Something to read in Quarantine: Essays 2018 to 2020

By de Pony Sum

Dedication: Thanks to Riki for their help with proofreading. To Kieran, brightest of us.

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Introduction

-There's a lot that's good and a lot that's new here- unfortunately, the good isn't new and the new isn't good.

Witticism often (probably wrongly) attributed to Samuel Johnson

I keep a blog at www.deponysum.com. Even though I have a backup, blogging feels inherently ephemeral, so I wanted to make something more permanent. Also, I wanted an opportunity to edit my posts, but could scarcely justify re-releasing them on those grounds alone. On these dubious premises, this book was conceived.

I guess that to the extent there's a unifying thought behind this enterprise, it's that the internet enables a certain kind of thinking out loud. A kind of thinking which is brash and confident in its right to play with ideas, but not filled with arrogant certainty in its conclusions. Nor am I prideful about the originality of these essays. A lot of the thoughts in these essays are of the sort that someone else has surely had before. I make no claim to originality.

There are three parts. Part one contains the essays which are not overtly political. Part two contains overtly political essays. The smaller part three contains difficult essays, defined as essays which would not necessarily make sense to an intelligent person with a high school education, but require further background, or at least are difficult without such. I've divided the overtly political essays from the other essays so that people who disagree with my political views still have something they can enjoy reading in quarantine.

It's free. In lieu of payment, I would ask you to obey social distancing rules and share and get the word out about our blog or this book. I'm on Twitter @sumdepony and there's a Reddit community for my blog- r/deponysum

Part 1. Not politics

Chapter 1. Philosophy & thinking about thinking

Four parts of belief

A little bit of prodding suggests that beliefs are not as simple as they seem. Consider for example Tamar Gendler's concept of an *Aelief*. An Aelief, per Wikipedia is:

"…an automatic or habitual belief-like attitude, particularly one that is in tension with a person's explicit beliefs. For example, a person standing on a transparent balcony may believe that they are safe, but alieve that they are in danger…"

And there are yet other ways of dividing things up. When I was a wee undergraduate philosopher my lecturer gave the following case study. Young Catholic men claim to believe that the sin of self-abuse risks their immortal souls. Yet they engage in it with great enthusiasm. Traditional accounts of belief and rationality have difficulty making sense of this. There are, my lecturer suggested, three possible explanations:

A) They don't really believe that self-abuse will send them to hell (though they believe that they believe this.)

B) They are acting (very) irrationally.

Or, his preferred option C) Belief is not a single thing. It consists in a complex of behaviours, thoughts and feelings which can be separated out from each other. In this case, two parts of what belief normally is -acting consistently with a belief that X and sincerely asserting that X- come apart.

To speculate a little further, the brain is made up of a bundle of systems which are not as well integrated as you might think. Thus it is at least possible that the seeming hypocrisy of these young catholic men arises different mental systems having different models of the world.

I am reminded of the two streams hypothesis– viz, that there is evidence of strong segregation between the brain pathway involved in visual *awareness* of our environment and the brain pathway involved in visual *action guiding* through our environment.

Here is a list of the separable components of belief I'm aware of. If you can think of any others, let me know.

1. **The non-verbal action component**
If I believe it is raining outside I instinctively grab an umbrella on the way out. If I believe the price of oil will fall tomorrow I don't buy oil now. An important subcategory here is betting behaviour, it may lie somewhere between 1&2.

2. The sincere assertion component
This component of belief is the ability to assert with real sincerity that P is true or that you believe P to be true. As in the case of the young catholic men we described above, it can come apart from the non-verbal action component- especially in fraught political, ethical or religious matters.

3. The feeling component
Often, someone with an anxiety disorder can assert that something they fear is not true. Their non-verbal actions may also reflect this apparent disbelief, to varying degrees. Yet they are still very distressed by some troubling possibility *as if they believed it were true or going to come true.* We might call this the feeling component of belief. This is primarily what the concept of aeliefs gets at.

4. The commitment component
This component (owing to Kieran Latty) consists in a determination to believe X, in the sense one or more of the modalities of belief listed above. Suppose for example that I have no real belief that humanity will survive the next hundred years, but I consider it strategically important that I believe such a thing. I might be committed to make myself act, sincerely speak and feel as if it were true that humanity will survive.

Chesterton's fence and thinking using sayings

"Common sense is a chaotic aggregate of disparate conceptions, and one can find there anything that one like."
-Antonio Gramsci

I.

Chesterton's fence is the principle that:

"Reforms should not be made until the reasoning behind the existing state of affairs is understood. " (Courtesy of Wikipedia)

It sounds so very reasonable- a more specific statement of "look before you leap". Like most entrenched bits of wisdom, it is not exactly wrong. It is very plausible to anyone who has started operating in a new context- for example a job- and thought they'd found numerous absurdities and inefficiencies, only to realise that most of them made sense for reasons that were not at first obvious.

Like other bits of entrenched wisdom, Chesterton's fence is an ideological iceberg. It encodes far more contestable assumptions than are initially obvious. For example:

1. Institutions have a reason and are rarely if ever, just spandrels- the result of chance or side effects of other social features- with no adaptive or maladaptive reason of their own.
2. We can feasibly discern these reasons, or, at any rate, if we can't discern them we have no need to change that particular institution.
3. (Implicitly) The kind of interests that institutions serve are the interests of society as a whole, and not merely particular wants of classes, interest groups, or even specific individuals.
4. (Implicitly) Change is an exogenous factor that potentially threatens the well-adapted system. Change isn't just another well-adapted product of the system.

Generally speaking, the overall picture is one of *adaptationism* and *functionalism*. Adaptationism is a family of views in evolutionary biology that tends to see a broad range of traits as adaptations to their environment, as opposed to contingency, genetic drift, etc. Functionalism is the view in sociology that society is like an organism, and its various institutions like functional organs within it, each serving some purpose of the whole, and not merely the particular interests of classes or other groups.

There's another subtlety here. Societies like ours have, for a very long time, been changing quite rapidly compared to many other societies. Presumably then our society has venerable mechanisms of change. Actions on society are not exogenous to society and its institutions so the image of the agent as pouring chaos from outside on a carefully balanced equilibrium is misleading. To put it another way, if the reasons for institutions can be submerged and not immediately obvious, yet still vital, why not extend the same courtesy to reformers, who are themselves an institution?

II

We might counter-pose Chesterton's fence with various other principles, e.g.:

Marx's dike: *Differences in both power and interests between people mean that we should expect existing institutions, and the purposes for which they exist, to disproportionately favour the interests of the powerful.*

Weber's walkway: *Massive differences between countries in things like legal and institutional structure, as well as social outcomes, indicate contingencies and path dependencies matter a great deal.*

Of course one can always say of a proverb that it is simply a tool for thinking, that it was never meant to be slavishly applied, and of course this is true. It is also true that no two people will agree exactly on what sensibly using it as a tool for thinking, and what slavishly applying it is.
One option would be to think without using these sorts of generalised sayings. After all, they frequently contradict each. Here is a list of contradictory proverbs from Liz Pullen on Quora:

- Look before you leap or All good things come to those who wait / Those who hesitate are lost.
- If at first you don't succeed, try, try again. /Don't beat your head against a stone wall.
- Never put off till tomorrow what you can do today. / Don't cross the bridge until you come to it.
- Two heads are better than one. / Paddle your own canoe.
- Haste makes waste. / Time waits for no man.
- You're never too old to learn. / You can't teach an old dog new tricks.
- A word to the wise is sufficient. / Talk is cheap.
- It's better to be safe than sorry. / Nothing ventured, nothing gained.
- Don't look a gift horse in the mouth. / Beware of Greeks bearing gifts.
- Do unto others as you would have others do unto you. / Nice guys finish last.
- Hitch your wagon to a star. / Don't bite off more that you can chew.
- Many hands make light work. / Too many cooks spoil the broth.
- Don't judge a book by its cover. / Clothes make the man.
- The squeaking wheel gets the grease. / Silence is golden.
- A stitch in time saves nine / If it ain't broke, don't fix it.
- Fools rush in where angels fear to tread. / Nothing ventured, nothing gained.
- Seek and ye shall find. / Curiosity killed the cat.
- The best things in life are free. / There's no such thing as a free lunch.
- Save for a rainy day. / Tomorrow will take care of itself.
- Life is what we make it. / What will be, will be.
- Opposite attracts. / Birds of the same feather flock together.
- Faint heart never won fair lady. The meek shall inherit the earth.
- With age comes wisdom. / Out of the mouths of babes come all wise sayings.
- Two is company, three is a crowd. / The more, the merrier.

But whether or not ceasing to think with proverbs would be good or bad, it won't happen. So what is the most productive way to use them? Contradictory bits of wisdom are disturbing if we think of sayings as things which are meant to be right or wrong. It is best not to consider them as right or wrong but as having different weights. The weights we place on each proverb will vary, but the saying serves as a kind of marshall for that side of the argument, and as a reminder that we should consider our general level of credence in the idea they represent.

Chesterton's fence, Marx's dike and Weber's Walkway are three different ways of looking at institutions. No one quite believes in one entirely, but the strength we place on them will vary. These weights will change based on our experiences and predispositions. Jointly they define a kind of space of possible views, emphasising respectively wisdom, conflict and contingency for drivers of how things are.

Just don't go changing your entire political practice for a proverb like Chesterton's fence without carefully interrogating it. If nothing else, that would be quite ironic.

Recent advances in Natural Language processing- Some Woolly speculations

Natural Language Processing (NLP) is, per Wikipedia:

"A subfield of linguistics, computer science, information engineering, and artificial intelligence concerned with the interactions between computers and human (natural) languages, in particular how to program computers to process and analyze large amounts of natural language data."

The field has seen precipitious advances during the recent explosion of progress in machine learning techniques. Some of these advances have taken on an eerie, almost human like quality. For example:

A) The Winograd Schema is a test of common sense reasoning- easy for humans, but historically almost impossible for computers- which requires the test taker to indicate which noun an ambiguous pronoun stands for. The correct answer hinges on a single word, which is different between two separate versions of the question. For example:

The city councilmen refused the demonstrators a permit because they feared violence.

The city councilmen refused the demonstrators a permit because they advocated violence.

Who does the pronoun "They" refer to in each of the instances?

The Winograd schema test was originally intended to be a more rigorous replacement for the Turing test, because it seems to require deep knowledge of how things fit together in the world, and the ability to reason about that knowledge in a linguistic context. Recent advances in NLP have allowed computers to achieve near human scores, in some cases differing by as little as one and a half percentage points.

B) The New York Regent's science exam is a test requiring both scientific knowledge and reasoning skills, covering an extremely broad range of topics. Some of the questions include:

1.Which equipment will best separate a mixture of iron filings and black pepper? (1) magnet (2) filter paper (3) triplebeam balance (4) voltmeter

2. Which form of energy is produced when a rubber band vibrates? (1) chemical (2) light (3) electrical (4) sound

3. Because copper is a metal, it is (1) liquid at room temperature (2) nonreactive with other substances (3) a poor conductor of electricity (4) a good conductor of heat

4. Which process in an apple tree primarily results from cell division? (1) growth (2) photosynthesis (3) gas exchange (4) waste removal

Reasoning, comprehension and domain knowledge are all necessary. Despite these formidable barriers, n the 8th grade, non-diagram based questions of the test, a program was recently able to score 90%. (https://arxiv.org/pdf/1909.01958.pdf)

C)

It's not just about answer selection either. Progress in text generation has been impressive. See, for example, this fake "news story" generated by Megatron.

A child holds up a portrait of a dead relative at a makeshift morgue in a building belonging to a local government in the town of Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky. A Russian Defense Ministry Tu-154 plane with 92 people on board crashed into the Black Sea on Sunday morning shortly after taking off from the southern Russian city of Sochi. (Yuri Kochetkov/EPA)

According to the ministry, the plane was found at a depth of more than 1,000 feet and the recorder was damaged. "The defense ministry has decided to hand over the recorder to the Interstate Aviation Committee, which is the main investigative body in the air crash," the statement said.

The search for the plane's black boxes is being hampered by strong winds and rough seas. Investigators have launched a criminal probe into the crash, which officials said was likely caused by a technical fault.

Russian President Vladimir Putin declared Wednesday a day of mourning for the victims.

2.

This progress has been rapid. Progress on the Winograd schema, for example, still looked like it might be decades away a few bare years ago. The computer science is advancing very fast, but it's not clear the understanding of those outside the field has kept up.

I found this relatively sudden progress in NLP surprising. In my head- and maybe this was naive- I had thought that, in order to attempt these sorts of tasks with any facility, it wouldn't be sufficient to simply feed a computer lots of text. Instead, any "proper" attempt to understand language would have to integrate different modalities of experience and understanding, like visual and auditory, in order to build up a full picture of how things relate to each other in the world. Only on the basis of this extra-linguistic grounding could it deal flexibly with problems involving rich meanings- we might call this the multi-modality thesis. Perhaps I was deceived by an analogy with the evolutionary history of intellectual capacities. Whether the multi-modality thesis is true for some kinds of problems or not, it's certainly true for far fewer problems than I had suspected. Even the progress achieved so far, regardless of anticipated continuations, is enough to demonstrate this.

In hindsight, it makes sense that reams and reams of text alone can be used to build the capabilities needed to answer questions like these. A lot of people remind us that these programs are really just statistical analyses of the co-occurence of words, however complex. However, we should remember that the relationships between words are isomorphic to the relations between things- that isomorphism is why language works. The patterns in language use mirror the patterns of how things are(1). Models are transitive- if x models y, and y models z, then x models z. Hence if you have a really good statistical model of how words relate to each other, that model is also implicitly a model of the world.

It might be instructive to think about what it would take to create a program which has a model of eighth grade science sufficient to understand and answer questions about hundreds of different

things like “growth is driven by cell division”, and “What can magnets be used for” that wasn’t NLP based. It would be a bramble thicket of many different models, probably all handcrafted. We know from our own experience that language allows for intellectual capacities to be greatly compressed. So it shouldn’t be surprising that some of the first signs of broad capacity- common sense reasoning, wide ranging problem solving etc., have been found in language based programs. Words and their relationships are just a vastly more efficient way of representing knowledge than the alternatives, thus NLP has arrived at many destinations before other machine learning approaches.

I find myself wondering then if language is not the crown of general intelligence, but a potential shortcut to it.

3.

A couple of weeks ago I finished this essay, read through it, and decided it was not good enough to publish. The point about language being isomorphic to the world, and that therefore any sufficiently good model of language is a model of the world, is important, but it’s kind of abstract, and certainly not original to me.

Then today I read this report by Scott Alexander of having trained GPT-2 (a language program) to play chess. I realised this was the perfect example. GPT-2 has no (visual) understanding of things like the arrangement of a chess board. But if you feed it enough sequences of alphanumerically encoded games- 1.Kt-f3, d5 and so on- it begins to understand patterns in these strings of characters which are isomorphic to chess itself. Thus, for all intents and purposes, it develops a model of chess.

Exactly how strong this approach is- whether GPT-2 is capable of some limited analysis, or can only overfit openings- remains to be seen. We might have a better idea as it is optimised — for example, once it is fed board states instead of sequences of moves. Regardless of whether its understanding is relatively deep, or simply based on overfitting and therefore shallow, it nonetheless illustrates the point about isomorphism.

Admittedly, everyday language stands in a woolier relation to sheep, pine cones, desire and quarks than the formal language of chess moves stands in relation to chess moves. Modality, uncertainty, vagueness and other complexities enter the relationship. However the isomorphism between world and language is still there, even if inexact.

Postscript- The Chinese Room Argument

After similar arguments are made, someone usually mentions the Chinese room thought experiment. There are, I think, two useful things to say about it:

A) The thought experiment is an argument about consciousness, a difficult thing to quantify or understand. It’s unclear that there is a practical upshot for what AI can actually do.

B) A lot of the power of the thought experiment hinges on the fact that the room solves questions using a lookup table. This stacks the deck. Perhaps we be more willing to say that the room as a whole understood language if it formed an (implicit) model of how things are, and of the current

context, and used that models to answer questions? I think this drains the intuition pump, at least a little.

The paradox of the book and the robot

This is an old puzzle- I recall reading it in Ted Chiang and I think other places as well. It's a great example of how seemingly reasonable intuitions can lead us astray.

Premise 1. There could exist a book that contains infallibly accurate information about the future.

Premise 2. A robot could read this book.

Premise 3. The book might predict that, at some particular moment, the robot will perform some mundane action, like raising its grasper.

Premise 4. The robot might be programmed to be a perverse robot, in the sense that if anything or anyone makes a prediction about what it will do, it will do the opposite.

But it seems that premise 3 & 4 can't both be true, if the book is infallible and the robot has read it. It seems that, if the robot reads the book, the book cannot contain any predictions about what the robot will do voluntarily assuming the robot's programming remains intact and there are no errors.

But it feels weird doesn't it? Infallible future telling may not exist in our world, but it seems logically possible. If infallible future telling exists, there seems no reason why any sort of agent shouldn't be able to access the results of that future telling, or why it must suffer malfunction or abrogation of its programming if it does.

The logical paradox here is related to, or even identical to, the grand-father killing paradox in time-travel. As there, we must say that in a world where time travel or future telling is possible, any attempt to rewrite events (whether in a fixed past or known future) will always be thwarted.

A consent theodicy

I have a favourite argument for the compatibility of an all knowing, all powerful, all good god and the existence of evil.

It's a weird argument because it relies on premises not compatible with any of the major monotheistic religions. It is unlikely to be adopted by apologists.

Suppose we are all immortal souls incarnated as human beings. Suppose that we agreed to be incarnated as humans because we wanted to experience life as humans, knowing that it would involve suffering, but wishing to gain something from that experience of suffering.

