly); however, my assumption implies that people will always be "rational" in considering their

options—meaning that they will look at long-term consequences with the same concern as short-range benefits. “Rational” also means that people making decisions have sufficiently broad and accurate knowledge of the consequences involved; plenty of people bought duct tape so that they could seal off their houses in the event of a biological terrorist attack, not because it actually served to prevent a significant loss of utility but only because their perceptions of the risk of such an attack and of the ability of duct tape to protect them were significantly off. Perfect knowledge of consequences is, of course, impossible, but there nevertheless exists a wide spectrum for how well informed various decisions are. (These rather strong assumptions of rational behavior will be relaxed toward the end of this essay.)

*Voluntary Utilitarianism:* To take an example, Person A is considering whether to go jogging or biking for half an hour. On this particular day, the former option will provide 15 utils in total, while the latter will provide only 10 utils; obviously, Person A will go jogging.

What about altruistic decisions in which Person B sacrifices for the benefit of Person C? For example, Person B might choose to donate blood to save Person C’s life. Is this not a case in which Person B deliberately chooses an option that will entail personal net negative utility? Consider, though, that there is a reason why Person B made the decision to donate blood: taking this action provides Person B the satisfaction of knowing that he or she helped another—which is to say, taking this action gave Person B positive utility. If the assumption in the first sentence is held, this positive utility must exceed the inconvenience of giving blood enough not only that the net personal utility of the action becomes positive but that it becomes more positive than that of all other options that would utilize the same resources. Thus, if we accept our initial assumption, we see that altruistic decisions not only increase the utility of society as a whole but necessarily increase the utility of the person making them, as well.

This might be best elucidated with example numbers. Let the discomfort for Person B of giving blood be -10 utils. The benefit of the donation to Person C might be +1000 utils. Ignoring other associated changes in utility (such as the relief of Person C’s friends and relatives), the net social utility of the option *given only the numbers listed so far* is 990 utils. Of course the action should be taken because its net social results are so positive (presumably higher than those of any other option), but our initial assumption predicates that an individual will only do something when *his or her personal* utility is maximized. So Person B will only give blood if the resulting net *personal* utility is positive. This condition is met when Person B’s individual happiness at helping someone else is high enough (say +50 utils) that the net personal utility of the action is very positive (40 utils). If Person B does not assign enough value to saving someone else’s life (for example, if Person B feels only 5 utils of satisfaction), he or she will not donate the blood *even though the net social benefit is still extraordinarily high*. Thus, it is now clear that the objective of what I shall call “voluntary utilitarianism” is to change people’s perceptions of altruistic satisfaction so as to align people’s personal decisions with maximum social utility—that is, to make individuals happiest when they are doing what will make society happiest.

*Coercive Utilitarianism:* In some cases, it may not be possible or effective to pursue voluntary utilitarianism because it might be hard to persuade people to do *proprio*

*motu* what is best for humanity as a whole. In these cases, the best option may be “coercive utilitarianism”—which I shall define to mean forcing people to make the socially optimal decision. A fitting example is taxation of the rich to pay for roads and schools.

Coercive utilitarianism works in the opposite way from its voluntary counterpart. Instead of increasing the utility that one personally derives from choosing the best option, coercion reduces the utility resulting from all of the other options so that the socially optimal choice provides the highest possible personal utility—even though such utility may still be negative.

For example, Rich Person D may experience -50 utils if he or she pays \$1 million in income taxes but would feel 0 utils if he or she successfully evaded those taxes. The social benefit resulting from \$1 million of extra tax revenue might be +100,000 utils, making the net social benefit of taxing Person D 999,950 utils. But right now, Rich Person D would experience more individual utility by not paying taxes (0 utils) than by paying taxes (-50 utils). So if the government cannot persuade Rich Person D on the basis of altruism, it must resort to coercion: namely, threatening to bring charges serious enough that Rich Person D would feel more negative utility from not paying his or her taxes (say, -200 utils) than from paying them (still -50 utils). Thus, paying the \$1 million has become the option of maximum individual utility—even though that utility is negative.

It is important to note that, in forcing Rich Person D to make the socially optimal decision, his or her personal utility had to be reduced. This is what distinguishes voluntary and coercive policies: while the former make both the individual and society happier, the latter make society happier at the expense of the individual.

*Relaxing the assumptions for “rational” decision making:* I shall now return to the assumption made in the first paragraph that humans act rationally in that they consider long-term utility to have the same value as that in the short term. Obviously, humanity has substantial room for improvement in this regard. The point that I wish to make here is that efforts to address myopia may be viewed under the same framework as I have outlined above for addressing selfishness. Sometimes the most effectual option is to change people’s perceptions of the worth of long-term utility so that they will derive more short-term utility from choosing the foresighted option (think, *exempli gratia*, of health-education programs). And in other cases, coercion will be more effective in forcing people to choose the long-term decision by reducing the utility of more immediately gratifying options (think of the seat-belt law). Or sometimes a combination of both would work best. Perhaps the new assumption on which the model should be based is that “People will always choose the decision that furnishes the maximum amount of *immediate* net personal utility.” The utilitarian goal then becomes not only to align maximum personal utility with maximum social utility but also maximum immediate personal utility with maximum long-range personal utility.