In other words, suppose we gave informed consent, before our births, to suffer, because we wished to experience the myriad possibilities of existence, good and bad. Under these conditions it seems to me that God could not be blamed for our suffering.

An analogy might make this more plausible. Suppose that there was a drug that gave people who took it insights. However, when you took it you temporarily forgot who you were, and your existence prior to taking the drug. Often persons on the drug suffered horribly. Afterwards you would remember both your experiences on the drug, and your life prior to taking the drug. Moreover you would reliably not regret having taken the drug for the insights it had given you, no matter how you suffered. Would it necessarily be unethical to give a person a dose of this drug? I don't think so.

One possible reply by the sceptic is "well what about all those people who have withdrawn their consent, but are still in the world, suffering." The theist might defend as follows- God knows that if these people had their full memories and faculties returned to them, they would no longer wish to leave, or to stop suffering.

A better reply by the sceptic is probably "Couldn't God, being all knowing and all powerful, simply grant beings the memories, personal growth and experiences of having suffered, without requiring them to go through it?". To this I have no reply.

The Paradox of the Crowd

There's an interesting little paradox about reasoning and the wisdom of the crowds:

1. The majority opinion in almost every field is more likely to be correct than your own if your opinion deviates from the majority opinion. This is true even if the group has no more raw data than you- because the aggregate reasoning of the group is likely to be better than yours.
2. If everyone reasoned on the basis of (1) that they should simply adopt the majority opinion, the quality of the majority opinion would fall.

I take it that it is obvious that the above statements are usually true. (1) may not always hold- for example you might be massively better informed and better at reasoning about a topic than everyone else with an opinion on it. However it is far more likely you think this is true and you are wrong, than that it actually is true.

This is all very context dependent. If you're the only biologist, and everyone else has no scientific training and is a creationist, you probably shouldn't be worried about the above paradox, you will simply reject (1). The case we have in mind is an inquirer in a community of relative epistemic equals.

To dramatise the paradox: Galileo said that "In questions of science, the authority of a thousand is not worth the humble reasoning of a single individual." This is wrong, the humble reasoning of a single individual is usually not that good. What is true is that without the humble reasoning of individuals and small groups, the authority of a thousand would not advance. Why though do we have an incentive to follow our own thinking, when we could have a better chance of being correct by sticking with the majority opinion?

One very simple way forward here (I will not claim it is the best way forward) is to create two sets of propositions:

1.) The set of propositions we 'believe' in the sense that we conduct our investigations on the basis of them, and use as the basis of our arguments internally to a community of inquiry and

2.) A second set of propositions we 'believe' in the sense that, if you were asked what was all things considered most likely, you would assent to.

We populate the first category with propositions that *seem to us to be true on the basis of all available evidence except the evidence of the judgements of others*. We populate the second

category with propositions that *seem true on the basis of all available evidence including the judgements of others.*

Of course belief partitioning may not be psychologically viable for individuals. An alternative would be to give individuals tacit permission to engage in self-deception about the likelihood that they've grasped what the majority hasn't.

And then there are hybrid models, where we put some weight on the reasoning of others, but not as much as it probably deserves. This would have the effect of preventing too much ink and lucre being spent on fringe ideas, while still alleviating the paradox of crowd judgement. I don't claim to have an exact correct solution here.

Part of orienting ourselves in this landscape is to reflect on our goals. *Are we trying to be right, or we trying to make the group that we are a part of right?* Traditional epistemology has assumed that the goal of the agent is, or should be, to have correct beliefs about the world. To this end they seek to form justified beliefs. What if instead we view our goal as trying to expand the knowledge of the group as a whole in expectation? This can be quite a liberating way of seeing things. Got some eccentric hobby horse ideas? Excellent! Someone needs to follow those up. We now enter the domain of *Normative Social Epistemology* the study of reasoning for, and as a part of, a group of enquirers, with the aim of supporting that group in its collective search for truth.

Why I left philosophy

1.

I started working on intuitions. To see what a philosophical intuition is consider the following:

You might think knowledge is justified and true belief. But suppose I look at my watch and it says the time is 12:37. On this surely reasonable and justified basis I believe that the time is 12:37, and indeed the time is 12:37. However, unbeknownst to me my clock is stopped. It happened to stop on 12:37, and by coincidence this is the time now.

Many people have the intuition that in such a case you do not know that the time is 12:37, but you are justified in believing it, your belief is true, and you certainly do believe it. Thus, they argue, having a justified true belief does not guarantee knowledge. If this is true, it overturns what was the almost universally accepted view of what knowledge almost two and a half millennia- that knowledge is justified true belief, often shortened to JTB. This sense of wrongness about the idea that the person in the example knows that it is 12:37 is the definitive case of a *philosophical intuition*. A *philosophical intuition* is typically a sense of rightness or wrongness about the application of a predicate- for example "Knowledge"- in a hypothetical case. This sense of rightness or wrongness is not obviously based on anything, rather it just seems self-evident.

But why are we confident in our intuitions? Why should these sorts of intuitions count as evidence? Do we all share the same intuitions about various philosophical topics?

During my undergraduate years, debate had erupted in the literature about what is sometimes called experimental philosophy. Experimental philosophers run experiments that seem to suggest a diversity of sometimes contradictory intuitions between cultures, social groups, and even within individuals about the same cases. For example, there is some evidence that East-Asian subjects actually regard Gettier type cases as instances of knowledge- i.e., they would grant that the person whose watch says 12:37 knows that it is 12:37, even if this only happens to be the correct time by accident. I wrote a senior thesis arguing against two views on what these experiments meant. On one hand I argued against people who say that these results debunk the method of hypothetical cases used by philosophers. On the other hand, I argued against philosophers who contend that the intuitions of non-experts about these matters should not be trusted.

My argument was informed by an underlying thesis about what intuitions were. I regarded intuitions not as glimpses into a platonic realm, but as constitutive and at least partially stipulative. It was my view that intuitions do not *track* the truth about philosophical questions, but rather that they are partly responsible for *making the truth* about philosophical questions, or at least that this is true for some sorts of intuitions about some sorts of philosophical questions.

Let's use the Gettier case again as an example. If Janet has an intuition that the Gettier case is not knowledge, this expresses Janet's predisposition to define knowledge in such a way so as to exclude these cases- that she refuses to use the word "knowledge" in a Gettier case partially constitutes what she means by "knowledge".

If Jiang has a conflicting intuition, Jiang is demonstrating that she is attaching a different *concept* to the word "Knowledge". To talk about Janet being right or Jiang being wrong would be nonsense, because their intuitions pick out different concepts. It would be a bit like an argument about whether it was raining on Wednesday where one person means last Wednesday and the other person means this Wednesday. Jiang and Janet could argue about or investigate whose version of the concept was closer to the typical version, and what sort of people use what variants from the big family of Knowledge concepts- and to do so they might find experimental philosophy useful. They might even debate which concept of knowledge was more *useful,* but debating which is correct is meaningless. Each of the two concepts describes or picks out a different property- e.g the property fo being $knowledge_A$ and the property of being $knowledge_B$. The role of experimental philosophy is to show us the variations in the concepts people are deploying.

A lot of people seemed worried that this approach would lead to anything goes relativism. I don't see the argument. If Jiang has X intuitions about the concept of knowledge, and Janet has Y intuitions about the concept of knowledge, then they are using slightly different words. There will still be a fact of the matter about whether someone's belief is knowledge as Jiang means it, and there will be a matter of fact about whether someone's belief is knowledge as Janet means it. Once propositions are properly disambiguated, there's no spooky 'the world is just a point of view' relativism going on.

There's a common cousin of the view I've outlined that I'd best explain so as to distinguish it from my own. It goes like this. "Philosophers can't study knowledge itself using intuitions, they can only study people's ideas of knowledge or how knowledge is used in ordinary language. There is this further thing which is Knowledge-itself and either philosophers can't study it, or they need to use some method other than intuitions about cases to do so". I can see why people would confuse this view with the view I've outlined, but I think they're quite distinct. Here's why: If there is a rich enough infinitude of properties in the world, then for any meaningful concept there will be a property corresponding to that concept. As a result, if we come to fully map out someone's intuitions which define a concept C, then we will also find out exactly which property C picks out. If we fully map out a folk concept, then, at least prima-facie, we also understand it's corresponding property in the world. There's no need to say things like 'we understand what this group of people mean by knowledge, but not what knowledge itself is- there's some further fact about that.' What the property of knowledge is, is given fully by what the concept of knowledge is. The character of the property of 'being knowledge' just falls right out of an analysis of the concept of knowledge.

The view I've outlined has many advantages. It avoids tricky epistemological puzzles, for example: why we should think intuitions tell us something about an intangible metaphysical world external to our own minds? If intuitions really do systematically vary between cultures, it avoids the awkwardness of having to explain how one group came to be right and the other group wrong. Also,

when you think about it, the idea of one property out there in the world being Knowledge with a capital K is kind of silly.

There are of course also arguments against it- mostly in a bundle of ideas related to reference magnetism, direct reference and the causal theory of reference which I won't get into here. There are also concerns built on Quine inspired semantic eliminativism.

Disclaimer for experts: So it doesn't seem like I'm denying certain facts let us clearly acknowledge that nothing in this view says that some linguistic frameworks aren't better equipped to describe the world, or carve it at its joints, or simply be more useful, than other frameworks. Let us also acknowledge that what is 'useful' will be context dependent. Let us acknowledge even further that nothing in our view denies that there may be a modest degree of some kinds of reference magnetism towards the 'joints' of nature, it only requires that it not be strong enough to outweigh the possibility of many alternative or parallel concepts for important philosophical topics like 'knowledge', 'mind' and 'personhood'.

As far as I know there is no name in the literature for the view about what intuitions that I have described. Despite that, when you talk to philosophers it becomes clear that the view I've described is extremely common. Perhaps the veiw is nameless in same way that, as is often quipped, fish would have no word for water. Among some cliques something like it seems to be the majority view, which makes the absence of an explicit name for the view all the more mysterious. The view has similarities with ordinary language philosophy, though it's hard to tell because their overall outlook was quite different. It has some definite similarities with what is sometimes called the Canberra Plan. Alvin Goldman outlines a vaguely similar view, although from memory his view is a bit more like the common cousin I outlined a few paragraphs above.

Nonetheless the view is rarely argued for in explicit terms. To revise after so many years away I reread the Stanford Encyclopedia of philosophy article on intuitions before writing this. Nothing like the view that intuitions make, rather than track, philosophical truths is described, despite exhaustive discussion of the minutiae of various other views about, and aspects of, intuitions.

As a step towards overcoming this marginalisation, let us call the view *constitutivism about intuitions.* Constitutivism is the view that intuitions are not merely truth-trackers, but truth-makers regarding certain philosophical claims. The reason for this truth-maker status is that a person's intuitions help constitute what they mean by a term in their idiolect, and philosophical questions on the constitutivist view often turn on semantics. Further, from the content of concepts we know trivially the nature of the properties they pick out, for any meaningful, complete and non-self contradictory concept has a property which corresponds to it.

Succinctly- intuitions are part of concepts and different intuitions about appropriate usage give different concepts, concepts give us properties, thus once we've finished conceptual analysis, we've finished. Variation in intuitions, whether between subjects, or even within a single individual, just indicates a plurality of concepts (an indvidual can deploy a multitude of different concepts in different contexts).

2.

But what does this have to do with me leaving philosophy?

I finished up my senior thesis which briefly touched on these themes, and then began a doctoral thesis. In the part of the world I was doing my doctorate, you immediately begin researching and ideally writing your thesis almost as soon as you enrol, unlike the American system. Like any prototypical twenty-two year old philosopher I was wildly over confident in the value of what I had to say, and ready to change the world.

That's when I encountered the haze. A lack of concrete research clearly on the topic of my thesis that I could tap into- an accessible bedrock of literature which I could build a thesis on. There were many papers on metaphilosophy tangentially related of course, but there were many more papers that at first *appeared* to be related. Everyone seemed to be coming at it from different angles, groups of people were having conversations that slid entirely past each other. There was no obvious way for me to slip into the party with grace. It seemed to me that there were a great many people who thought they were talking about the same things, but really were talking past each other. There weren't even always names for the various constellations of positions people took. I was lost.

There are, I think a number of causes for the haze. Two of which lay with me, one of which I could be rightly blamed for, and the other I couldn't. The one I could be rightly blamed for was that I was nowhere near as fucking smart as I thought I was. The one I can't be blamed for was that I was severely mentally ill. However there were also external cases for the haze.

First of all, many philosophers just don't care that much about metaphilosophy. When I talked about my thesis with faculty members and fellow students I generally got one of four responses:

"This is obviously true."

"This obviously not true."

"This is too abstract to be interesting."

"That's really interesting, I'd never thought about it like that."

I realised with astonishment that many- though not all- philosophers had the same orientation towards metaphilosophy that many scientists have towards philosophy. Just like a room of scientists asked about science would tend to throw up sentiments like:

"That's all good and well, but what's the practical point?"

"I have strong opinions on this topic but haven't thought about it that much."

“Ooh that’s really interesting but it’s a little abstruse for my taste.”

So to did philosophers. The other cause of the haze was that even though what I was saying corresponded to what a lot of philosophers believed *no one had thought to name it.*

Also for some reason even though many philosophers in general are instinctively drawn to something like constitutivism, the specific subset of philosophers who work on topics like ‘what are intuitions’, don’t seem to like the idea. I don’t really know what is causing the differentiation.

Maybe it’s because there’s vaguely self-effacing about the whole thing? If you sort of suspect that parts of philosophy (not all, mind) are continuous with semantics- “semantics” being a byword for irrelevancy in our society- maybe you sort of want to shut up about it. Thus you’ll only write on relevant topics in meta-philosophy if you think you’ve got something to say which carves philosophy into a more imposing figure.

I guess I never saw it that way, because I think there’s a kind of glory to be had in studying such important concepts and words as *knowledge, personhood, belief, desire* and so on. Some questions about the semantics of words and the structure of concepts go to the very heart of the way humans understand their world. Are humans not noble enough in reason or infinite enough in faculty?

Overwhelmed by a conversation that was at once fragmentary, vast, and hard to find, in which people who agreed with me never seemed to speak up and which many philosophers seemed to think was a useless conversation, and sapped of energy by my health problems, I sank out of academia.

Chapter 2. OCD & Mental illness

OCD: What I learned fighting mind cancer

Everywhere you go you always take the weather with you
-Crowded House "Weather With You".

0. An obsessive compulsive life

Obsessive compulsive disorder is a horrible thing and I would not wish it on anyone. That said, living with OCD has given me a certain way of seeing the world. I decided to write this to share what the refining fire of a lifetime with OCD has given me.

1.Generalities

What follows is an info dump. If you're already confident with the basics of OCD, you might skip this section.

Obsessive compulsive disorder is defined by the presence of one of, or both of, obsessions and compulsions. **It is not necessary to have both obsessions and compulsions in order to have OCD**– for example, some sufferers either have no compulsions, or very subtle compulsions that only become obvious once the context of the obsessions is understood. By the DSM V an obsession is defined as follows:

1. Recurrent and persistent thoughts, urges, or impulses that are experienced, at some time during the disturbance, as intrusive and unwanted, and that in most individuals cause marked anxiety or distress.

2.The individual attempts to ignore or suppress such thoughts, urges, or images, or to neutralize them with some other thought or action (i.e., by performing a compulsion).

And a compulsion is defined as:

1. Repetitive behaviors (e.g., hand washing, ordering, checking) or mental acts (e.g., praying, counting, repeating words silently) that the individual feels driven to perform in response to an obsession or according to rules that must be applied rigidly.

2.The behaviors or mental acts are aimed at preventing or reducing anxiety or distress, or preventing some dreaded event or situation; however, these behaviors or mental acts are not connected in a realistic way with what they are designed to neutralize or prevent, or are clearly excessive.

There are a few other parts to the definition, but we can safely leave them aside for our purposes.

2. My specifics

Anyone who doesn't have a guilty conscience needs one, and anyone who does have one, doesn't need one.

–Something I once read on a Magic the Gathering Card

One more bit of background- the kind of OCD I suffer from.

I suffer from a form of OCD that makes me afraid of enacting violence on others, sometimes called "Harm OCD". I fear both the harm I might do to others, and the consequences I might face as a result of doing such harm. Although this form of OCD is quite widely understood among experts, not many people in the general public are aware of it. Partly I think this is because of the nature of the content of this form of OCD- it's self-censoring. Although it's embarrassing, you might be willing to admit that you're afraid of catching aids in a public bathroom for example. However admitting that you're afraid of shoplifting, sexually assaulting someone, or kicking a child in the face as you walk down the street- examples of some forms of harm OCD-, is a more scary proposition. Thus, knowledge of this form of OCD doesn't much seep into the public consciousness.

A lot, **but not all** of my fears, centre on the following nexus. Within this nexus there are numerous variations on a theme and elaborations, and I am perhaps misrepresenting what is going on in some respects, but this is the basic story. Suppose a random thought of groping someone on the subway pops into your head. At first, so long as you recognise that they are not really *your thoughts or desires* this thought may not be very frightening. Suppose though that you began to worry that because such thoughts had popped into your head so many times, that you might perform them on auto-pilot- as a kind of mechanical reflex- without even being aware of it, and certainly not intending to. You now have a plausible story about why you should be afraid of these thoughts, and a story about why being afraid of these thoughts is dangerous in itself. So trying to get rid of these thoughts becomes like trying not to think of a pink elephant. You will think these thoughts more because you perceive them as dangerous, and in your mind that makes them even more dangerous.

A simplified schemata of the process:

Thought of harming someone>>>Thought that you've had that thought so many times you might do it on autopilot>>>The thought is now perceived as dangerous>>>This makes you want to stop thinking about it>>>This makes you think about doing it more.

Because you're worried about doing these things 'automatically' you don't even have the comfort of being able to reason 'well nothing has happened yet and it's been a long time, so it should be okay'. Part of what you're afraid of is that you might be doing such things all the time, and just not noticing- with the victims perhaps too shocked or scared to say anything.

The irony of harm OCD is that all available evidence suggests that people with it are unusually appalled by violence, and thus much less likely to commit it than the general population. There are no recorded cases of someone with harm OCD committing violence in a way in which relates to their fears.

3. The Red Queen Hypothesis of OCD: Fear as genetic algorithim

"Now, here, you see, it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that!"

-The Red Queen, *Through the Looking Glass*

One of the things I find interesting about OCD is the process by which it generates fearful obsessions perfectly targeted against its subjects. In coming to understand this, I realised that OCD is a self-generated mental parasite, operating like a genetic algorithm.

Fearful thoughts are generated randomly. Those fears that are successful (in the sense of capturing attention and thus cognitive resources to elaborate on them) are selected- just as with a genetic algorithm. These fears give rise to lineages of similar fears and variations on a theme which are in turn elaborated on. Over time, a thoughtful sufferer will come to see holes in their fears, and this leads to an arms race where the fears evolve in response to keep up with the growing dialogue between fears and defences. For some readers the Red Queen hypothesis in evolutionary biology might be a useful analogy here.

Coming to understand that a part of me- my fearful thoughts- was evolving and acting with logic that was blind to, and actually opposed to my own purposes was terrifying, like finding an eldritch horror in your own breast. However, it was also a breakthrough not only in my struggle with OCD, but in my struggle to know myself.

4. You don't really know scepticism until you've fought delusions

You usually learn facts through indirect sources, and you know that these sources can be faulty, even if you consider it unlikely. On the other hand the basis of your reasoning about, and inferences from, those facts is immediately present to you. If you don't find an inference convincing, you will

most likely drop it. Thus we have a cognitive blindspot when it comes to being sceptical about our own reasoning- doubting the premises on which we build our inferences is easy, but doubting your own reasoning- the inferences from those premises- is hard, because *it wouldn't be your reasoning if you weren't already directly convinced it was persuasive.*

Your accepting a sequence of deductive inferences as valid is partly based on your inability to imagine ways it might be wrong. In the case of inductive reasoning, your accepting a sequence of inferences as valid is based on it being hard to imagine a *plausible* scenario where the premises hold but the conclusion doesn't. On the other hand, imagining a factual premise false is easy- "I misremembered" or "Maybe someone gave me wrong information". As a result, you almost necessarily trust your reasoning more than your premises. This asymmetry is a real shame, because as many errors are made through faulty inferences as through faulty premises, so we should be just as sceptical of our reasoning as our premises.

A few concrete examples. Witness the incredulity, confusion and even anger which can arise when someone is corrected about the Monty Hall problem. Another example is the way in which many scientists worry about whether their methodology is generating reliable data, but then scarcely worry at all about whether there are any gaps in their method of statistical analysis (*Cough* psychologists *Cough*).

I believe OCD can help with this. Even if you don't have OCD reflecting on the experience of an otherwise reasonable person with OCD might bestow a healthy doubt in your inferential capacities. Having been in a state where you feel like everything is about to come crashing down on you again and again, only to find each time that your carefully manufactured chains of inferences about what would happen next meant nothing *even though you could see nothing wrong with them at the time* is educational. OCD takes a series of commonplace facts and real observations and weaves a story which seems perfectly plausible to the sufferer according to which the only reasonable inference is upcoming disaster. The inferences involved *seem* persuasive, but turn out to be meaningless. To escape, you have to become good at recognising that there is no link between how persuasive it seems to infer D from A, B, & C, and the real validity of that inference.

Recognising that an individual chain of reasoning can always be invalid- no matter how good it looks- is the first step to becoming a fox, not a hedgehog- we'll get to what that means in a moment.

5. Epistemic judo- turning doubt in upon itself

"Doubt your doubts…"

-Switchfoot

In real Judo, you leverage your opponent's weight against them. In epistemic judo, the person afflicted with doubt and inconfidence leverages those feelings against their own fears. Empirical evidence suggests that people with OCD are unusually sceptical and doubtful, even about things not

related to their fears. Doubt and the trait of being doubtful seems to be intimately related to the aetiology and processes of OCD, leading some to call OCD "The disease of doubt". How could the OCD sufferer leverage this capacity to doubt everything against their own fears?

The first step is to think of your mind as a mechanism for generating understandings of the world. Return to our earlier model of OCD as like a genetic algorithm for finding blindspots in your epistemic processes, and using them to trigger fear. You can try to beat it by seeing why every single lie it tells you isn't plausible after all, and this will help to some extent, but to make progress past a certain point *you have to stop believing that just because a fear seems plausible, it is plausible- even if you haven't got a great counter argument for it yet.* If you can't take this step, your OCD will keep throwing up new fears and variations on the old fears faster than you can spot what is wrong with them. In other words, you have to stop believing that your own OCD driven cognitions are reliable, even if you can't see the specifics of why they are wrong. You may not have found the logical gap in the argument that you should be afraid of X yet, but eventually you will. even if you don't, chances are that it exists and your fear is rubbish.

The strategy to achieve this is to turn the sceptical/doubting mindset OCD generates in, against itself, until you reflexively doubt your fear arguments. To a certain extent, you have to stop believing in your own ability to reason about topics that overlap with your OCD. Ordinary people have trouble engaging in blithe and automatic scepticism of plausible sounding ideas they themselves have generated. However, people with OCD have so much practice questioning and doubting everything, what is it to doubt one more thing? Eventually I turned "I am not qualified to think about these topics well or impartially" into a mantra.

6. Arguing with your feelings

"Thoughts aren't facts"

-Common Parable

"Feelings aren't facts"

-Another common parable

Most folk wisdom tells us to trust our feelings- our "intuition". Perhaps the hardest part of grappling with OCD, and one of the most educational, is learning not to trust your feelings automatically. Sometimes feelings are right and sometimes they are wrong. Just because you feel like **SOMETHING IS VERY WRONG** doesn't necessarily mean shit. If you want to overcome OCD, you have to overcome the sense that emotional intuition should never be ignored. You have to be able to challenge your feelings. To put this in a slogan- listen to your feelings but don't forget to talk back to them.

If you think of feelings as unlike thoughts- as beyond debate or as things which 'just are', you will find this difficult. Hence you must come to understand the similarities between thoughts and feelings. Both are rooted in ideas about how the world is, and neither are immune from criticism. For example, being "afraid" of a spider is almost always accompanied by the thought that it can hurt you, or crawl all over you in an unpleasant way. There is no sharp distinction between feelings and thoughts.

There's a wrong way to approach this- thinking of feelings inferior to thoughts. Actually, some feelings are very accurate. Sometimes the explicit chains of reasoning we call 'thinking' are much worse than the pattern matching we think of as feelings or intuitions. Sometimes the opposite is true. This is unsurprising because, again, emotion was never discontinuous with reason, and both feeling and reasoning are subject to critique and scrutiny.

People have accused me of valorising the Cartesian thinking subject at the expense of the embodied subject of feminist epistemologies yada yada with this view. I think the opposite is true. Only by challenging the false separation of thought and feeling can we see what is wrong with both the mystical valorisation of intuition and the obnoxious assertion that one has transcended reason for pure rational assessment. "Trust your feelings" and "Suppress your feelings so you can be truly rational" are two sides of the one coin, both accepting the validity of the same underlying thought/feeling dichotomy.

7. Becoming a hedgehog: OCD and the struggle against single model thinking

"Homo unius libri timeo"

-St Thomas Aquinas

Almost all OCD type fears have the following structure- a prediction about the future (or in the case of the guilt, the past) based on a specific sequence of events in a causal pattern. This will follow this and then either this or that will happen but then in either case necessarily this must happen… and so on. Even though every individual step might sound plausible, something almost always breaks down, and so the fears of people with OCD are almost never true.

This single model thinking is an extreme type of the "Hedgehog" cognitive style identified by Isaiah Berlin, and contrasted with the "Fox" cognitive style, based on a more flexible appraisal of different factors and plausibilities. The hedgehog tries to build a single model- often based on preferred ideas and themes which they understand well, and interpret the world through it. The fox doesn't place very much faith in any single model, and switches between them- listing arguments for each possibility and trying to weigh them up, rather than trying to generate a single narrative which perfectly encompasses the situation.

There's a great deal of evidence that the hedgehog type approach breaks down not just in OCD, but in things like expert attempts to predict future events. Overall being a hedgehog isn't a great

strategy (although beware anyone who tells you it is **always** wrong- we wouldn't want to be meta-hedgehogs).

As I saw how being a hedgehog was making me mentally ill I made an effort to become more of a fox. These efforts were not just with regards to OCD, but throughout all of my life and activities. For example I tried to view the challenge of predicting the future not as a matter of charting a sequence of events, like falling dominoes or a Rube-Goldberg machine, but instead tallying power factors, tendencies, resources, general drifts of various coalitions and past trends, and throwing in a generous dollop of pattern matching.

8. I am not special: Taking the outside view on yourself

There's a kind of soft narcissism that OCD forces on you. It doesn't help that OCD makes you live inside your own head and spend so much time talking to yourself . Your problems seem very distinct from the problems of other people with OCD. Their fears sound so absurd, whereas your own sound so reasonable to you (due to having been specially crafted for *your* cognitive blindspots).

It can seem like the standard treatments could never help- e.g.: Dammit I don't need to relax, I need to establish that I won't hurt someone! Or: What's the point in going to a psychologist- I'm just as clever as they are, any point they can make about how my fears are illogical I will have certainly thought of myself! Yet all of this turns out to be false. Chances are you're really not so different from other people, and will benefit from, and be harmed by, roughly the same things as them. So get exercise, go to a psychologist, avoid very high intensity stressors. Certainly that was my experience.

Recognising that you have all the fallibility—and strength- of other people is incredibly liberating. It's okay to reason as follows:

"Hey, this stuff seems plausible to me, but I am literally a delusional person, so rather than using what the base odds seem to me to be, I should think about it from an outside point of view. How many people with OCD feel their OCD fears are plausible (almost all), and how many actually turn out to be right (almost none, and **literally none** in cases of harm OCD like you have). Therefore it's massively unlikely that you will be the first person with harm OCD ever to have your fears realised. The fact that you think you are an exception to this rule, doesn't matter a damn, because there is a 100% chance you would think this, given your OCD."

Meaning it's okay to take the outside view on yourself.

This isn't just about the plausibility of your fear arguments. You have to take the outside view on a lot of lifestyle and treatment factors. For example, "While it seems that my problem is the dangerous situation I'm in, so sleep won't help, if I actually get some rest, the experience of countless humans over many millennia indicates the situation will probably seem very different".

Or “While I don’t feel consciously lonely, and socialising doesn’t feel like a priority since I believe my life is about to collapse, the experience of the human race as a whole would suggest it’s a bad thing that I haven’t talked to anyone except my parents in almost three days and that this, not my situation may be the real reason for my terror. I need to go meet up with a friend”.

I’ve taken this attitude and applied it to other areas of my life. I don’t regard my studies and writings as attempts to find truth in any personal capacity because the odds that I will discover something important are much lower than the odds that my novel ideas are just crankery. Instead my hope is that I will contribute to the social process of truth seeking, that in some small way I will work towards increasing society’s knowledge. I look upon my own work indulgently- from the outside perspective it is true that my work is likely air and puffery, but also from the outside perspective it’s true that you could say that of just about anyone. Thus it is important that we don’t let the fact that our work will almost certainly be either wrong or unoriginal stop us.

9. OCD and non-self

“I may venture to affirm of the rest of mankind, that they are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement.”

-David Hume

It’s kind of pat, but it’s got to be said. At a certain point, gazing at the changes within yourself, and understanding them as intertwining and sometimes contending forces you begin to see the inside of your own brain not so much as a monarchy with an ego-king, but as a republic. This republic is full of traitors, excitable mobs and hard working but beleaguered bureaucrats. Seeing yourself as a balance of forces can induce vertigo, but it can also inspire hope. A unitary subject with attributes attached is hard to change, a contending swarm can shift.

I remember vividly sitting in a lecture when I was much younger, shaking with terror that I could barely conceal. I began to imagine myself as like a boat on a stormy sea, except because I was both the boat and the sea I could never escape. Wherever I went I would always take the weather with me. As painful as this moment was, it stayed with me because it was the beginning of insight.

Later, I beheld the mirror and saw nothing reflected there, and so realised that “I” wasn’t beholding the mirror at all, I was the mirror. I was also the room in front of it, and I was the wall it stood on. There is no person in that room, and there could be no person in it, because that room is a series of components which make a person.

Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder and the origins of religion

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) is known to be shaped by pre-existing cultural and religious beliefs and practices. I was interested in coming at it the other way- is there evidence that culture, particularly religious culture, has been shaped by OCD?

Although I can't prove it, I believe that there is enough here to make the idea worthy of study. That mental illness might be linked to the origins of religion is not a new idea, but rarely in the specific context of OCD.

It is worth stating categorically that a link between religion and OCD is not intended to denigrate religion, nor OCD. As a lifelong sufferer of OCD myself, such an intention is the furthest thing from my mind. OCD is associated with many positive traits and traits which can be positive in some situations- caution, concern for our impact on others, cleanliness, seeking certainty, aiming to systematize etc. Although these traits tend to get out of control in OCD, at other times and parts of life they can be profoundly useful. If there is a relationship between OCD and the development of religion, the contribution of OCD could well be positive.

Nor does saying that OCD played a role in the formation of religion imply that great religious figures all had OCD (though many may have). Rather, patterns of thought present even in 'normal' minds related to OCD may have influenced religious thinkers and their interpreters. One might think that even people without clinical OCD can tap into an OCD like mindset, especially when concerns as vast as salvation and divinity are on the line.

The idea of a link between religion and OCD is far older than my poor thoughts (notably, Sigmund Freud championed it, although there is surprisingly little development in later literature), but I wanted to explore it in a more contemporary way. I've gone looking for information on people who have tried to develop a connection, but as best I can determine, most of the literature tends to be practical and epidemiological, with little of it coming from a studies-of-religion perspective.

What follows is my attempt to trace what I see as shared themes between OCD and religion. The exact role, if any, that OCD, and OCD-like mental states, played in the formation of religious beliefs is probably in most cases lost to time now, yet as we will see there may be grounds to suspect it was a rather large one.

Themes that OCD might have contributed to the development of religion:

We'll examine five parallels between OCD and religious thinking, and speculate about the possibility that OCD-like modes of thinking may have contributed to their development in religion- concerns about purity, fear of offending the sacred, rituals and ritualistic behavior, complex, detailed and guilt driven forms moral reasoning, and ideas of demonic or external possession. While many of the parallels we discuss are not entirely unique to obsessive compulsive disorder, the overall picture is of a striking resonance between the focused but fearful reasoning of OCD, and similar trends within religion.

1. OCD and similar mental states as an explanation for the origin of religious fears around contamination and purity

A common concept in OCD is the fear of contamination, although today this fear is often expressed in terms of the germ theory of disease, prior to the development of such it would likely have taken different forms.

Religious categories of ritual and dietary purity are often worked out with a logic that is at once rigorous and dreamlike, very much mimicking the 'style' of OCD thinking. This overlap in content (concern about purity) and style of thinking (internally coherent, deeply elaborate) is quite striking. There is a concern form how various unclean things might infect various clean things, of what is capable of 'carrying' or 'transmitting' uncleanliness, about making sharp rulings in unusual and borderline cases and so on.

The book says do not mix a kid goat in it's mother's milk. Easy enough. But the book says don't do it three times? There must be something extra here. Better not mix meat and milk, and keep a four hour gap between eating one and the other, just in case.

2. **Fear of offending the sacred, blasphemy, scrupulosity and the origins of sacredness**

A very common form of OCD is scrupulosity, a fear of offending the divine through uncontrollable sacrilegious thoughts, words, mental images etc, or through very small lapses in action or words that would seem unimportant to many. It seems at first glance that the idea of scrupulosity presupposes the prior existence of a concept of the sacred, yet I can imagine ways in which symptoms of scrupulosity and a sense of the absolute sacred might co-develop. The belief that one must not even think- let alone say- certain things about a being, even in jest or illustration, elevates it to a higher level of sacredness. For sacredness to exist, the possibility of blasphemy must exist.

The constant guilty struggle with one's own thoughts and micro-behaviours about the sacred can further drive greater religious engagement, and the development of cycles of repentance, perhaps contributing to the often dramatic rituals of self-abasing penance and the purging of sin common to so many religions.

3. **OCD and the origins of religious ritual and ritual magic**

Numerous OCD behaviours are rituals, in the sense of stereotyped series of actions intended to influence seemingly unrelated actions. Tapping a spoon three times to make sure your husband does not die on a ship, for example. Or Saying the Lord's Prayer 27 times to make sure that your children do not die of a horrible disease. It is easy to see how, in a society which did not necessarily dismiss

such rituals like ours tends to, someone might develop a belief about a necessary series of actions and this be adopted by the society at large. This is especially true if the ritual 'worked' several times.

OCD even comes with a ready-made explanation of why rituals sometimes fail. There is an overwhelming concern that one will slightly mess up one of the innumerable complex parts of the ritual, and this will prevent success (leading to repetition or "checking" behaviour). Ritual failure and its paranoid avoidance is itself an important theme in many religions.

4. **OCD, guilt and the development of categories of moral reasoning**

A common form of OCD is a supreme concern that one will, or that one already has, acted in a way entirely dissonant with one's moral values. One form in particular is the fear of negligently or actively causing others harm, or violating the moral order of the universe. Sometimes these fears revolve around actions that would, to most outside observers, look absolutely harmless.