The remaining assumption for “rational” behavior that must be relaxed is “sufficiently broad and accurate knowledge of the consequences involved.” Here, “sufficient” implies not consummately detailed familiarity with a subject but experience adequate to prevent serious harm. Obviously, it would not be a utilitarian decision to waste one’s time in trying to learn the details of every aspect of life; one should educate oneself up to the point at which the long-range social utility of making oneself aware falls



below the long-range social utility of doing some other action in the same amount of time. Nonetheless, there are many topics about which many people want even the most basic knowledge: sex education, physical education, nutrition, and the economic and environmental effects of government policy. When people lack adequate knowledge of these subjects, they can make perfectly “rational” decisions within the framework outlined above, but their decisions may still be far from socially optimal. Thus, the third obligation of utilitarianism—apart from aligning personal utility with social utility and immediate utility with long-range utility—is to ensure that people are sufficiently informed about their decisions.

*Friday, 27 May 2005*

#### THE ALL-OR-NOTHING FALLACY

One common defense of direct charity over political advocacy is that the results of the former are clear and certain, the benefits of the latter are up to chance. Whereas spending an hour serving food at a soup kitchen demonstrably gives a few extra people a meal, using the same time to write a letter supporting a living wage will most likely not change a legislator’s position, much less the final outcome of the bill’s passage. As a consequence, many people donate to their local food bank rather than Food First. I intend presently to challenge this widespread argument.

Assumption 1: The policies that advocacy groups fight to implement are not misguided and will genuinely address the problem.

Assumption 2: Unless a letter or advocacy campaign actually changes the vote on a bill, it is useless. (I strongly reject this assumption on the grounds that some base level of constant political pressure is important to keep one’s cause in the back of the minds of politicians, strategists, and the media. This may not change a legislator’s decision on one particular bill, but it will continue to have a somewhat subconscious affect throughout the legislator’s term. The reason that I have included this assumption is that it represents a concession to some charity advocates who might dispute it; including it means that I shall be arguing on their terms. Moreover, it simplifies the analysis.)

Assumption 3: A certain critical mass of citizen activism will at some point force the government to change its position (this might be 1,000 letters or 100,000,000 protestors).

Assumption 4: Once critical mass has been reached and the policy implemented, count the resources (time and money) required to achieve that critical mass and count the magnitude of the change that will result. Then consider what magnitude of change could have been accomplished had that same amount of resources been utilized for charity.

*This piece has been abandoned here, because it has failed to take the intended direction.*

*Friday, 27 May 2005*

#### THE ALL-OR-NOTHING FALLACY

People too often attempt to rationalize their own failure to take a certain utilitarian action with the following statement: "One more person will not make a difference. Sure, if 10,000 other people joined me, we could really have an impact. But the effect of one person is too insignificant to measure, so it doesn't matter if I take this action or not." This argument may be invoked in trying to justify inaction in two distinct types of situations; in both of them, it fails.

I shall call the first type of situation one of "continuously distributed effects" or, for short, "continuous." That is to say, the amount of effect that one's action can have is, for all practical purposes, continuously distributed (i.e., it can take any real-number value). An example is greenhouse-gas emissions from driving one's car: for every extra meter that one drives, a slightly higher amount of carbon dioxide is emitted into the air, so that driving one meter less has a quantifiably smaller adverse impact.

The second situation is one of "discretely distributed effects" or, abbreviated, "discrete." Here there exist only a finite number of possible outcomes, and usually there are just two: success or failure. For example, passage of a bill in its final form can be considered discrete, because it either passes or fails, and there is no in-between. A bill to which two amendments have been proposed has four possible outcomes: passage with both amendments, passage with only the first, passage with only the second, or defeat.

Application of the all-or-nothing fallacy to continuous situations is rather easily refuted. Those who accept the fallacy generally believe that, were there a critical mass of people taking the given action, the results would far outweigh the costs. For example, people who feel that it would be useless for them individually to donate \$20 to an advocacy organization would welcome a society in which everyone gives \$20 to such organizations, because the enormous results of the latter situation are much larger. This feature is what makes the fallacy "all-or-nothing" rather than just "nothing": under the former justification of inaction, people claim that if enough others took the action, the problem would be all solved, but if only they act, nothing will happen; those with the latter view do not believe that action will make a difference whether they alone or a group of ten million other people do it. The latter view may at many times be admirable; the former view is not. Because the effect distribution is continuous, the result when one person takes the action is one-one millionth of the result when a million people take the action; the burden of one person taking the action is one-one millionth of the burden of a million people taking the action. So if the costs of a million people doing something are outweighed by the benefits, then the cost of one person doing that same thing will also be outweighed by the benefits. This assumes, of course, that the relationship between number of people taking action and amount of benefit is best approximated by a line (rather than a parabola, exponential graph, logarithmic graph, et cetera), but I think that such an assumption is fairly accurate for the types of actions from which people genuinely try to exempt themselves by means of the continuous all-or-nothing fallacy: donating money, driving less, recycling, conserving paper, conserving electricity, and others.