Replaying past actions for evidence that one did the wrong thing in one's mind constantly, and endlessly vetting possible actions, could drive the creation of new categories used in moral and religious thinking.

To choose a few examples, categories of Islamic jurisprudence, Catholic moral philosophy and- perhaps above all- the Jewish Halakha- display an exemplary combination of deep caution, deep concern, deep subtlety and exceptional systemation. Relatively harmless or even completely harmless behaviours are condemned in the strictest language. St Thomas Aquinas claimed that masturbation was worse than murder, Jesus said that thinking about another woman sexually was a form of adultery and that calling one's brother a fool was worthy of the fires of hell, the Talmud says that it is better to be burned alive than to embarrass someone in public. The fusion of intense anxieties with careful legalistic thinking resembles OCD, and the longer one reads the texts, the stronger the parallels seem.

Neurological evidence suggests that OCD may be a disease of hypermoralism, and is deeply implicated in the over activity of neural pathways associated with moral reasoning and thinking (forming a possible inverse to antisocial personality disorder). It seems to me that inclinations towards hypermoralism may also be one of the motors driving the development of moral thought in a religious context.

But unreasonable rules give rise to resistance, and religion is no exception. Resistance to hypermoralism, by OCD sufferers who had become sick of it might form another motor driving moral development within religious traditions. An ongoing dialectic, sometimes creative and sometimes destructive, between the spirit and the letter of the law, is a theme in every religious tradition I have ever studied. I'm not just trying to have it both ways here- there's a least one very good case study of this kind of 'bending in the opposite way' reaction to hypermoralism by an OCD sufferer with a profound effect on the history of religion: Martin Luther, leader of the protestant reformation. Martin Luther is fairly well established to have suffered from scrupulosity, a religious

form of OCD. Luther's continual sufferings, and deep fear that his behaviour was inadequate almost certainly contributed to his religious development, leading him to propose that belief in god alone was enough for salvation, attempting to cut the cycle of fearful hypermoralism.

5. OCD and demonic possession

While many mental illnesses can be seen as 'demonic possession' by those without a psychological background, the potential for OCD to be perceived in this way is often forgotten. While I don't think the majority of cases of 'demonic possession' are really OCD in disguise, I suspect a substantial minority may be.

Many forms of OCD- such as uncontrollable thoughts of the violent, sexual or sacrilegious which go against the values of the sufferer could be seen in some societies as a sign of mental demonic harassment. Many sufferers of OCD (falsely) believe that they are experiencing barely controllable urges to do violence or other behaviours abhorrent to them. Such feelings could very easily be mistaken for a sign of demonic activity, either by the sufferer, or by society at large.

6. Religious (Self)-Consciousness and internal struggle

But more importantly than extreme cases like demon possession there is the form of self-consciousness associated with many forms of religious life- the sense of oneself as a tempted being- a being who is constantly in an unwilling dialogue with dark forces that wish one to sin. Whether these be conceived of as as internal, external (like a demonic tempter) or something ambiguous and intermediate (like the Yetzer Hara) the effect is the same. The self is seen as torn between obedience and sin, and thus inherently divided, even fragmentary.

The parallel in OCD is found mostly in cases of morally charged OCD- scrupulosity, harm obsessions and sexuality obsessions. The sufferer can be confronted with a sense of division about themselves, about who one is, what one has done and what one might do- a kind of fragmentary consciousness in which parts of oneself sometimes seem work with a vicious semblance of autonomy in order to perversely thwart the whole. Many sufferers of OCD begin to conceptualise their OCD thoughts and impulses as a cruel and bizarre stranger living in their mind.

We might also point to the internal struggle between doubt and belief that plays such a role both in the life of the believer and in OCD. Certainly there's a parallel in concepts here, although whether there's a deeper or historically important parallel is harder to say.

Summing up the historical case

You're a psychologist, someone comes to you and pitches a hypothetical. There'a a patient who keeps strict rules regarding bathing, refuses to mix certain foods, repeats certain words at certain precise intervals throughout the day, regards certain behaviours as absolutely taboo for reasons which they either cannot articulate, or which seem bizarre, will only dress in certain specific ways,

is afraid that they are a deeply wicked person and struggles with questions about their moral identity.

If you had to take a guess at the diagnosis, what would it be?

Evidence of an association today

To bolster our historical associations, let us take a brief look at the very large literature suggesting that religion and OCD remain linked today. Degree of religiosity is linked to likelihood of developing OCD, this has been validated for a wide variety of monotheistic religions including Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

While formal research has focused on these religions the internet is full of heartrending stories of people struggling with these problems in all kinds of religious contexts including Buddhism, Hinduism and Jainism.

There is little doubt that membership in at least some religious communities is associated with OCD. The direction of causation remains unclear.

Conclusions

What we've presented here is very partial and tentative. The idea of a strong connection is far from certain, but while the indvidual pieces of evidence are modest, they are numerous.

I want to reiterate that it is not my intention to contribute to a crass reductionism here. We are not saying that major religious figures were all OCD sufferers. We're not making an argument that religion is a disease. Reasoning of the form "OCD might have contributed to religion, OCD is a pathology, therefore religion is pathological" is lazy and dangerous.

A more fruitful approach, and what I'd like to see, is greater investigation of the link between OCD, mental states which parallel OCD, and the development and survival of religions over time.

Rather than denigrate religion, I would hope such a study might deepen our appreciation of the social role of both religion and obsessive compulsive disorder.

A final quotation:

"Luther's first years in the priory were thus a time of interior tension, spiritual struggle and suffering. The hopeless feeling that he was not numbered among the elect but among the reprobate overcame him and grew stronger as he grew more and more conscious that he did not fulfil God's commandments in all things. Since he began early to condemn as sin every movement of natural appetite, even though unwilling, and since, with his exuberant vitality, such movements kept

recurring, he supposed himself to be full of sin, and no prayer, fasting or confession could free him of this terror."

Karl Adam, *Roots of the Reformation.*

The feeling of disgust in depression

Secondary to my OCD, I suffer relatively mild depression. One of the symptoms of this depression with which I am well acquainted, but eluded my description for years, is a low-level sense of disgust at *everything.*

Disgust and contempt very specifically, and not just “anger” or “irritation”. When this feeling is present, everything feels wrong, contemptible, ill-formed, and incomplete. To feel this way about the world would be quite narcissistic, except it is accompanied by an equally vehement self-disgust. Everything is revolting- aesthetically, ethically, intellectually, politically revolting. Nothing is innocent or clean.

I’ve never heard anyone talk about this symptom of depression and I wonder why. I think it’s because of the way we glamorise depression by focusing on existential sadness. It’s a prettier picture than imagining bilious, venomous disgust welling up in you.

OCD: A poem

After such knowledge what forgiveness?

After such knowledge what forgiveness

Such after knowledge what forgiveness

Such knowledge after what forgiveness

Such knowledge what after forgiveness

Such knowledge what forgiveness after

After such knowledge what forgiveness

After knowledge such what forgiveness

After knowledge what such forgiveness

After knowledge what forgiveness such

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Knowledge after such what forgiveness

After knowledge such what forgiveness

After such knowledge what forgiveness

After such knowledge forgiveness what

What after such knowledge forgiveness

After what such knowledge forgiveness

After such what knowledge forgiveness

After such knowledge what forgiveness

Forgiveness after such knowledge what

After forgiveness such knowledge what

After such forgiveness knowledge what

After such knowledge forgiveness what

My method for dealing with anxiety

I wanted to outline the methods, strategies and approaches that have helped me with anxiety (moderate to severe OCD). Although I hope you might find something useful here, you may not. Seek competent psychological advice.

The critical concepts are:

A). *Insight* . You have insight when you regard your problem as anxiety and you recognise, on an intellectual level, that your anxieties are either very likely unreal, or at least greatly overplayed. When you lack insight you regard your problem as the content of your anxieties. Insight exists on a spectrum.

B). *Rumination*. To ruminate is to spend excessive amounts of time thinking through your anxieties.

C). *Attention shifting*. The antidote to rumination is attention shifting. As a strategy, attention shifting means a decisive, insistent and active refusal to engage with or entertain anxiety thoughts.

The aim is to raise the degree of insight while avoiding rumination. You might be wondering how can both happen at once? After all, to challenge a thought, doesn't one have to think about it? The strategy that works for me is multi-headed. When I face a spike in anxiety, I employ the following steps:

1. Get my general factors right: All the usual advice, plus a few me-specific things. If I am not taking a med, start one. If I am taking a med have a conversation about whether I should raise the dose with my doctor. Consider supplements with some scientific basis, such as ashwanghanda. Exercise! An anxiety beating combo for me is walking while listening to podcasts. Cut stressors and utilise supports. Keep in mind there's a delicate balance here- I don't want to cut stressful activities in an avoidant way, or give into anxiety and become a hermit. I also need to remind myself to use the support I have available.

2. Conceptualise myself as ill and recognise the limitations of my own reasoning: This is going to sound paradoxical or self-limiting to a lot of people, but I've found it useful. I get myself into a headspace where I am very aware that I have an anxiety disorder, and that having an anxiety disorder means that some of my thinking will be irrational and distorted even when it "feels" right. I develop and use mantras that will help me remember the limitations of my own thinking. For example: "Anxiety is distorting my thinking so I can't trust my own judgements about my fears".

3. Read some articles by experts about my specific form of anxiety: It is sometimes also wise to read the stories of people who have similar anxieties to myself (there are plenty of forums where people post descriptions of what they are worried about). Reading experts and fellow sufferers writing about fears like mine is an extension of point 2. The aim is to begin to see my thoughts as

the manifestation of a common illness by reading about other people's similar experiences. By this, I hope to create a perspective shift in which I see myself as a sick person, rather than as a person endangered by the content of my worries.

N.B. This could very easily become a weird kind of compulsion- a sort of reassurance seeking- although that hasn't been my experience thus far. This is important to monitor.

4. Meditate on the optimistic meta-induction You can find the article on my blog**:** Really burn it into my mind. Many people like me have had similar fears, and they always (or almost always, depending on the content) come to nothing. Furthermore, I have had many other fears, and they have also come to nothing. This step also builds on point 2.

All these steps help reduce the degree of belief in the content of fears and worries, however their generalised nature and "third-person" character mean that there's no need to spiral into thinking through the details of your fears- ruminating.

5. Go see a psychologist ASAP: Even in a session where I don't make much progress (and that is rare), seeing a psychologist is at least a tangible reminder that I am a person with an anxiety problem, and not a person with a "whatever I am worrying about" problem- so once again it comes back to insight.

6. Create a defined, delimited space in which I am permitted to ponder my anxieties: About 15 minutes a day is appropriate. I sometimes even want to limit the time to "When I see my psychologist". In that space, called "worry time", it is appropriate to ponder my anxieties. When thoughts occur outside that space, I push them aside, and mentally acknowledge that the right time to think about those worries is in worry time. It's easier to dismiss things if there is a space where those things are permitted, so I am not simply saying "No, bad thought!" I am instead saying "In its proper time".

7. In worry time, bookend every chain of reasoning with the thought that, whatever my assesment of the situation good or bad, the truth is probably better because anxiety is systematically biasing my thinking towards bad: Weave this liberally through my thoughts.

8. If I find myself worrying or ruminating outside worry time, squash those thoughts with prejudice by shifting my attention: Think about something else. This is easiest when I act quickly. Often there is a moment of vague anxiety just before I think my first anxious thought in a train of worries- I try to use that moment to squash my anxieties and force myself to think about something different. In our culture there is a bias against the idea of squashing thoughts. It's seen as a form of cowardice. In truth, going over the same thoughts over and over again is a futile search for comfort and certainty- abandoning that takes courage. Novels and pop psychology teach us that if we can only find some perfect key, we might find some great revelation or answer to our worry. In truth, when we leave thoughts that are no longer constructive behind, we create the space for personal growth.

9. Aim to think everything through once and once only: In practice the way I do this is oriented around sessions with my psychologist. I prepare before the session (making notes to bring in to the session) and then really go through every argument and fact I can think of relevant to an issue with my psych in detail before coming to a conclusion. If I am later plagued by some aspect of that same topic again again, I consider whether it's really novel, or just a rehash. If it's really a novel perspective or fact, I resolve to mention it in my next session with my psychologist, or at least not think about it till worry time. If it's just a rehash, I remind myself that I've already made a determination, under the closest to ideal and rational conditions I can, and that whatever my feelings, re-litigating it will most likely lead me further away from the truth.

Chapter 3. Thinking about people

Yvne: The forgotten complement of envy

Yvne (pronounced "Iv-Knee") is the complement of envy. Where envy is unhappiness that someone has done better than you, Yvne is the joy and satisfaction that comes from a sense of having done better than someone else. Yvne isn't joy in having nice things, or having done great things, Yvne is joy in having *nicer* things and having done *greater* things.

If you've never heard this word before it's because I had to invent it. Its closest pre-existing equivalent in English is probably the German loanword Schadenfreude, but this is not quite the same thing. Yvne does not necessarily require that a calamity befall the other person, or that their condition be miserable, simply that your success be in excess of their success.

It's something of a mystery that I had to invent the word. Yvne is no less common than envy -the rich indulge in it all the time. It is no less objectionable than envy, indeed, I would argue it is worse. Envy pits your interests against those who are doing better than yourself and gives you a reason to drag them down. Meanwhile Yvne pits your interests against those who are doing worse than yourself- it gives you a selfish reason to prevent those weaker and more vulnerable than yourself improving their station- isn't that more sinister than envy? At least envy is about "punching up", yvne is about punching down. Yet envy is denounced as one of the seven deadly sins, while people very rarely even talk about the concept captured by the word "Yvne".

You may have already guessed the likely reason for the disparity. The most powerful people in society have much to fear from envy, and so wish to condemn it. Meanwhile, these same powerful people enjoy yvne as a wellspring of pleasure. Back when religion held more importance, it was employed by the powerful to condemn envy. Now the task falls to economists. By contrast, the opponents of Yvne have never enjoyed the same funding.

Postscript, why yvne cannot be identified with self-satisfaction or smugness:

I've had some people argue in response to this piece that yvne can be identified with either self-satisfaction or smugness. There are two main problems with this.

Firstly, I can experience yvne even while totally dissatisfied and dismissive of my own achievements. For example "I'm a total loser, but at least I'm doing better than my cousin."

Secondly, one can experience smugness without even thinking of others. I might feel smug and self satisfied upon completing a log-cabin in the woods, without even thinking about other people. There are concepts that are "almost" yvne, and overlap in many or even most cases (schadenfreude is another one, as is pride in general), but none are the same thing.

The paradox of high expectations: The more you demand, the less you get

In various fairly common situations, demanding more can result in receiving less.

I.

The kinds of situations I am talking about are ubiquitous, but we'll start with employee hiring. Suppose you are running a job search, and are primarily interested in some desirable talent T. Perhaps T is years of experience using some application or programming language.

Now suppose that people come in two varieties, liars and truth tellers. Truth tellers will truthfully (or mostly truthfully) state their level of T. Liars will claim to have whatever level of T they think will make you most likely to hire them. Suppose further that every truth-teller who meets your expectations will apply, and every single liar, regardless of whether they meet your expectations, will apply. Assume the average T value is the same for liars and truth-tellers.

Let's say the population=1100 and 100 of them are liars. Now suppose you set the required level of T at 2 standard deviations above the mean. Assuming a normal distribution, 25 truth tellers will apply, and 100 liars. If you have no way of telling liars apart from truth-tellers, you have an 80% chance of hiring a liar, if you pick from among the applicants who meet the threshold at random.

Meanwhile if you'd set the level of T you were demanding at 1 standard deviation above the mean, you'd have a less than 40% chance of hiring a liar assuming you pick from among the applicants who meet the threshold at random.

If, for example, the value of a candidate to you is equal to their T-value expressed in standard deviations from the mean (positive or negative) you will actually get a lower T score on average by setting the cutoff at T=2, than if you'd just set it at 1.

A lot of readers are probably thinking that our simplifying assumption that employers are no better than chance at spotting liars is too harsh. I have a few things to say to that, viz:

A) The processes most employers use to determine quality past the resume stage- referee checks and interviews- are in many ways easier to navigate if you're a little bit loose with the truth. It would actually not surprise me if the real process filters out more truth-tellers than liars.

B) Available empirical evidence suggests that people are generally delusional about their ability to spot liars, and spotting liars is actually incredibly difficult.

C) Even if employers have some skill in filtering liars, if that skill is less than complete, it remains true that, past a certain point, increasing your expectations simply makes it more likely you will get a liar.

One interesting sub-case here is where you are interested in multiple traits, some of which you can check in applicants more easily than others. In these circumstances it may pay to set relatively modest minimum thresholds for the traits you cannot easily check, but adopt a policy of "more=better" for traits that you can accurately check.

II.

Perhaps the most extreme, and comical, variant of this phenomena companies that demand candidates who have more years of experience in programming languages than those languages existed. I don’t know if this has ever actually happened, or if it is just a persistent urban legend, but any company that tries this is guaranteed to receive liars.

Although job searches are among the most obvious areas in which this paradox arises, it comes up in other areas. For example, seeking quotes, choosing between products and any other domain where the phrase “too good to be true” comes to mind.

When we consider that a pattern of high demands might turn once truth-tellers into liars, something like this phenomena could explain the flourishing of hypocrisy in some morally rigorous communities. Past a certain point, lying becomes a more workable strategy than actually trying to better yourself.

Demand the very best and you might get much, much less.

Postscript:

One reader suggests that reasoning similar to this is why you should find scientific papers just short of significance considerably more trustworthy.

Another commenter on Reddit suggests that we leave out one very important specification- a third type of person he calls an exaggerator. An exaggerator does not lie to an indefinite degree, but instead exaggerates their qualifications by a fixed amount. If such people are common, it may be prudent to demand a T value of 2, if your real minimum is 1.

This is a really great point, and I guess the overall picture here is that it’s difficult to know in the abstract what kinds of demands and criteria are the most likely to work. We’ve certainly demonstrated that under some conditions, demanding more will lead to less in expectation. However In other possible conditions this isn’t true. If there is a moral here, it is that unintended consequences abound. It is probably worth thinking through a variety of possibilities and balancing different concerns against each other.

The Joyous Hypocrite

For most people, being hypocritical is uncomfortable- at least if they become aware of that hypocrisy. Hypocrisy means guilt and dissonance.

A minority- sociopaths and sociopathy adjacent types- seem unaffected by hypocrisy- able to wear the mask comfortably. Many politicians and clergy, for example.

But every so often one hears about spectacular cases of hypocrisy among elites, cases where a person's private actions seem to mock the norms they support in public life- as if the hypocrisy were not incidental, but the point of their actions. When I hear about these cases I wonder if they might form a type, the joyous hypocrite. The joyous hypocrite goes beyond mere calculating indifference to hypocrisy. Such people enjoy the sense of power they gain from violating the norms they preach.

Such a character might enjoy hypocrisy for:

1. The sense of cleverness it gives them in tricking others about their principles and moral identity.
2. The sense of power it gives them, in bypassing barriers which they have reinforced.
3. The sense of exclusivity they gain, in taking pleasures they've rendered illicit for others.
4. The sense of freedom they gain, in being unencumbered by the disguises they wear.

The Resurrection of the Dead

The 19th-century Russian thinker Nikolai Fedorovich Fedorov proposed a “Common Task” which he held to be the most important project of humanity. Fedorov argued that the greatest alienation was one rarely directly remarked on- that of the living from the dead. To lose someone to death is a profound and permanent wound. We are all crippled, whether or not we realise it, by irrevocable connections to the irrevocably gone.

Others might have used this as a springboard for sad existential reflections on the briefness of life- not Fedorov. Fedorov called for the abolition of death- and not just going forward. He called for the resurrection of everyone who had ever died. I do not know what he was like as a person, but as a thinker, he had the greatest can-do mindset in all history. Apt, for one of history’s first transhumanists.

Although a religious man, Fedorov did not rely upon miraculous means. Rather he called for the discovery, and application, of technological means yet unknown.

I have never read Fedorov’s work first hand, yet ever since I heard of the idea it has haunted me. I have wondered at his hope. I have wondered why I could not find the same faith.

II

Is it possible? I suspect not.

This much is clear- the project only has hope if one holds that personal identity consists in the continuation of a pattern. If personal identity requires the physical continuation of a body, the effort is doomed because the bodies have been destroyed by time. Any plausible attempt at the common task will have to aim to reconstruct the dead based on information from the past, available in the present

I have considered the matter on and off, with no real background in physics, for many years. In theory, A powerful telescope located a thousand light-years away might now record the life of a person who lived a thousand ago. Thus if faster than light travel is possible it would be possible, in principle, to collect this information. One would have to get out ahead of the light fleeing earth. Since light travels slower than its vacuum-speed through many media, it might even be possible to “get out ahead” of the fleeing light without exceeding C. The problem is that it is unlikely we could make a good enough telescope.

Beyond this cartoonish scheme, there’s always “something we haven’t thought of yet”. I do not know how one would go about proving or disproving the in-principle possibility of Fedorov’s common task.

III

What about partial completions- the recovery of some of the dead? One option that I am aware of exists for recreating both the recently deceased and the well-attested deceased.

We have bits of partial information about many people in a variety of forms including:

1.Their genetic code.

2.The memories of the living about them.

3.Their writings, and the writings of others about them.

4. Information about the world they lived in generally.

These sources of information would be substantial for anyone who had died within living memory. Consider an unimaginably powerful supercomputer synthesising all available information and creating the best possible guess about a person's psychology, including reconstructed "memories" to fit.

Dan Simmons moots this idea in Hyperion. Despite being set in the far future, the poet John Keats is a character. This "John Keats" is reconstructed through known biographical information, his genetic material and his letters, poems and other writings.

For remaking the contemporary dead we would have two main advantages viz: A) the long trail of electronic data and B) direct extraction of memories of the living via a brain-machine interface.

Exactly how good a copy of a person one could triangulate using available data is an open question. My guess is shockingly good- inclusive of secret hopes and fears- for recent individuals and impressive for those for whom we have less data. Exactly how good a copy has to be to count as "resurrection" is another open question.

The problem with any partial salvation of the dead, from a Fedorovian perspective, is that it negates the majesty and universal redemptive quality of the vision. Perhaps the full plan will remain simply a haunting vision, a scream of wrongs never undone.

IV

Walter Benjamin (who I have also read very little of) argued that the triumph of a better world is not only a victory "going forward". Rather the triumph of a better world is the redemption of the past. More than anything else, this is why I cannot get the idea of Fedorov's common task out of my

mind. The enchantment of liberty and mercy for all souls whose lives were full of pain. Taking all the discordant notes, of history and weaving them into a happy whole.

To the best of my knowledge, no one has ever proven Fedorov's Common Task impossible. Perhaps this gives warrant, if slender, for hope.

Chapter 4. Economics and adjacent topics

GDP undervalues government services

I.

Gross domestic product can be calculated in many ways, but one of the most common is:

(Government expenditure)+(Consumption)+(Investment)+((Exports)-(Imports))

To see why government expenditure is under-counted consider two countries, one of which provides all of its health care through the public sector, the other through the private sector.

In the latter case, health care is counted in GDP as the amount that consumers pay the private provider.

In the former case, health care is counted in GDP as the amount it costs the public provider to provide the service.

Assume it costs the same amount to provide the service in both countries. This is actually a generous assumption, governments can usually provide healthcare same quality healthcare for cheaper than the private sector.

Assuming further that the profit margin of the private provider is not zero, it follows that:

(Price of the private health care services)>(Cost of the public healthcare services)

In the simplest terms, government expenditure is devalorised as a contributor to GDP because it only includes the cost of provision, not the profit margin.

II.

The political implications are obvious. Insofar as GDP is a metric that voters (and investors) care about, politicians are incentivised to focus on private, rather than public growth.

III.

There is a long list of common complaints against GDP. It doesn’t include damage to environmental assets, or resource depletion. It doesn’t include unpaid labour- and therefore especially discounts the contribution of women. It pays no attention to distributional concerns, and treats an extra-dollar going to a billionaire as just as important as an extra dollar going to a pauper who truly needs it. Given these problems, many of which seem much more serious than a little under-counting of government activity, why make a big deal out of this?

The answer is that GDP is, in a sense, honest about these problems. Everyone knows these faults with GDP, many people can figure them out themselves after a minute’s thought about the definition of GDP. The problems a measure wears on its sleeve are less grave for than the problems a measure hides. The problem we have discussed here is less obvious than the others, because at first glance it appears that GDP does allow for government expenditure. The worm hides deeper in the pear.

IV.

There are three natural ways to deal with this problem that I am aware of. All have their pros and cons:

1. Value government services at the sales price of equivalent private services.
2. Value government services using willingness to pay analysis
3. Inflate the government expenditure term by a multiplier equal to the average profit margin.

Of these my favourite option is probably (3), although it sounds a little eccentric at first. Option (1) might unfairly overvalue government services if the private provision of certain goods (like roads) is very underdeveloped in relation to the government, and government provision benefits from economies of scale. Option (2) effectively gives the government a sort of monopoly power, since it's based on the absolute maximum people would be willing to pay, with the only other alternative being losing it altogether.

It might be tempting to say "let's just not adjust for it at all, it's too hard to find a fully non arbitrary answer." But not adjusting it and accepting the biased status quo is equivalent to a deeply arbitrary and pretty steep downward adjustment.

The efficiency game

Bibliographical note: This essay develops ideas owing to Kieran Latty, who is in turn developing ideas in Kalecki.

0.

I want to show something which will at first sound extremely paradoxical- shrinking the overall size of the economy by promoting inefficient taxation can be in the interests of the rich.

There are numerous ways of structuring taxation. Optimal tax theorists consider both efficiency and equity in comparing different possible system. It may seem that while equity is politically debatable, efficiency will appeal to everyone. As we will see, this is not necessarily so.

Note that most of the points we consider here could be applied, with slight translation, to other domains like regulation.

1.

Jiang & Jim are playing a multiplayer game, perhaps a business simulator. As part of that game they have to put money into a common pot where it is used to fulfil certain functions the players cannot achieve on their own. Neither wants the money in the common pot to go below a certain level, and neither wants all their income to go into a common pot, but Jiang's ideal level of contributions is higher than Jim's. We do not need to specify why Jiang's ideal levels of contributions are higher than Jim's- perhaps the pot is re-distributive in some way. Equally, Jiang could just benefit more from the kinds of things pot money is spent on due to her strategy in the game.

Now suppose the sub-game of determining the size of the pot is played as follows:

There are two stages.

1. First a method of payments to the pot is decided. Methods are not necessarily lossless, instead, for each possible level of contribution to the pot, each method involves some degree of loss between 0% and 100%. Joe decides the method of payments.

2. After Joe decides the method of payments, the level of payments is decided. Jiang decides the level- that is the proportion of funds that will be transferred from each player to the common pot.

Interestingly, it is not necessarily in Joe's interests to pick an efficient method of payments. By picking an inefficient method, Joe might dissuade Jiang from setting the contribution level too high, since Joe wants a lower contribution level than Jiang. Ideally for Joe a method that is inefficient at high levels but efficient at low levels will be found, but if this is not possible, depending on the shape of Joe's curve of preferences, a method that is inefficient at all levels may be preferred. Not maximally inefficient mind- it would be bad if Jiang were forced to choose to put nothing in the common pot, but somewhat inefficient.

2.

You may have already guessed this is about taxation, specifically about progressive taxes- taxes that affect the rich more than the poor. Instead of Joe and Jiang we have high income earners and low income earners. The pot, representing state funds, is used to fund essential services that appeal to everyone or almost everyone (amenities, security) but also things like redistribution. The methods of transfer represent different kinds of tax structure, with different levels of deadweight loss

associated. For the same reason it isn't necessarily in the interests of Joe to choose a transfer method with minimum dead-weight losses, so the rich might lobby for certain taxes to be structured in such a way as to have higher dead-weight losses.

Why imagine that low income earners have comparatively more power over the level of taxation whereas the well to do have comparatively more power over the method(1)? Because discussions over the details of taxation are technical affairs. The rich can afford to hire analysts and well informed lobbyists, and to control the policy community, while the poor's political advantage lies more in numbers and thus very broad strokes.

Thus It might be to the interest of the rich to reduce the efficiency of the taxation system and exacerbate the growth/inequality tradeoff –to the degree such a thing even exists at current inequality levels. For this, and many other reasons it cannot be assumed that efficient taxes are a politically neutral issue.

Hopefully I've sketched out the core intuition of what Kieran and I call Kaleckian inefficiency. For a richer discussion see "A Kaleckian theory of tax inefficency" by Kieran Latty.

Interlude: Aphorisms

1. The desire for safety is one of the most violent desires there is.
2. It's astonishing how many variations on the argument: "There is no free lunch, therefore we should not do anything" have been made.
3. The next truly radical social movement in the rich countries will demand: That it be impossible to fuck up life so badly that you can't live it with dignity. That no one, however bad their financial choices, however unsought after their skills are, should live in poverty.

Part 2. Political

Chapter 5. Political Economy

The Heritage Foundation Economic Freedom Index is bad

TLDR: The problem with freedom indexes is this. They are aggregates of separate variables, some of which indicate small government, others of which indicate what would uncontroversially be regarded as 'good government'. It is the good government indicators, not the small government indicators, which actually correlate with GDP per capita- the measure that the Heritage foundation uses to tout the success of their metric.

You may have seen indexes of economic freedom floating around. These typically claim to show that "economic freedom" is good for the economy. The practical use of these indexes is to argue in favour of limited government on the basis that economic freedom is correlated with prosperity. However these indexes are conceptually flawed and try to win by shifting the goalposts. They bundle together things everyone agrees are good, with the actually controversial small government criteria in a way that produces misleading results.

Let us suppose that I create the crystal-health (TM) index of crystal-healthy living. It's scored on the basis of:

1. Number of hours you spend exercising a day

2. Caloric intake

3. Work-life balance

4. Number of crystal-health (TM) products purchased

5. Amount of time you spend each day meditating in a circle of crystal-health (TM) products.

If you have a high score on this test you are deemed to have a crystal-healthy lifestyle. Now I can guarantee that having a crystal-healthy lifestyle will be positively correlated with health outcomes. I can also guarantee that this tells us nothing about whether or not there's any merit to magic crystals. The problem is that the scoring overlaps with a number of things that are good for you- exercise, a balanced diet and relaxation for example. These are bundled in with things that have no effect (purchasing crystals). The total bundle will correlate with healthiness, but that's not really evidence in favour of the specifically magic crystal parts of the bundle.

This is the methodological problem with measures like the Heritage Foundation's Index of economic freedom. Incontrovertibly good things like an independent judiciary- things that basically just indicate whether a state is running well or not- are thrown in with things like low government spending. Whatever your political viewpoint it's totally unsurprising this bundle would correlate with economic growth, because so many parts of it are obviously good things supported by everyone such as:

-Government integrity

-Judicial Effectiveness

-Fiscal health

But this doesn't prove that the distinctively small government parts of the bundle are good for economic growth. Parts like:

-Tax burden

-Government spending

-Labor ‘freedom’

Maybe these latter parts of the index do have a real relationship with economic health, or maybe they are like the magic crystal bits of the crystal-health index- superfluous additions included for ideological reasons.

These economic freedom indexes are often used to argue for small government policies, on the grounds that the highest ranked countries usually have high GDP. To expose the inconsistencies between the variables that are included in the bundle of “Economic freedom” I thought I’d run a few correlations using the Heritage foundation’s own data. Now it’s important to be clear that these correlations do not prove anything of significance about what makes for good or bad economic management- for that we need very strong controls, Granger causation etc. However they will serve to demonstrate the underlying problem with taking a grab bag of things everyone likes, taking a grab bag of things you like because you support small government, mixing them together and calling it an economic freedom index.

I have only included sub-scales which are measured in a way I can reproduce, either by looking up publicly available data, or by accessing third party independent reports. This is because, to be blunt, I do not trust scales produced by the subjective judgements of Heritage foundation employees anymore than I would trust Dracula with the blood bank. It’s not that I think that they’re dishonest, it’s just that I don’t think they’re disinterested. Scales that involve subjective or qualitative assessments are fine, so long as those assessments have been done by third parties.

Probably the most serious criticism of my post here is that I’ve chosen to correlate the various sub-scales with log GDP per capita rather than using some other measure. In some ways this is not ideal, we could have chosen, for example, growth as our point of comparison. But unadjusted growth has its own issues- e.g. growth tends to slow down in richer countries and many other disparities. I’ve seen how messy these debates can get, for example there’s a whole argument in the effects of redistribution literature on this. I really didn’t want to get bogged down trying to construct an ideal point of comparison- say growth adjusted for GDP with numerous other tweaks included. This isn’t how the economic freedom index is sold, or validated. It’s not like people are relying on the index in the main because it has undergone these sophisticated tests.

So I decided log GDP per capita (henceforth just “GDP”) is the closest thing to a single fair metric. What ultimately clinched it was that the Heritage institute itself often boasts about the correlation of the freedom index with GDP. On these grounds it seemed like a natural and fair comparison because they use it all the time- this is a response within the framework of their own research.

SUBSCALES MEASURING THINGS EVERYONE LIKES

Judicial effectiveness: Everyone likes judicial effectiveness, from democratic socialists to small government advocates. The scale is based on survey data and third party opinion. Unsurprisingly it correlates 0.6 with GDP per capita, a very respectable relationship.

Government integrity: Government integrity is also universally liked. Government integrity scores in this report are taken from a variety of survey data. No one will be surprised that it correlates 0.65 with per capita GDP.

Fiscal Health: While it is true that small government advocates are more fixated on balanced budgets than the left, no one actually likes running large deficits. Basically this scale tells us that countries that have recently run deficits are likely to have somewhat smaller GDPs (A weak correlation at 0.22). In part this may be because many countries use deficit spending counter-cyclically during periods of economic downturn.

Business freedom: Wait a moment! Surely not everyone likes business freedom? Surely this is a small vs big government issue issue? In general yes, but given the way the authors choose to measure "business freedom", almost every single criteria is unequivocally a good thing. There are few people on this earth who want it to take more days to set up a business, get a licence or obtain electricity. Maybe one criteria out of 13 marks a genuine ideological point of contention (number of procedures required to get a licence) and this is very debatable. Given that this is basically a measure not of the scope of bureaucratic procedures, but their efficiency, and a very specific suite of procedures at that, it is unsurprising that this criteria correlates 0.66 with GDP- a strong relationship.

Now we turn attention to the bits of the index that divide small government advocates from everyone else.

SUB-SCALES MEASURING THINGS SMALL GOVERNMENT ADVOCATES LIKE AND OTHER PEOPLE DON'T LIKE

Tax Burden: Some people like high taxes for the services they allow, some people don't. There is no practically or statistically significant correlation between low taxes as indicated by this scale and GDP according to the Heritage Index's own data. In fact it's non-significantly negative (-0.08).

Government spending: Obviously a good measure of small v large government. The correlation between GDP and this score is somewhat negative (-0.34), suggesting that more government spending as measured by this scale is associated with a bigger economy per person. In other words, this sub-scale actually somewhat anti-predicts economic success, not a great result for the Heritage foundation.