The all-or-nothing argument takes on the appearance of greater sophistication in discrete situations. For instance, a single person who campaigned for John Kerry in Ohio in 2004 can tell himself or herself that his or her effort was futile, because George W. Bush would have won the state either way. Similarly, if a person wrote a letter to a wavering

member of Congress whose vote determined whether or not the Clear Skies bill got out of committee and the Congressperson ultimately decided to vote contrary to the wishes of the letter writer, the letter writer might feel that his or her effort was wasted and that he or she should not have bothered. These positions seem *prima facie* defensible.

But they are not. Before the event in question actually happened, the person deciding to act did not already know what the result would be. Under other circumstances, that person might have been the deciding factor. And since the wisdom of a decision is determined by the probability of the possible outcomes at the time the decision was made—not by the specific outcome that actually occurred—the decision to campaign in Ohio or to write the letter was a good one even though the desired result did not happen to come about.

This idea may be best illustrated by a simpler example. Imagine a lottery for which tickets cost \$1 each and for which the prize is \$100 million. The probability that any given ticket will be the winning ticket is 1/1,000,000. Assuming that those playing this lottery have enough superfluous money that losing \$1 will have no impact on their standard of living, the lottery is a great deal, for the expected value of buying one ticket is \$99. It is certainly better than paying \$1 to earn a guaranteed \$10. (I must immediately qualify these statements as being predicated on the assumption that winning \$1,000,000 is a million times as good as winning \$1, et cetera. While this assumption rarely holds true for money because its marginal utility drops off so sharply, it often does for public-policy gains. For example, precluding two million metric tons of carbon dioxide emissions really is almost twice as good as precluding one million metric tons. And preventing 10,000 deaths from AIDS really is almost ten times as good as preventing 1,000. If I had said that the money won through this lottery would go to a charitable cause, the assumption would continue to hold true.) The analogy should be obvious: buying a lottery ticket represents political advocacy, such as campaigning for Kerry in Ohio, while accepting the guaranteed \$10 represents direct charity. The results may be more certain, but the expected value of the gains is far smaller. Certainly someone who bought one of the hypothetical lottery tickets should not regret his or her decision simply because he or she did not win; buying the ticket is still the best decision even though 99.9999 percent of people do not win it.

Thus, the discrete application of the all-or-nothing argument is as fallacious as its continuous counterpart.

*Thursday, 2 June 2005*

#### ON FREE WILL

It is a common belief that the existence of “free will” (that is, the ability to make decisions that have not already been preordained by determinism) is necessary in order for life to be meaningful, in much the same way that ninety percent of Americans feel the need to believe in God despite the absence of scientific evidence. But much in the way that “a spirit” need not exist in order to enjoy life, free will need not exist in order to make the best decisions: in both cases, the reality of the situation is irrelevant beyond abstract philosophy, for the effective implications are the same whether or not a spirit exists and whether or not people have free will.

Assume for the moment that determinism is approximately true on the macroscopic level and that quantum randomness can be ignored. It is true that all of the events of the universe are theoretically predestined, but it is also true that such a fact matters not. Since humanity can neither predict the future by means of atoms and molecules nor ever come close to doing so, we must in practice act in the same way that we would given free will. The existence of theoretical knowledge makes no difference if people will never be able to learn it. Given that reality, we must act as if actions are not predetermined. According to a determinist, the outcome of a coin toss is predestined, but inasmuch as no one could ever predict it, we must act as if the outcome *were truly random*—that is to say, by assigning probabilities of 0.5 to heads and to tails.

Some people argue that if determinism were true, they would not have responsibility for their decisions and would have no incentive to make the right decision because whatever they choose would have been selected ahead of time. Such reasoning ignores the obvious fact that, if the right decision is to be carried out, *one still has to do it*. What does it matter whether one decides to reduce suffering out of free will or predestination? In either case, one still has to make it happen. The world's molecules may have been previously ordained to move in such a way that one makes the best decision, *but one still has to move them in order for it to happen*. If humans could somehow know the future, and if such knowledge did not alter that future, then the mindset presented above would be acceptable. But when we cannot ever learn such knowledge, the effect is the same as if such knowledge existed not at all. Thus, whether free will exists or not is a moot topic reserved for philosophy classes; it should have utterly no impact on the way in which we choose to lead our lives.

*16 June 2005*

## ECONOMICS AND ETHICS

Introductory economics courses teach of two opposing trajectories in policy approaches to the economy—the noninterventionists and the interventionists. The former believe that the pure market system will by itself will lead to optimal allocation of resources and that government interference on behalf of the common good would only mess things up. The latter believe that the pure market system under the nice assumptions exists not in reality: market power and market failure, they argue, corrupts the ideal model. As a result, the government must intervene to correct those failures so that the market system will become socially optimal.

Mirroring this debate almost perfectly are two conceivable approaches to utilitarianism. The “noninterventionist” utilitarian would have egoist leanings, in the sense that she would argue that the pursuit of self-interest by each will produce the greatest utility for all. In other words, every person need not concern himself with society as a whole; each person need only concern himself with his own utility, and if everyone does that, humanity collectively will maximize its happiness.

The “interventionist” utilitarian points out the flaw in this nice model—to wit, “market power.” Some people have far more power, control, influence, and forcefulness than others, wherefore their personal desires are met far more fully than—and often at the

expense of—those of others. Just as those with enough money can advertise to create brand loyalty and steal customers away from smaller firms, those with enough political or economic power can steal utility from the weak (think, for example, of the Egyptian pharaohs fulfilling their own moderate desire for great pyramids by forcing thousands of slaves to work for no benefit of their own). Had everyone equal control and ability, the idea of maximizing social utility by selfishness might have some merit—just as the idea of the pure free market could conceivably be defensible if market power and failure did not exist. But because those ideals do not hold true in reality, people must instead act with social utility in mind, in the same way that the government must act by considering the common good.

*Friday, 8 July 2005*

#### EUROPEAN DATES AND TIMES

The American convention of writing, for example, “July 8, 2005” is unnecessarily inconvenient. Not only does it require the introduction of a comma, but it also puts the quantities listed out of any consistent pattern of ascending or descending size (month is a bigger unit than day, but day is a smaller unit than year). The European format—“8 July 2005”—both obviates punctuation and puts the units listed in order of increasing size (day < month < year).

American use of a twelve-hour time system is similarly foolish. There is no purpose in arbitrarily dividing the day into two halves; the only result of doing so is to necessitate use of “a.m.” and “p.m.” Speaking of times on a 24-hour basis eliminates this gratuitous burden and avoids potential confusion.

*Monday, 11 July 2005*

#### ON POPULAR OPPOSITION TO UTILITARIAN POLICIES

*I sent this email with an attachment of “Who Cares about Cost? Does Economic Analysis Impose or Reflect Societal Values,” Working Paper 46 of the Center for Health Program Evaluation.*

The attached document is a thoroughly fascinating study, and I suspect that you will enjoy it.

I appreciated the authors’ recognition of the complexity of utilitarianism in acknowledging that the theory must take into account any adverse impact of an unpopular policy on society. It is very easy to create a strawman by only considering “direct” costs and then claiming that the utilitarian framework is therefore flawed, but this article made use of utilitarianism according to its true meaning.

The study focused on the very question that you had asked previously: If the vast majority of society rejects a certain utilitarian policy, then how can you claim to be right in advancing it? I have previously explained my response, but I shall do so again.

Consider Unpopular Utilitarian Policy A. The direct value of Policy A (that is, the change in utility that it creates if one does not consider the opposition of majority sentiment) is, for instance, +100 utils; assume that the next-best policy that could be carried out with the same resources is Neutral Policy B with utility value +50 utils. Clearly Policy A—viewed purely from the standpoint of direct utility—is the best option. But remember that implementation of the unpopular policy will create public outcry, perhaps so much that the utility value of the policy only on the populace at large (that is, people watching the news at home, et cetera) is -150 utils. The net effect, of course, is that Policy A has a value of -50 utils and should not be carried out; we would choose Neutral Policy B instead. Is this not the end of the discussion, forasmuch as Policy A has a negative utility value while Policy B has a positive one?

Not quite. The reason is that one must not only consider the *actual present* utility value of an action but also the *potential future* one. Let's say that Utilitarian Group C conducts a public-awareness campaign to demonstrate to people that Policy A itself has a direct utility value higher than that of all other options. If Group C succeeds in convincing enough members of the general public that Policy A in and of itself should happen, then the value for exogenous utility will have been changed: because Group C cannot convince everyone, assume that public-opinion utility has merely risen to 0 utils, so that the intensity of outrage that remains is balanced out by intensity of support. The result, then is that Policy A now really does have a total utility value of +100 utils and should thence be implemented. The amount by which Group C, in changing public opinion, increased the utility of society can be calculated by considering the utility value of the option that they succeeded in enacting (+100 utils) and subtracting therefrom the utility value of the policy that would have been implemented without their intervention (+50 utils). Thus, Group C's advocacy campaign augmented social utility by 50 utils.