Labor Freedom: The right likes it, the left hates it and would dispute the "freedom" bit (do you enjoy your freedom to be fired?) I could probably quibble with how the heritage foundation defines this measure on a few points but I've chosen not to because I don't want to be accused of special pleading. Labor freedom as measured by the Heritage foundation has a small positive correlation with GDP (0.28), good news for the Heritage foundation I suppose, but it's only about 8% of the variance.

SUB-SCALES EXCLUDED AS THEY DEPEND ON THE SUBJECTIVE OPINIONS OF HERITAGE FOUNDATION EMPLOYEES

Property rights: Entirely graded on by Heritage foundation employees. Worse, the criteria arguably bunch together a bunch of potentially independent things.

Investment freedom: same as property rights.

Monetary Freedom: Honestly I wouldn't have been terribly against including this one, as it is mostly scored on objective grounds, but I'm sticking to my own criteria. The subjective part is the way they measure price controls.

Trade Freedom: Trade freedom is a bit of an ideologically weird issue that transcends distinctions between people who normally vote for small or large government. I wouldn't be especially perturbed if it had a large positive, negative or no correlation with GDP. It's subjectively graded in part by Heritage foundation employees through the assessment of non-tariff barriers so I haven't included it.

Cronbach's alpha

I thought I'd check the quantitative consistency of the scale using Cronbach's alpha, a measure of the internal consistency of a scale. Cronbach's Alpha for the scale with subjectively scored items removed is .68, which according to trusty Wikipedia is "Questionable".

Conclusions

The Heritage foundation economic freedom index is a bundle of often unrelated criteria. Excluding criteria graded on the basis of Heritage foundation employee opinions, those criteria on which pro and anti big government thinkers are likely to agree are good things are correlated strongly with GDP. However those criteria which small government proponents are likely to think are important, and big government supporters disagree, do not correlate positively with GDP and in some cases (e.g. Government spending) are negatively correlated. The only exception is labor freedom, but the correlation is small and there are other problems with the labor freedom scale.

As a result of the unrelatededness of the criteria, the scale is inchoate. Many of the sub-scales either do not correlate with each other, or even correlate negatively with each other, suggesting that there is no one, real coherent construct being measured by "economic freedom". This is shown in the scale's Cronbach alpha score of .68.

You could always just say "By economic freedom I mean that which the economic freedom index measures." But if so, "Economic freedom" has little internal unity, and its parts predict different, sometimes contrary things. The whole scale seems very misleading, whether intentionally so or not.

Just for fun: DePony Sum's Index of Small Government

Just as an exercise I took the objectively measurable variables which are measures of small government and added them together (this is how the freedom index does it- no fancy maths here). Those variables are labor freedom, government expenditure and taxation rate. I then correlated the resulting sum with GDP.

The result is actually slightly negative, -0.15. It seems this index won't be demonstrating a link between small government and prosperity any time soon.

Also just for fun: DePony Sum's Index of Good Government

Inversely, what would happen if we just used the measures which everyone- small government advocates or not- regard as measures of good government. To recap these are judicial effectiveness, government integrity, fiscal health and "business freedom" (because of the peculiar way "business freedom" is measured and defined in this data.) This index fares much better as a predictor of economic prosperity, correlating 0.61 with GDP per capita.

The use of this scale in serious economics

The 2001 Index of Economic freedom alone was cited 1425 times, and an edition is produced every year. The combined number of scholar citations for all EFI editions is probably in the tens of thousands. The EFI has been cited approvingly in distinguished journals such as Economic Policy, Journal of Development economics and The Journal of Law and Economics. It has been cited in such highly regarded non-economics journals as The Journal of Accounting research. The majority of these citations treat the index positively, at least implicitly, and some even treat it as authoritative. For example, some include it as a variable in regressions and other statistical analyses.

To my mind, the fact that this scale has been cited as authoritative in major journals is a scandal of the name of economics. This stuff doesn't belong in an undergraduate journal. It's a mess.

We've honestly used a pretty light touch here. I've pretty much accepted that the scales are internally well constructed representations of what they purport to measure, despite many many sub-scales being themselves constituted by an odd mishmash of variables. I could have been a lot meaner.

No one likes to think of themselves as engaging in ad hom argument in academia, but it really should be obvious that scepticism is needed when the index is called the "Economic Freedom Index" and created by an organisation called "The Heritage Foundation". You shouldn't take my word for this of course- I'm just as bad as they are but from the opposite end. However, it doesn't have to be a matter of trust. If you are a social scientist of any sort and take your profession seriously, please read through the methodology of the Freedom Index and at least look at the first order correlations in the data before you cite it, let alone use it as a variable. This is simple minimal due diligence. Like a good doctor facing a pharmaceutical representative, use common sense.

Why we can't (usefully) dismiss concern about the income of others as envious

I.

The Easterlin paradox is the observation that country level happiness does not seem to increase overtime with income- even though there are many reasons to think it should- for example, income gives us choices, security, additional consumption and so on. The paradox grows even weirder when we reflect that individual increases in income do raise indvidual happiness.

In 2008 a group published a paper entitled "Relative Income, Happiness and Utility: An Explanation for the Easterlin Paradox and Other Puzzles". The paper argued quite persuasively in my opinion that this phenomena can be explained through the relative income effect- that is to say much of the happiness we derive from additional income is to do with changes in our status relative to others. Consequently, simply increasing income won't do much- indeed if it is accompanied by increases in inequality it may lower average happiness, even if it increases everyone's income.

There are subtleties in how relative incomes are thought to work(1), but on one plausible model, relative income effects indicate that less inequality will mean higher aggregate welfare. If so, the existence of relative income effects give a reason to favour higher taxation and redistribution.

II.

Here and there one encounters thinkers who argue that relative income effects represent envious preferences that should be disregarded because they are morally illicit and are tantamount to a sadistic desire to level down. Although this argument hasn't yet achieved great prominence, as the literature on relative income effects as an argument for egalitarianism becomes larger, objecting to "envious" preferences will doubtless become more popular as an anti-egalitarian defence.

It is perhaps not clear that relative income effects do represent envy. They may, for example, reflect legitimate concerns about economic security or the security of democracy in the face of rising inequality, or legitimate outrage over an unjust distribution.

However, I want to argue that regardless of whether relative income effects truly do represent envy, attempts to blame people for their "envious" feelings about the incomes of others are futile. They are futile because, plausibly, the need to not to be lower status than others is deeply hardwired into us. To enjoin anyone to ignore these feelings is delusional.

In making this argument I am mindful that we must steer between the Scylla of the naturalistic fallacy ("X is natural, therefore X is justified") and the Charybdis of taking no account of the composition of human psychology in considering how we should order society. Our argument is not that society should indulge these drives just because they are natural, but rather that that, because they are hardwired, if they are not indulged they will always remain as unmet needs. Since unmet needs prevent flourishing, not indulging them would be a major impediment to flourishing. This is true even if, on the whole, we would prefer that such drives not exist.

You might be worried our argument could be used to justify monstrous behaviour? I doubt it. Let's take violence as an example. If our logic justifies violence that's a major problem but I don't think it does justify violence. To see why, we need to distinguish between the tendencies that evolution has

given us and the needs and drives that evolution has given us. It is important for human happiness to make peace with our drives and needs. It is not so important to make peace with our behaviour tendencies. There is a great deal of evidence that humans have a tendency towards violence in many situations, but with the possible exception of a few psychopaths, very few humans have a need to be violent- they may choose to be violent in more circumstances than would be wise, but being violent does not generally meet important and non-instrumental desires or make them happier. On the other hand, the desire to not be at the bottom of the ladder reflects a drive or need- not fulfilling it will lead to suffering.

Thus, insofar as we care about human flourishing, we have a reason to meet this human need not to be far below others. If we call this “envy” intrinsically evil or try to ban gratifying it, we condemn people to a less rich and flourishing life. Moreover we will not succeed in changing this aspect of human nature. That seems like a good reason not to ignore these preferences.

Footnotes:

(1): Note that if relative income effects are purely about rank order, reducing income inequality won’t help at all, at least not if any income inequality remains whatsoever, because in the presence of any level of income inequality there will be ranks. I find the notion that it’s purely about rank order implausible. Also note that if the rich derive as much happiness from their extra status as the myriad poor derive unhappiness from their lower status, reducing inequality will not increase overall happiness. Again, I find this implausible. I doubt the zero sum model of relative income effects- it seems to me probably true that at high levels of income inequality more utility is lost to relative income effects, while at lower levels, less utility is lost. However some authors endorse a zero sum model,caveat emptor

Chapter 6. Political Strategy

Seeing Like a Communist

I read this by Scott Alexander:

"*I picked up Inventing The Future… because I feel bad that I've never been able to get my head around the communist paradigm. In the past, I've learned new paradigms by reading a lot of books from within that paradigm (and hating them) and debating people from within that paradigm (and thinking they're crazy). Then fifty books and a hundred debates down the line, I finally get some kind of inkling of where they're coming from, and then after a while I can naturally make my mind shift into that mode and my only differences with them are at the high-level generators of disagreement. I was born into the Woke California Liberal paradigm, I managed to force myself to understand the libertarian paradigm in college, I managed to force myself to understand the right-wing paradigm a few years ago, and I would really like to be able to understand the communist paradigm too."*

And it got me thinking, is there some way that the process of grasping a weltanschauung could be sped-up? I could of course just write a debater's case for communism. However, such a case would just be another one of the fifty things that Scott would have to read before groking communism.

To grasp a weltanschauung is to rearrange what we always knew into another pattern. Once we've grasped, it should seem surprising to us that we didn't see it. To that end the easiest way to make the communist weltanschauung graspable seems to me to present a series of propositions that many would find at least plausible, which taken together gesture at another way of thinking. Rather than going for quality by trying to prove something really difficult and significant, let's go for quantity by presenting a series of fairly modest ideas that jointly gesture at something more.

I say 'gesture' rather than 'explain' because I suspect that when it comes to grasping a model of the world on this scale, part of the experience has got to be putting the pieces together for yourself. Some ideas always lose something if they are explained, to be properly conveyed they must instead be rediscovered by the student.

Perhaps the best model for this sort of thing is Wittgenstein's the *Philosophical Investigations*. There's not a great deal of *arguing* going on there, but the ideas form a sort of haunting constellation. Or for another analogy, it's less a lecture, and more a kind of meandering stand up comedy set without the punchlines "what's the deal with language games eh?" It was after all Wittgenstein who said a serious and good philosophical work could be written that would consist entirely of j*okes*.

In what follows, I try to do that for communism, arranging a sort of blancmange of ideas that don't so much argue for a communist world view as swarm into it. It would be an interesting exercise to perform a similar conjuration for other world views, and if anyone gives it a try, please link me to it.

Method and social epistemology

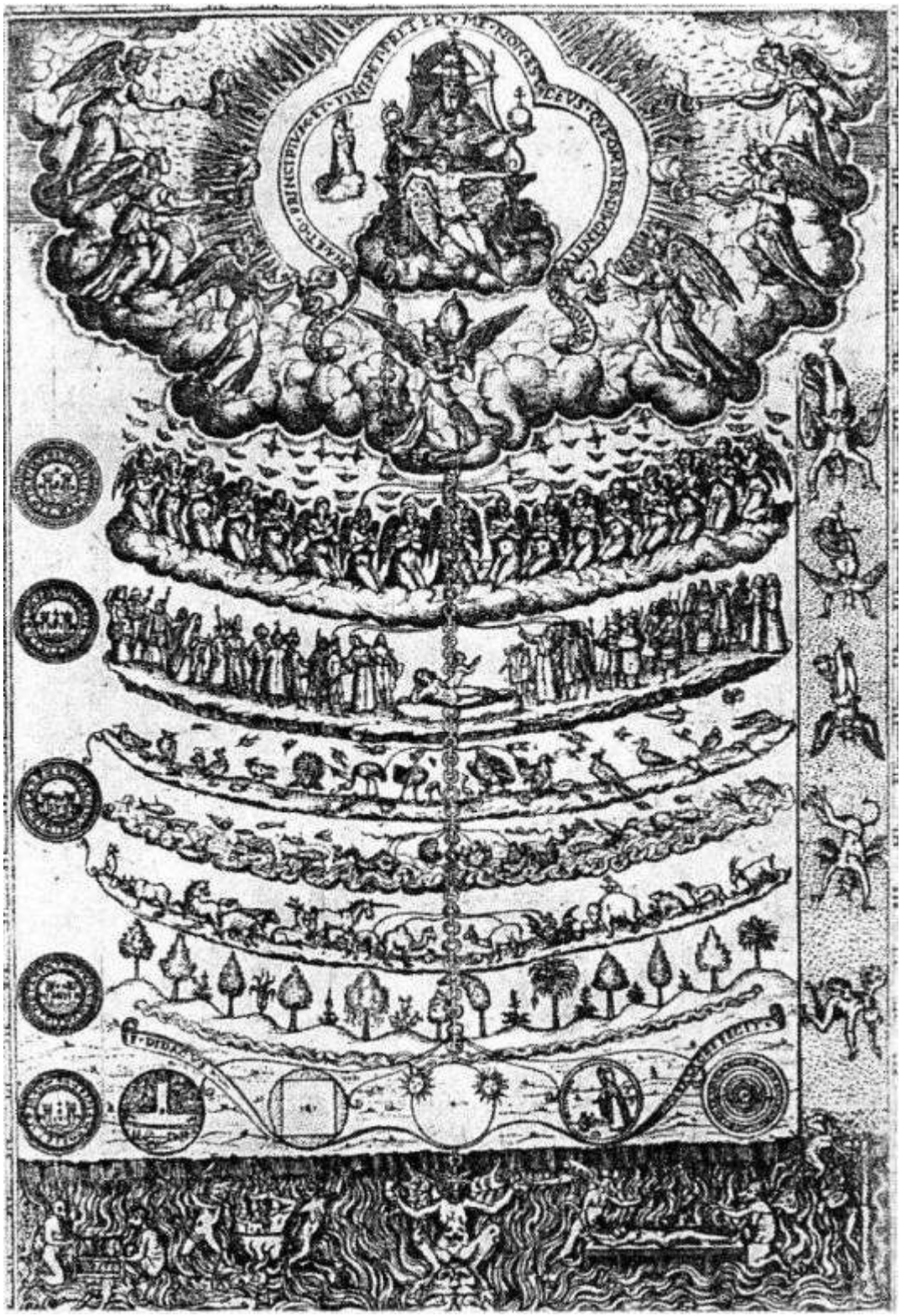
1.1 The ideas on the table are a reflection of the kind of society we live in. The ideas that were on the table in AD 1019 are very different to the ideas on the table today. This is due to the interests of the powerful, but also due to the sheer difficulty of imagining your way out of your own society.

1.2 In all areas, but especially the areas that really, truly matter to the powerful (predominantly economic policy and foreign relations), the dominant ideas will disproportionately reflect the interests of the powerful, although of course there will be counter-narratives.

1.3 Even if all you want is an accurate view of the world, you need to be aware of this skew in the evidence that is being presented to you- a skew towards power. You need to work to overcome this skew.

1.4 Because power isn't absolute, the dominance of the ruling ideas is never absolute, and power comes to reluctantly compromise on matters that were previously off the table. For example, discussion of universal healthcare in the US used to be regarded as a fringe position, but though the policy hasn't been adopted, room has been made at the table to, at least, discuss it.

1.5 You are not intrinsically smarter than a medieval scholar arguing that the great chain of being validates the divine right of kings. Don't think you can't be duped by ideas that will one day seem laughable. If those ideas favour one set of interests over another, the odds are that they will be powerful interests.



1.6 The pervasiveness of ideology leads to a kind of circularity, or unseeing. Consider the argument 'capitalism is good because it's built on voluntary exchanges'. Remember that capitalism is only built on voluntary exchanges *insofar as you accept that the people who society presently regards as the legitimate owners of goods really are the legitimate owners.* Suppose that you didn't accept this. Suppose, for example, that you held that a family who has lived in a house for generations has a better claim to own it than the landlord. In that case it would seem to you that there is nothing voluntary about their tenancy- rather they are being extorted for something that should be theirs by

right. Thus we come to the absurdity of the slogan 'capitalism is voluntary' *it only works if you believe the capitalist distribution of property is right, but this is the whole of the topic under dispute!* Ideology makes us engage in this kind of circular thinking, because it becomes tricky to suspend our belief in the existing system even long enough to argue for it!

1.7 Is communism primarily a theory about how things should be, about what should be done, or about how the world is? All three, in a difficult to describe and uneasy tension. They sort of loop into each other, and you could start that loop at different points. For example, we start a dream for how things should be, we ask *why did that dream arise, and why is it frustrated,* and so we come to ponder how things are at the moment, then the combination of a goal with a theory of the present conditions leads to thinking about a method to get to that goal.

The material organisation of society

2.1 Resources have always granted power and power has always granted resources, in turn, power and resources have always structured society. There are tight links between social structure, the interests of those who are in power, and the way a society produces and distributes resources.

2.2 Capitalism is a system under which people make investments for the aim of maximising return, with the return being reinvested (at least in part) into making more money, and so on. It can be seen as a growing spiral.

2.3 The process isn't a matter of free choice. Rather, something like evolution is in play- if you don't try to maximise your returns, in the worst case you'll go bankrupt, and in the best case you'll become increasingly irrelevant. As we will discuss later, it starts to seem like capital has developed an existence, motivation and cunning all of its own, not fully reducible to what is in the head of any one person.

2.4 The pseudo-agency and intelligence of capital might fruitfully be compared to the pseudo-agency and intelligence of natural selection- a dumb process that, through the discipline of selection, thrives and solves problems.