Does that mean, then, that utilitarians should focus on changing public opinion? Not necessarily. Group C's public-awareness drive used a certain amount of resources in achieving a +50-util enhancement to society's happiness. The effect of the campaign must be viewed alongside all other possible resource allocations. Obviously, if using the same amount of time and money on global sanitation would have increased total utility by 60 utils, Group C should not have conducted the campaign.

In other words, deciding whether to change public opinion in order that society will accept a utilitarian policy must be weighed as any other use of resources is weighed. If it will not be effective (perhaps because prevailing popular sentiment results from deeply engrained biological responses), it should probably not be carried out.

*Sunday, 17 July 2005*  
THE DARWINIAN CASE  
AGAINST SPECIESISM

None of the below discussion is novel or original; all of the ideas mentioned have been explicated at length by many other authors, particularly Peter Singer (<http://www.utilitarian.net/singer>). I wrote the following passage merely in order to develop the established argument for animal welfare with a slightly different emphasis.

Speciesism—discrimination on the basis of species—has been the dominant attitude of human beings ever since they developed thousands of years ago. Indeed, a disposition of apathy toward other animals is probably favorable from an evolutionary standpoint: those early human beings who cared for animals were probably not likely to survive easily, particularly before the advent of agriculture. Of course, that something is natural means not necessarily that it is ethical. It is *natural* for men to repress women, for the wealthy to exploit the poor, and for the strong to dominate the weak. But these practices are not *moral* according to prevailing standards. So it is also possible that our current treatment of animals is not moral, however natural it may be.

Concern only for members of one's own species seems generally favorable for survival in the wild. But speciesist attitudes have also been reinforced by prevailing cultural standards—particularly the Judeo-Christian ideas that God made man in His image and gave man dominion over the animals. Just as virtually every civilization throughout history has seen itself as the center of the universe, so too humanity has viewed itself as supreme and fundamentally different from every other living creature on the planet. It is this view that has caused humans to care more for their neighbors than for their cows, and it is because of this view that we, for example, shudder at Abraham's determination to kill Isaac while thinking nothing of his actual slaughter of the lamb.

This Judeo-Christian view of humanity was slowly eroded by science—notably the discovery by Copernicus and Galileo that earth was not the center of the universe—before being completely shattered by Darwin, whose 1871 *The Descent of Man* proclaimed that “man is the co-descendent with other mammals of a common progenitor.” In other words, *Homo sapiens* are simply biological entities like any other organism; they may possess unique capabilities—particularly writing, farming, and manufacturing, not to mention having the most intricate language of any species—but they are not at a basic level different from other advanced animals. Distinguishing members of the human species from members of the chimpanzee species represents not a fundamental division but merely one more arbitrary way to classify various organisms. And while this separation may be useful, it is not necessarily morally relevant. In the same way, it is helpful in many ways to distinguish between males and females, but such a distinction does not necessarily have moral significance.

This is where concern for the welfare of other species takes hold. When we stop viewing humans as members of one species and pigs as members of another, but instead view them both as biological entities fulfilling their own needs and desires, the inveterate conceptual roadblock that inhibits tantamount concern for the pig disappears. We can then concentrate on the *ethically relevant* characteristics of each biological unit—to wit, the capacity to experience fear, stress, and pain, and the capacity to feel joy, satisfaction, and fulfillment. In short, the Darwinian approach allows us to understand that division on the basis of species is but one possible way of viewing animals, and—furthermore—it is not a morally important one. We might similarly classify organisms based on their age, their

color, or the speed at which their heart beats; it is because we are so accustomed species-based division that we consider it more than one arbitrary way to arrange biological entities.

*Friday, 22 July 2005*

#### FROM MATERIALISM TO UTILITARIANISM

Assume for the moment that materialism can be regarded “true” within the context of conventional human views of reality.

According to this assumption, all matter consists of groups of atoms that move around, recombine, and occasionally change form. Every once in a great while, atomic interactions happen in such a way that a group of atoms forms a self-replicating combination. Such incidents are not somehow “favored” by the universe any more than any other series of chemical reactions is favored; it is only because of the very nature of the combination itself that it “survives” when other combinations do not. As these combinations continue to reproduce, they inevitably mutate into a variety of different forms, and those that are best able to reproduce themselves are those that remain. Every once in a while, this process of adaptation leads to a more complex combination of atoms—not because complexity is an inevitable result of evolution but simply because a particular set of environmental factors at one particular time happened to favor it. By fortuity, the intricacy of the combinations will sometimes continue to expand and may eventually—in very rare circumstances—lead to groups of atoms that can cognize their own existence. This cognizance, along with any other thoughts, sentiments, and sensations that the atomic collection experiences, consists entirely of bunches of atoms moving and interacting in certain ways. Such is the materialist view.