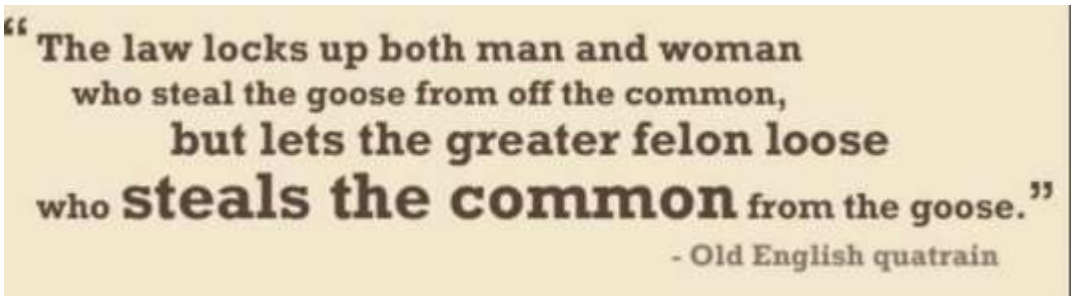
2.5 Under capitalism, capital is the motor of production. As a result, capital begins to discipline everything, because if you get in the way of smooth production, you're getting in the way of a lot of very powerful interests. Any social institution- formal or informal- can thus be potentially subject to the discipline of capital. Historians have argued that things and concepts as important and diverse as religion, education, the family, and of course, politics and the state, have been relentlessly altered and rewoven by capitalism.

Pumping intuitions about fairness

3.1 Above we made the point that the voluntary status of capitalism depends on the legitimacy of a certain framework of property relations. Let's consider what the world looks like sans that

framework. People often complain that chief executive officers make a huge amount disproportionate to the work they put in- but wait till you hear about shareholders! Under capitalism, extra money is owed to certain individuals in view of their 'ownership' of certain assets, and this starts to like a kind of unearned privilege backed up by state power. That is- if you don't buy the legitimating narrative that the ownership of the productive assets is rightful.

3.2 The defender of capitalism will often try to argue that the order of property ownership under capitalism is legitimate and not arbitrary- it reflects a sequence of voluntary exchanges following legitimate initial acquisition of property from nature. There are two main sorts of problems with this. **A)** Technical philosophical problems about the Lockean or Nozickean account of distributive justice, which we won't go into here, and **B)** a simpler and arguably more decisive problem. *History did not happen like that.* It's simply not true that if you go back through the chains of ownership and exchange this is what you will find. It's war, theft and the state all the way down. The Lockean and Nozickean accounts of distributive justice have a peculiar fragility to them- it doesn't take much to render a chain of acquisition illegitimate, and there is much, from state subsidies to genocidal land-grabs.



Human Nature, hierarchy and markets

4.1 If we take human behaviour in the evolutionary environment as definitive of 'human nature', then human nature is not just passively egalitarian, but actively anti-hierarchical. **(See the note in the appendix for elaboration on this point.)**

4.2 The market economy is not atemporal. Other kinds of economies have existed. The notion that the market economy is 'human nature' would be very surprising to the vast majority of human societies that have ever existed (hunter gatherers).

4.3 But is it always the case that 'naturally' arising non-market based societies are too poor for trade to be very important? Hunter gatherers, medieval subsistence farmers and the like? No. Consider for example the Inca, who had a complex system of production managed through a 'naturally' occurring non-market economy without money or currency, in which households were issued with the goods they required from storehouses.

Technologically advanced non-market economies

5.1 Some non-capitalist economies existed relatively recently and using modern technologies. It is far from obvious that such economies were, in economic terms, failures. You may rightly doubt whether the Soviet Union is a good model for a communist society, but it is a very different model to contemporary capitalism, and its productive achievements were often impressive. This is somewhat odd because to listen to some people talk you'd think that societies not dominated by markets couldn't exist, but didn't some exist just thirty years ago? Everything that is actual is possible.

5.2 But if a completely different kind of economy to our own can fly, why assume the ideal looks anything like this amalgamation we inhabit? Since Soviet style command economies were viable, even superior in some ways, and among capitalist countries the variation in economic structure is vast, the space of possible ways an economy can be designed is large, and models quite different to our own can work quite well. That should shake your confidence- at least a little bit- that the economy you live in is optimal.

A Note About Weighing Costs

6.1 Never forget: we ignore the atrocities that are going on all the time around us because we regard them as a default state of affairs.

The Dialectic of Use and Exchange Value, and related social tangles

7.1 Our society produces things for exchange, not use, but this weirdly indirect way of servicing our needs has its downfalls. Producing things for exchange, not use, can fail to maximise utility for many reasons. Two of the most obvious are inequality (a person might desperately need a good, but not be able to afford it) and externalities (two people might happily buy and sell a good, without consideration for the positive or negative effects that seemingly private contract has on others. This will tend to lead to overproduction or underproduction of goods with strong externalities, relative to the social optimum).

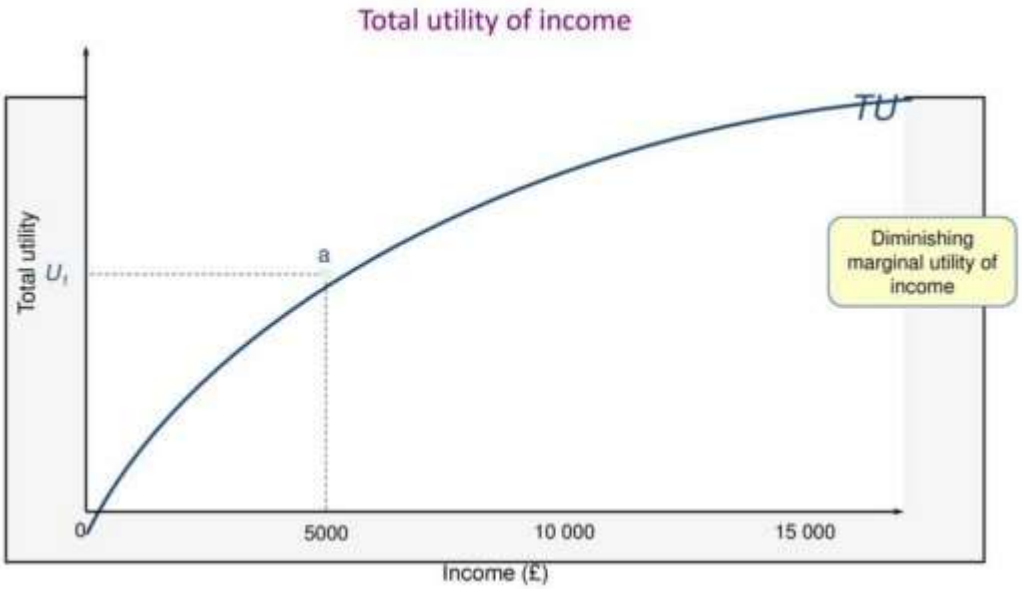
7.2 Consider also the effects that producing for exchange, not use, has on the producer. Anyone who has worked as a telemarketer and gone home wishing they could do something that matters has felt this. There's a lot of jobs that just don't need doing.

7.3 Let's double back to ground we've already covered briefly- the eerie seeming 'self-moving' agency of capital. The operation of individual behaviour in a society with a given institutional framework gives rise to emergent phenomena that may have been intended or desired by none of the participants, or by only a very few of them. Capitalism has a logic all of its own, that logic arises from our individual actions, but ends up controlling them.

7.4 This self-moving logic of capitalism will always work to subvert principles, legal and moral. Every institution faces the imperative 'serve the goal of profit', and everything and everyone that exists in the social world is warped by it.

7.5 But aren't these goals just human goals- weighted by purchasing power? Weighting by purchasing power would be bad enough, given that it makes the desires of some hundreds of millions of times more important than those of others, but the problem is deeper than this. The self-expanding loop of capital doesn't really care much about externalities.

7.6 As Gerry Cohen pointed out, it also has a peculiar preference structure regarding leisure- it would always prefer societies to work more and consume more, rather than use additional productive power for leisure. Why? Because capital owners would prefer for their capital to be employed for as large a portion of the day as possible, so as to maximise profits (it's not as if the capital owner has to be working all the time their capital is being put to work). It will push for this through means cultural and political- although it won't always get its way.



Planning? Yes, but.

8.1 Planning a better world is important, but don't mistake the absence of complete plans for the futility of transition. No one planned capitalism out of feudalism, but struggle and dreaming helped get us there. Plans are necessary, but they will never be complete. (Editorial note here: Showing my market socialist sympathies I recommend "Economics of a Feasiable Socialism" if you are interested in detailed plans for a socialist society.)

Intentionally or not, people are lying to you

9.1 It's a childish delusion that you just so happen to live in the only civilisation without propaganda.

9.2 Propaganda is rife. Consider public debate about just about any policy position. You're constantly being told that even the slightest steps towards the subordination of exchange value to use value (e.g., universal healthcare) will maybe cause the economy to keel over dead and rip ragged human economic activity in the sphere in question.

9.3 In many cases you know for a fact this can't be true, because even in the capitalist world there are many countries where any policy that might be under debate has already been adopted. In the healthcare debate, people will tell you that the economy will suffocate, or at least that healthcare will bloat and become ineffective, if universal healthcare is implemented, even though anyone can drive to Canada.

9.4. In the US minimum wage debate, people will tell you that unemployment would spiral if minimum wages were raised to $15 dollars an hour. Meanwhile, in thoroughly capitalist Australia, a 21 year old fast food worker in Australia who is casual (without guaranteed hours) is entitled to $26 an hour (and no, Australian dollars don't go much farther, or much less farther, than US dollars). At every turn, capitalism is presented as at once essential to human activity, but also very fragile and in need of the velvet glove treatment *even though you can see it just isn't true by buying a plane ticket.*

The State

10.1 On no topic is the communist at more danger of being misunderstood than the state. It didn't use to be this way- in the past it was fairly easy to understand that the existing state is no friend to the communist, but with the advent of the post WWII welfare state, people began to associate the state with communism.

10.2 From the communist viewpoint, the welfare state can be seen as a sort of commons that has been won as a concession from the ruling class- an exception to the usually strictly individualistic property order the state typically administers. Because communists do not regard capitalism as natural, for the communist the welfare state is not an unnatural 'exception' to the general order of things, it's just one more way the state organises property rights, a steam valve to prevent the existing state's real purpose- the maintenance and improvement of private property- from exploding.

10.3 There are three factors that act on the state to pull it towards the interests of capital. The first is the least significant, but the most noticed- it costs money to run an election campaign, and money can buy lobbying. The second is that the most important people in the state, politicians and senior civil servants, tend to be rich, have rich friends and have gone to the same cliques of schools, universities and jobs as other rich people, forming a well connected power-elite. The third is the power of the purse strings- states are disciplined in supporting capitalism through the threat of capital strike and diminishment in investment.

10.4 This critique of the state can go in two directions for the communist. One either thinks that the state can be done away with entirely (anarcho-communism), or, regarding the state as a body of armed people for the defence of property relations, one concludes it is necessary to replace the

capitalist state with a communist state (main-line communism). Optimists in the latter camp might hope that the need for such a state might one day whither away. A more pessimistic view (which I favour) is that complex societies probably inherently require standing armed bodies for the enforcement of social order.

Workers: Is there a hero to lead us through these brambles?

11.1 How interesting that the very people who have the least stake in the system (wage labourers) are also the very same people without whom the system would grind to a halt!

11.2 To be more explicit, think about things like a murder case in reverse. If capitalism is *going* to be killed, the question is, who has *means* and *motive.* From this point of view, proletarians- people who sell their labour for a living- would seem like the perfect suspects for the pre-crime of murdering capitalism. They gain the least from capitalism, yet oddly they are absolutely essential to operating it. Proletarians have means and motive. The method? Ah, well that's a hard question.

Appendix: Reader questions and miscellaneous

It's a busy week for me, and while I'll read all the comments posted here, I haven't read all comments posted in response to this article on other websites like Reddit. I feel irrationally guilty about this- I'm not trying to be an aloof author, it's just that things are busy. I got a lot of questions about the details of how a socialist society would work, but I'm going to save my exposition on that for my book review of "Economics of a Feasible Socialism" by Alec Nove.

I got an excellent question for a reader named Jack about why I say that human behaviour in the evolutionary environment was anti hierarchical. Here's my response:

Hi Jack

It is largely uncontroversial among academics that study the subject from a variety of disciplines (primarily anthropology, but including diverse disciplines like economics and evolutionary biology) that early hunter gatherer societies had very little in the way of internal hierarchy, based on inference from existing and recently extinct hunter gatherer societies.

It's important not to romanticise these societies too much, just because they were egalitarian does not mean, for example, that they were peaceful. They weren't always peaceful, either in relation to their neighbours, or internally.

What is interesting is interesting about their egalitarianism is that it wasn't simply a 'passive reality', it was rigorously enforced by pressure on those who were seen as a threat to the egalitarian order through their popularity, charisma or success. Methods used ranged from teasing successful hunters to muderering individuals who were seen as domineering (at least in some societies, the

murder of such individuals was expected to be carried out by close kin.) In the literature these strategies are called ‘ reverse dominance’.

Do I think relentlessly dragging down successful individuals and vicious reprisals against pushy individuals would be a good way to run our society? No, but thinking about it is an antidote to the idea that humans are inherently hierarchical. The truth is complex- probably it is fairer to say that humans are simultaneously hierarchical and anti-hierarchical- these are warring tendencies within us that express themselves to different degrees in different societies. During the critical formative years, the anti-hierarchical element dominated.

Here’s one of many classic papers on the subject if this has captured your attention:
https://www.unl.edu/rhames/courses/current/readings/boehm.pdf

Thinking about political persuasion from a left-Wing point of view

1. The American left cannot win without persuading large swathes of the right & centre

There's a comforting lie that some parts of the American left believe. We don't need to worry about convincing conservatives- we just need to get non-voters to vote.

This has never rang true to me. What evidence we have suggests turnout is not a panacea. For example, culturally the UK and Australia are very similar, however Australia has compulsory voting. The political centre of both countries is about identically positioned.

The evidence from the US suggests that non-voters aren't as politically different from voters as is sometimes claimed. As of the time of writing, 53.5% of registered voters disapproved of Trump whereas when we look at polls of all adults… the figure is exactly the same- 53.5%. Registered voters are more likely to approve of Trump than adults in general, but only very marginally (42.3% v 40.7%).

The Democrats would surely win if everyone turned out, but not by all that much. Specifically progressive and left-wing Democrats, even on the most generous conception of these, would still be a long way from a majority. Thus there are strong reasons to think the left can't win simply by getting more people who share their values to turnout. Anti-parliamentarianism won't save you either- it's very hard to win a revolution if 75% of the population (at least) disagree with you. The idea that no persuasion beyond a little bit of base motivation is necessary is a comforting myth. It's a way of telling ourselves we don't have to talk with those self-satisfied, self-centred, self-serving, deliberately ignorant idiots over there.

There's a natural tendency to view those who disagree with us on topics which are genuinely important as abhorrent. In turn, abhorrent things are viewed as dirty, or likely to contaminate us. I'm not going to argue about whether these feelings are justified, instead let us just say they aren't useful- they're not workable levers for changing the world. If you pick a random person on the street it's almost certain that they'll hold extremely dangerous and regressive political views on at least one topic. I'm not talking about minor issues here- I'm talking about big things like war, criminal justice, etc. Despite that, it is absolutely essential the left engages with them.

TLDR: examples from overseas, and data from the US itself, indicate that increasing turnout or motivating the base alone will not win the US for the left. There will be no left victory in the United States without persuading a lot of conservatives and centrists.

In the rest of this piece we'll go through the permutations and methods of persuasion from a left-wing point of view.

2. Arguing the line

The kind of persuasion that we are all probably most familiar with is what I call arguing the line. Arguing the line is, quite simply, arguing vigorously for your position. Sometimes this is done against a real interlocutor, as in a comment or Twitter thread. Sometimes this is done against a purely hypothetical interlocutor, as in many blog posts. Arguing the line is not a collaborative process, it is a confrontational process. While it can be cruel or angry, it doesn't have to be.

Some would say that this is the least effective of persuasive strategies; I disagree, although it is often overplayed. In order to see how arguing the line can be effective, it's important to understand what it will generally not achieve.

Usually, arguing the line is not going to change the position of the person you are arguing with on the spot, especially if the argument is happening on the internet. If it does change anyone's position immediately, it will almost invariably be on small points.

Rather than changing the mind of the person you are arguing with, the primary purpose of arguing the line is to convince onlookers. There are a lot of people with relatively unformed political views floating around in pretty much every space on the internet. If you're on the fence, seeing someone argue coherently, reasonably and powerfully for a position like Medicare for all or an end to foreign interventions can have a big impact.

Keeping in mind who you are really trying to persuade- undecided observers rather than your direct interlocutor- clarifies the mind. It will help you pick your battles, keep your morale up, and refine your methods and pitch. This isn't to say you should just speak as if your direct interlocutor weren't there- in most contexts this would make you seem weird, rude or aloof.

3. Rules of thumb for arguing the line

You should aspire to state your arguments so clearly that no one can misinterpret you even if they want to. This is because it is quite likely your opponent will be deliberately or quasi-deliberately trying to misinterpret you. You almost certainly won't succeed in making your work impossible to misinterpret, but it's important to try and get as close as possible. This is because if you're engaged in a back and forth with someone, onlookers will only be partially paying attention. Thus if your opponent attributes a meaning to you, many onlookers will automatically assume their interpretation is correct unless you have been so totally clear that even people who are only half paying attention can see that your opponent is bullshitting.