To many people, this conception of the universe would lead to what I shall call “materialistic nihilism”: If all feelings and emotions can be reduced to atoms moving in certain ways, why do they matter? Who cares whether certain groups of atoms move in one way rather than another way? In response to these discomfoting questions, most people turn to belief in God, a spirit, or some other form of meaning that transcends matter. I obviously cannot dismiss such beliefs as definitely false (speaking, of course, within the conventional human view of “reality” that considers it possible to define “truth” and “falsehood”) for the same reason that prevents me from dismissing a belief that little green aliens will colonize Earth within the next ten years: in both cases, I simply lack evidence to disprove the beliefs with certainty—however unlikely they may be. But in choosing between a model of the universe for which there is substantial evidence and one simply that cannot be disproved, I consider it sensible to select the former. And it is for this reason that I shall maintain the assumption set out in the first paragraph that materialism can be regarded as “true.” Does this not, then, lead back to nihilism? I shall argue that it does not: to me, a purely materialistic view of existence leads not to a rejection of concern for others but to a defense of it.

Let us first examine the perspective of materialistic nihilism. In doing so, it will be helpful to focus on one particular example of a sensation—say the pain of torture. The



nihilist is indifferent to the suffering of the victim because she sees the experience of pain merely as the movement of certain atoms in the victim's brain and nervous system. And if pain is nothing more than the movement of atoms in one particular way, what makes it any different from the movement of atoms in any other way, such as one that a person experiences as pleasure? If the whole field of ethics concerns itself with making sure that a few atoms in the universe move in one way rather than another, what is the point? For that matter, who cares about art, literature, music, or anything else, because all of these activities accomplish nothing other than moving atoms in certain ways?

The flaw that runs throughout this argument is the assumption that "it makes no difference whether groups of atoms move in one way or another." Such a statement may seem valid *prima facie* because people tend to view atoms as abstract objects like rocks—and few people care how a pile of rocks is oriented. But some atoms are not just meaningless pieces of matter: those that enable a person to live, feel, and think are as valuable as the sensations themselves—indeed, the atoms of emotion *are* the sensations themselves. If a certain arrangement of atoms is a *sine qua non* for the experience of love, then that arrangement *genuinely is* love, and those tiny bits of matter should be viewed with the same reverence as we generally give to the abstract notion of love itself.

In the preceding paragraph, I attempted to demolish what I defined as the materialistic-nihilist argument, which is the equation of thoughts and sensations with specific movements of atoms in an attempt to transfer the putative dryness of the latter onto the former. It is possible, however, for the nihilist to go further, by denying not only that atoms as an abstraction can have value but that the emotions that they create do not matter either. I think not that this revised nihilist approach can be refuted in the sense of regular argument, for it reaches down to perhaps the most basic axiom of all of human existence: namely, that sensations of pain and pleasure, fear and comfort, frustration and satisfaction all do matter. Such an axiom cannot be "proved" to someone who refuses to accept it, inasmuch as the process of argument requires shared assumptions of value on both sides, and this dispute is over the existence of value itself. I cannot "prove" that it is better not to burn my finger, break my arm, or otherwise needlessly inflict pain on myself, and I cannot "prove" that there is "value" in fulfilling my preferences. I simply take these feelings for granted as the singular assumption on which all reasoning rests.

If we accept this premise—as most of humanity does—then we see that the atomic interactions that create sensations also matter, for the reason that I explicated above. So not only does my sensation of joy have value, but the movements of atoms that created it have equivalent value. The same is true for discomfort: the atomic interactions that create it have (negative) value.

From this materialistic standpoint, empathy follows quite naturally. If certain atomic interactions are good in my own body, then the same interactions will be good in any other body. So just as I want to move atoms in my body in desirable ways, I should want to do the same in any other body. If there is no higher power, no spirit, and no God, then the value of the universe derives wholly from these desirable atomic movements, and we ought to create as many of them as we can; it makes no difference in which collections of atoms the pleasurable atomic movements take place.

*Sunday, 24 July 2005*

IS HAPPINESS RELATIVE?—

A PERSONAL CONJECTURE

For much of my life, I held the belief that happiness is relative, meaning that regardless of the conditions of one's life, one will experience a certain amount of joy and a certain amount of displeasure. I expounded this idea best in a book review that I wrote for my tenth-grade English class on 2 January 2003:

[T]he Ojibwe [Native Americans] “understood that both the making and the unmaking were essential parts of life and necessary to keep the balance. After all, what was dawn without dusk and what was life without constant change? [...] For all the pain and heartache we have felt, there has been and will be, an equal amount of joy. That is how everything works. There is always a struggle to maintain the balance” (187, 299). This statement explores ideas that I have also found to be true. The second sentence explains that life would be monotonous and meaningless if our surroundings and situations were not changing all the time. This applies even to moments of felicity, for if humans only experienced happiness (“dawn”) we would have no other emotion for comparison, and we would not be truly joyful. Changes are required for us to appreciate life's best moments, or else none of our experiences would be special, unique, or important. This relates to the ideas in the last three sentences of the above quote, which explain that, because the world has a balance, all of our emotions equal out, and we can never have more of one than another. When moments of elation subside, we are met with less pleasant emotions, just as feelings of desolation are always followed by periods of exultation.

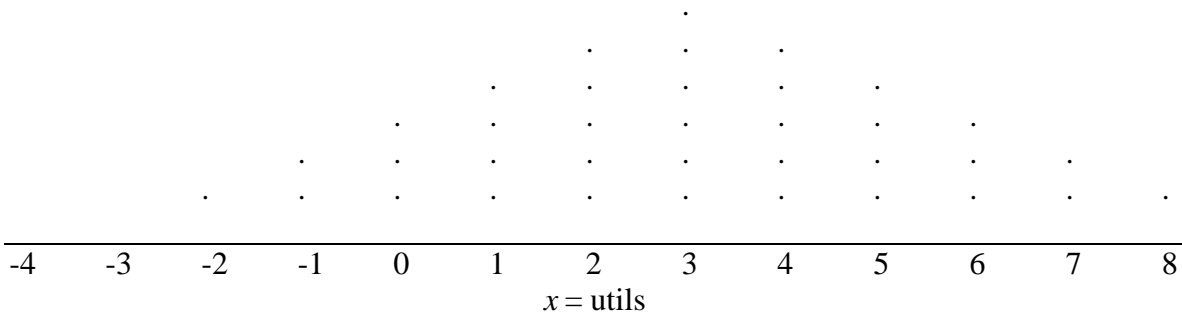
One might, with levity, call this observation the “law of emotion”: For every feeling there is an equal and opposite feeling.

Comparisons between people in affluent nations and those in the Third world may to some degree support this claim. It is often commented that peasants and villagers in Latin America and Africa live joyfully in spite of their hardscrabble situation. At the same time, it is also frequently noted that middle- and upper-class Americans, with all of their luxuries and conveniences, are very often depressed, aggravated, and discontent. While primarily an argument against relying on consumerism for happiness, this generalized comparison may also indicate that the material conditions of one's life will not, in the long term, affect the quality of one's life.

This view presents a problem for progressives and advocates of social change: Why should we worry about economic justice if a tenant farmer in India is just as happy as a CEO in Japan? Why bother providing health care and clean drinking water if people who are sick will experience just as much utility as those who are not? Why should we concern ourselves with the confinement of billions of animals each year on stressful, unsanitary, and cramped factory farms if the animals will adjust to the harsh conditions? In short, the

question of whether we should work to improve the quality of lives rests on the extent to which happiness is relative. Therefore, I shall presently endeavor to explore this topic.

Firstly, I shall admit that happiness is relative *to some extent*, a conclusion with which few would probably argue. Certainly it would be more unpleasant for a rich corporate executive to live one day in the life of a malaria victim than for the malaria victim to live for one more day, simply because the latter is far more used to the pain. And it is also true that the presence of health feels much better right after one has recovered from sickness than it does after being healthy for a long time. Obviously, emotions change from time to time, and diversity is essential for happiness (which is, of course, a restatement of the law of diminishing marginal utility). In order to represent the distribution of emotions that one experiences, I propound the following model for happiness:



The dispersed periods are meant to represent a probability-distribution curve. Obviously, the mean of the distribution represents the average amount of utility that the given person experiences. In this case, assuming that the distribution is symmetrical, the mean is 3 utils. For any given probability-distribution function  $P(x)$ , the mean value will be the integral from the lower tail to the upper tail of  $xP(x)dx$ . I suspect that the mean value of utility for most people’s lives is a positive value, because if asked whether they were glad that they had the chance to live their life, most people would probably answer affirmatively. The usefulness of this model derives from its ability to acknowledge the diversity of one’s emotional states while simultaneously creating a single number—the mean value—with which to compare average happiness.

It is now clear that the debate is not whether emotional states vary or whether this variation is important for making certain moments special but whether the average amount of utility that two people experience can have different values. To me, the answer seems clearly to be “yes.” It is clear that some people carry themselves with habitual pleasure, while others experience more-subdued emotions. This situation might result from a difference in attitude or even simply from a difference in brain composition that causes the former person to produce more “happy chemicals” than the latter. Consider, as well, clinical depression and permanent drug-induced anhedonism: these are not merely short periods of sadness from which one rebounds with an equal amount of felicity later on. And even the most basic applications of the law of emotion might be brought into question. For instance, I think not that the relief of convalescence is as great as the

discomfort of sickness; if it were, one would have no reason to wash one's hands or cover one's mouth when sneezing. The same seems to apply in cases of pain, anger, frustration, and other negative emotions. (This is not to suggest, of course, that one should not remember one's own hardships and the suffering of others in order to appreciate one's health and comfort. I merely intend to demonstrate that the values of an emotion and its opposite emotion need not be equal.)

Perhaps the critic will admit the above examples and recognize that two people can, in fact, have different mean values for their utility distributions. "But," she might say, "you have still not demonstrated a connection between environmental conditions and emotion. Of course two people can enjoy life to different extents, but this does not mean that the average utility values for two populations of disparate material standards of living will differ. People who live in poverty are used to poverty: that circumstance becomes their baseline utility value from which variation spreads on either side. In the same way, affluent people are accustomed to affluence, so their utility values spread out from either side of that baseline. You have not demonstrated that the locations of these baseline values—which, in a symmetrically distributed graph, are the mean utility values—are necessarily different."

I shall attempt, therefore, to adduce whatever limited experience I have with this subject in proceeding to demonstrate that these baseline values are indeed different and that the conditions which progressives seek to address do in fact militate to lower these values. First of all, consider severe depression and hopelessness. I hope that I succeeded above in demonstrating that these conditions do result in an *absolute* lowering of average utility. Thence, if certain policies increase the prevalence of depression and hopelessness, then at least from this standpoint, the policies ought to be changed. In general, I think that this charge can be leveled conservatively against torture and perhaps more arguably against disease, hunger, and general poverty. Suicide, as well, appears to be a strong indication that people's lives are *absolutely* worse than normal; indeed, in order to wish to die, one must be enduring significant periods of negative utility. So I think it fair to say, for example, that the hardships of Indian farmers, which have induced thousands of suicides, have made agricultural life *abosolutely* worse.

Finally, I shall appeal to an argument akin to "Maslow's heirarchy of needs." There may be certain elements of life that are *absolutely* essential to its enjoyment, beyond which all additional material factors are luxuries that will have no definite effect on average utility. Consider, *exempli gratia*, the need for food. From my own personal experience, hunger is not only discomfoting because it is less fun than satiety (*id est*, relative to satiety, it has a lower utility value, but if one had never experienced true satiety, then the presence of hunger would be normal and would hence not have a lower utility value). Hunger also seems to have an absolute effect on the body's ability to experience utility, perhaps because it makes harder the production of "happy chemicals" and the execution of other biological processes that create enjoyment. The same applies to sickness, tiredness, and any other state of poor health. Other basic biological functions may also fit into this category. Pages 113 to 116 of Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002) describe the ways in which factory-farmed chickens—who have never had access to the outdoors in their entire life—nevertheless exhibit strong

instinctual impulses to “walk around, scratch the ground, bathe in the dust, build nests, [... and] scratch their wings” (113). Thus, even beings that have never directly experienced or even indirectly heard of a better life can still experience frustration that is relative merely to fundamental physiological needs. In other words, it may be *biologically impossible* for happiness to be relative, at least until one’s quality of life rises above a certain basic material level sufficient to maintain health.

*Note:* After completing the above article, I did an Internet search for actual research regarding this topic to see how my conjecture would compare to empirical studies. Here is one source that I found:

### IS HAPPINESS RELATIVE ?

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#### ABSTRACT

The theory that happiness is relative is based on three postulates: (1) happiness results from comparison. (2) standards of comparison adjust, (3) standards of comparison are arbitrary constructs. On the basis of these postulates the theory predicts: (a) happiness does not depend on real quality of life, (b) changes in living-conditions to the good or the bad have only a short-lived effect on happiness, (c) people are happier after hard times, (d) people are typically neutral about their life. Together these inferences imply that happiness is both an evasive and an inconsequential matter, which is at odds with corebeliefs in present-day welfare society.

Recent investigations on happiness (in the sense of life-satisfaction) claim support for this old theory. Happiness is reported to be as high in poor countries as it is in rich countries (Easterlin), no less among paralyzed accident victims than it is among lottery winners (Brickman) and unrelated to stable livingconditions (Inglehart and Rabier). These sensational claims are inspected but found to be untrue. It is shown that: (a) people tend to be unhappy under adverse conditions such as poverty, war and isolation, (b) improvement or deterioration of at least some conditions does effect happiness lastingly, (c) earlier hardship does not favour later happiness, (d) people are typically positive about their life rather than neutral.

It is argued that the theory happiness-is-relative mixes up ‘overall happiness’ with ‘contentment’. Contentment is indeed largely a matter of comparing life-as-it-is to standards of how-life-should-be. Yet overall happiness does not entirely depend on comparison. The overall evaluation of life depends also on how one feels affectively and hedonic level of affect draws on its turn on the gratification of basic bio-psychological needs. Contrary to acquired ‘standards’ of comparison these innate ‘needs’ do not adjust to any and all conditions: they mark in fact the limits of human adaptability. To the extend that it depends on need-gratification, happiness is not relative.

From <http://www2.eur.nl/fsw/research/veenhoven/Pub1990s/91a-ab.htm>