Often people's impression of the epistemic virtues of the debaters stays with them longer than their recollection of the actual arguments (e.g., "This person seemed reasonable" vs "This side seemed histrionic or dishonest.) Thus, without seeming like a pretentious dickhead, make your epistemic virtues visible. Show others that you are measured, calm, inquisitive, nuanced where nuance is appropriate, perspicuous and attentive to the whole picture. If you aren't already these things- try to be! If you can write or speak well, do so.

A good rule is that you should avoid engaging where you are clearly going to get stomped. This includes topics where you have no idea what you are talking about and circumstances where your opponent can control the flow of the conversation in such a way that they can cut you off at leisure. There's an old proverb about this, it's harsh but it makes its point: It is better to remain silent and be suspected of being a fool than to open your mouth and remove all doubt. If you don't say something your side will be perceived as having lost ground, but not as much ground as if your opponent can smash through a tissue thin defence. Arguing poorly is like building your opponent's strawman for them!

Consider the way Ben Shapiro bolsters the rhetorical strength of his case by picking dissenting audience members in the grip of strong emotions, controlling the flow of conversation and "destroying" them. This is a great example of why it is sometimes better not to engage if you can't do so on fair (or better!) terms.

The above rule has to be tempered with the recognition that there is sometimes value in being the lone dissenter. If you are the lone dissenter, you're certainly going to 'lose' the debate, since the numbers of the other side mean they will get more speaking time- they can 'rebut' all your points

and put forward more ideas than you can reply to. Nonetheless, there is sometimes value in clearly, simply and powerfully stating your ideas. In the Asch conformity experiments- for example- it was shown that a group consensus about something has an extremely powerful effect on onlookers, but even a single dissenter can greatly weaken the effect of that conformity. We can think of this as the principle of contested space- if there is a space, conceptual or physical, which the left is not contesting then there is a problem.

People- even fellow travellers- always try to pigeonhole arguments into being a variant of something they've already read- either to dismiss it or accept it without thinking too deeply. People are always looking to be able to say "oh this writer is one of X type people so she thinks Y&Z and must be vulnerable to objection P". In order to avoid this, try throwing in curve-balls that will surprise your readers expectations of what they think you believe. For example, channelling the Communist Manifesto for a moment:

"I'm a Marxist so I believe that capitalism has accomplished wonders far surpassing Egyptian pyramids, Roman aqueducts, and Gothic cathedrals; it has conducted expeditions that put in the shade all former Exoduses of nations and crusades."

4. Rogerian persuasion

If you want to actually persuade an individual of something, and not just onlookers, Rogerian persuasion (named after the psychologist Carl Rogers) is your best bet.

Most people don't have especially clear or fixed views on issues, but instead have a mixture of beliefs and values related to any given topic. The idea of Rogerian persuasion is that if you want to persuade someone on any given topic, you should focus on areas of shared and similar beliefs and values. You want to demonstrate how those beliefs and values might actually support a left-wing position on the topic. This is easier and less artificial than it sounds, because most people at base have many quite left-wing intuitions and beliefs, they just get crusted over by reactionary propaganda.

Focus on demonstrating that you understand what the other person is thinking and saying. A good technique to combine Rogerian persuasion is what counselors refer to as mirroring. Paraphrase key things the other person has said and repeat it back to them to show you understand and check that you are on the same page.

One very important point in Rogerian persuasion is never to leave the other person in a position where they don't have an out. You want them to have a natural route of escape. A way they can walk back from positions and change their mind without making a big mea culpa. People usually aren't that afraid of changing their minds, what they care about is the humiliation of having to admit that they were previously wrong, especially if it is in a way they now recognise is a bit repugnant. As a result, people often want to dress up a big change of heart as simply stating something they've always believed 'more clearly' or 'clarifying' their views. There's a fine line here. I'm not sanctioning dishonesty, and there probably are times when people should feel a little bit uncomfortable. But remember, this isn't about 'winning', much less about punishing the person for their prior views. It's about the structural transformation of the world.

Don't try to turn Rogerian persuasion into passive-aggressive hippie focus-group bullshit where you get exactly the cookie-cutter result you want. You really do have to listen, you really do have to actually care what the other person thinks and accept- at least in the context of that conversation-

the differences in your opinion. Above all you have to respect the autonomy of the other person. This respect for what the other person thinks means that you're not going to turn out intellectual clones of yourself, but that's okay.

Sometimes you've got to accept partial wins. For example, if you can persuade someone who supports the death penalty, to restrict that support to a much smaller set of circumstances, that's a win. If you can persuade someone to move from supporting the criminalisation of abortion to just being personally opposed, that's a win. Accepting these partial wins does not mean having to compromise your own views.

5. Mere presence

In a lot of ways, this is related to Rogerian persuasion, but it's worth emphasising separately. Simply being a part of someone's life while holding left-wing views can exercise a powerful influence.

For example, Just letting others know that you support free public college tuition has an effect. You are giving the other person information- that it's possible to be a reasonable, kind person and believe these ideas. For a lot of people exposed to an intense diet of right-wing memetics this is a powerful thing, since their understanding of the world includes the assumption that it's only weirdos who think those things. Try letting people know you're left-wing and being a presence in their lives, but also being cool about it.

6. Don't forget the Socratic Method

Socratic questioning is a kind of arguing by question, where rather than concentrating on putting forward propositions of your own, you focus on asking difficult questions about what the other person believes. In the ideal case (as Socrates practiced it in Plato's dialogues) Socratic questioning leads the other person to move to your own position, as they struggle to deal with the difficulties you raise by amending their position step by step. Even if you don't get that far, Socratic questioning is a powerful method. Socratic questioning can be a complement to either Rogerian persuasion or arguing the line, although the kind of Socratic questioning that works best will vary depending on your purpose.

Intuitively it can look like the person asking the questions is less powerful than the one giving the answers. It's the person answering the questions who gets to describe their worldview, and who speaks the most. This is an illusion however; there is immense dialectical power in asking the questions. When someone is simply expounding their view they can make big logical leaps which are all too easily concealed from the casual listener or reader. Under questioning this stuff comes out. You can expose the underlying assumptions.

Here's a great example of what Socratic questioning can look like, owing to Current Affairs magazine podcast:

"Single payer can work in places like Sweden because they are more homogenous, the United States is too diverse for single-payer healthcare.

"Okay, Canada is only a bit less diverse than the US. What do you see as the key differences between diversity in the United States, and diversity in Canada, which makes single-payer possible in Canada but impossible in the United States?"

The question sounds very innocuous, but is actually quite difficult to answer without either A) implausibly insisting that the relatively small quantitative difference in diversity levels makes a huge difference. B) Saying that the problem is the kind of ethnic groups the US has- straying dangerously close to explicit racism C) Just outright changing the topic.

7. Make propaganda

I don't have much to say about this except an exhortation: Make and distribute stuff that can persuade people: memes, posters, pamphlets, wearables, comics, drawings and essays.

The majority of internet users (95%+) are largely passive and don't comment. Outside the internet, the ratio of culture consumers to culture producers is even higher. You don't have to try very hard to have an out-sized impact (hundreds of times that of the average person) on the conversation. Look at what other people are doing who are good at making persuasive political materials, study their technique, experiment and, hey presto. You'll almost certainly find there's at least one medium where you can excel.

8. Organising as persuasion

It's a pretty well known observation that the process of fighting for justice is radicalising. Thus if you want to persuade people to the left, you should start organising. The reasons being part of organising tends to draw people to the left are many, but include:

A) The support they will (hopefully) receive from the leftists.

B) The conversations they will have with other people they are organising with, and the shared concerns and experiences they find together.

C) The opposition they will face from capital and the capitalist state.

There are limits here. For example, around the world numerous farmers have been organised to oppose fracking on their land. While this experience has no doubt moved the campaigning farmers to the left in some ways, in many places the majority of these farmers will still vote for centre-right parties. The limits are based both on the objectives of the campaign, and the class and social position of those participating. Nonetheless, organising changes people.

9. Institutions as persuasion

Left-wing institutions are the useful residual of concrete left wing struggles and organising. For example, many unions can trace their existence, however distantly, to a particular wildcat strike. Unions are the ultimate example, but not the only one, even within the sphere of industrial issues. For example, although they are rare in this period, it was common in the past to have worker's education institutions, workers schools etc. Most of these can trace their origin to some particular flare-up in the worker's struggle. The same is true of women's libraries, associations of racial minorities, pride marches and even the much maligned student union. These institutions often owe their existence to big moments in particular fights, and while the struggle continues, they often outlive the specific campaigns or moments of intense action that gave birth to them.

I'm including them in this guide because these organisations perform persuasion on an industrial scale, they aim to align not just individuals, but whole demographics, industries and suburbs to a cause. Their strategy is a form of persuasion, but it transcends persuasion. When successful they create whole new political categories and identities.

One of the major problems with sectarian organisations is their tendency to take for granted these kinds of institutions and not recognise their value except as a momentary tool of the sect.

Inversely, it would be a mistake to regard these organisations as inevitably radical- they tend to become soft over time when disconnected from struggle. Too much faith in these organisations is linked to that common new-left disease, the tendency to venerate “communities” (especially oppressed communities) without recognising the contradictions that exist within such communities.

10. A word on critical thinking and informal fallacies

Many Universities have courses on critical thinking. In a good critical thinking course one learns about formal and informal fallacies, cognitive biases, the scientific method, the basics of probabilistic reasoning sometimes up to Bayes’ theorem, a tiny bit of formal logic, maybe a smidgen of inferential statistics, and a few other useful tidbits.

A lot of this material, but especially the study of informal fallacies has been given a bad name by poorly socialised people who try to use it like incantations from Harry Potter (“Ad Hominem!”,”Petitio principii!”) and don’t pay attention to the larger conversational context. Fragments of reasoning that would be fallacies in one context are perfectly valid in other contexts. Sometimes arguments that appear to contain informal or formal fallacies are just abbreviated statements of perfectly fine arguments.

My advice would be to familiarise yourself with ideas like informal fallacies, cognitive biases, probablistic reasoning etc. but generally don’t use the words and terms in your explanations of your thinking. Instead explain the basic flaw in your opponent’s reasoning without appealing to the jargon of cognitive biases or informal fallacies. There’s two good reasons for this. The first good reason is that you should be avoiding jargon generally. The second is that you’ll avoid the bad reputation that these particular conversational manoeuvres suffer.

Specifically with regards to ad hominem attacks directed against yourself, either ignore them, or, if you must, retaliate with a better insult or comeback. Pretty much everyone understands that ad hominem quips don’t really prove anyone right or wrong. Complaining that your opponent’s insults are fallacious won’t do you any favours and just comes across as whining.

11. Dealing with bad faith

A lot of people don’t want to engage in persuasion because inevitably many of those who wish to discuss politics are acting in bad faith. This is a serious problem, and the only advice I have is try to make sensible judgement calls about when discussion is worth your time.

For example, there’s little point arguing with someone who clearly isn’t listening if there isn’t an audience of potentially undecided people to see your argument. In general, beware time wasters, but recognise that on occasion time wasters will successfully waste your time, and this probably can’t be helped.

The far-right are a special case. Arguing with the far-right has many dangers and few benefits. For example, some ideas are so niche that they gain more oxygen if you argue with them even if you completely smash the argument. Let’s say someone comes up with some novel far-right position or titbit and you completely squash it. Good for you, except no one had even heard of it before you bothered so no matter how thoroughly you squashed it, you’ve now helped it enter the discourse.

There’s a special kind of bad faith associated with far-right argumentation. As Sartre puts it in relation to anti-Semites:

“Never believe that anti-Semites are completely unaware of the absurdity of their replies. They know that their remarks are frivolous, open to challenge. But they are amusing themselves, for it is their adversary who is obliged to use words responsibly, since he believes in words. The anti-Semites have the right to play.

They even like to play with discourse for, by giving ridiculous reasons, they discredit the seriousness of their interlocutors. They delight in acting in bad faith, since they seek not to persuade by sound argument but to intimidate and disconcert. If you press them too closely, they will abruptly fall silent, loftily indicating by some phrase that the time for argument is past.’

In other words, if your opponent has bought into the aestheticisation and/or gameification of politics, and cares not whether they are right or wrong- but only for power- why bother? Prove their thesis that their ideas will give them more power wrong in practice, by spending your time elsewhere.

The only thing I would caution here is that you shouldn’t use not talking to the far right as an excuse. There’s a sense for example in which what the typical Trump supporter believes is far-right by many reasonable standards. However, applying such a definition in an American context simply wouldn’t be useful. If you’re uncomfortable talking to Trump supporters, fine, but don’t make a principle out of it.

The three organising myths of centrist establishment Democrats and what's wrong with them

Centrist Democrats often claim not to be tied to any specific theory of politics. However three central ideas reoccur in their rhetoric. The cumulative effect of these ideas is to marginalise, in theory and practice, the left flank of their own party. These ideas are flawed because they rely on simplistic conceptions of how humans and politics work.

These ideas are: The myth of the all power centrist swing voter, the myth of abstract policy choice and the myth of policy precision.

1. The myth of the all powerful centrist swing voter

The first organising myth of centrist establishment democrats is that the party must appeal to the voters in the middle. The logic of appealing to centrists in the middle might seem to be impeccable. After all, don't swing voters decide elections? Is it not logical that swing voters must be positioned somewhere between the Democrats and Republicans in their preferences? There's even a mathematical theorem, the median voter theorem, that purports to show that the centrist swing voter is king. Thus, the centrist democrat concludes, the party must go to the middle.

I don't deny that the median voter model has a rational kernel in some circumstances, but I think it is overdone for two reasons.

The first is a quibble- but an important one. In a voluntary voting system with low turnout like the United States, there is not a fixed population of voters. Rather you must try to excite potential voters. Watered down centrist policies may not be the way to do this.

The second, more philosophical, problem is that the myth of the centrist swing voter assumes a model of the voter according to which voters have clear pre-existing political preferences, and select from a marketplace of political parties to meet their preferences. On this model, the swing voter is evenly positioned between the two parties with "moderate" preferences. This is a false model of how people work generally, but I think it is especially false of swing voters.

Really, people have a vast array of tangled, contradictory values, ideas, hopes, plans, idiosyncratic theories, pet peeves, secret lusts and fears. The party that wins is not necessarily the party that appeals to well defined pre-existing preferences, it's the party that can articulate the different thoughts and wants people have into new political visions and new political identities (e.g. "Reagan Democrats"). The right has traditionally tried to re-articulate people's values around identities like "citizen" and "taxpayer" while the left has tried to articulate their values and social position around identities like "worker", reflecting their material situation. It is no coincidence that the centrists, who think in terms of meeting prior preferences, and not transformation, have been *extremely bad at creating political identities.*

2. The myth of abstract policy choice

The second organising myth of centrist establishment dems is the myth of abstract policy choice. The idea that policies can be assessed in a social vacuum. All we need to do, says the myth, is ensure that we have policies that benefit a majority of the electorate more than the other side, and logically a majority of the electorate must vote for us! People are modelled as omniscient interest maximisers. The dirty work of coalition building and organising is abstracted away.

In truth, policies have to be both *implementable* and *sustainable.* Implementable in the sense that a large segment of the population will fight to get them put in place, sustainable in the sense that they are difficult to knock down or modify once implemented. To do both these things, you've got to make it obvious what you are doing and how it is helping people.

That beloved tool of technocrats- tax credits, are uniquely bad at this. The tax system is opaque and tax returns are only done once a year. I wonder, for example, how aware of the Earned Income Tax Credit many of its recipients are.

Means testing also weakens implementability and sustainability, because it shrinks the constituency that wins from the program.

A good example of the dangers of focusing on policy detail, and forgetting about implementability and sustainability is Obamacare. Part of the reason the Republicans were able to repeal part of Obamacare, and come close to repealing the rest, is because only a tiny fraction of the population has anything like a complete understanding of the affordable care act. It's mystifying, and the winners often don't know that they are winners.

3. The myth of policy precision

The third myth is the myth of policy precision. The myth that *the most important factor for good government is policy expertise.* At first glance this seems plausible, but things are more complicated than this. Focusing on technical details misses the fact that all policy reflects values and goals. Those values and goals differ in important ways along political lines.

If we all shared the same interests, then the most important issue in policy design would be getting the details right. The problem is that in questions of the distribution of resources, there are necessarily differences in interests. If the left is correct that some necessary changes in policy for the good of the vast majority of people are going to negatively affect the 1%, it matters less how carefully crafted your policy is, and more *which side you are on.* It doesn't matter how clever your policy is, if it primarily reflects the interests of plutocrats your policy programs will be harmful.

I don't disagree that well crafted policy from the left is better than poorly crafted policy from the left, but almost any left wing policy is better than almost any right-wing policy. Thinking political valence isn't primary is like being proud of walking fast when you're going in the wrong direction.

We can see a manifestation of this myth in the centrist obsession with calling Republicans stupid. Doubtless, many Republican legislators are stupid. However, this isn't the major problem with Republican legislators. The major problem is that they either don't care enough about inequality, poverty and oppression, or actively support it.

4. The functions of these myths

The function of each of these myths is to disempower and disarticulate the left.

The myth of the centrist swing voter gives a rationale for not caring about the opinions of the left. Only the almighty median voter, serenely and rationally choosing from a menu of options, matters.

The myth of abstract policy choice abstracts away the activist element of making policy- the coalition building. In doing so it reduces the role of extra-parliamentary activists, who tend to be further left.

The myth of policy expertise locks the majority of people out from criticising or arguing about policy. It turns policy discussion from a discussion about justice, to a discussion about technical detail.

Heading left: The stories of people who have moved from the political right to the left.

I asked in half a dozen left-wing sub-reddits for the stories of people who had moved from the right to the left. I received well over one hundred responses, here is my synthesis on themes and patterns which emerged in the sample.

Brief notes on method

I don't normally do qualitative research, I'm a quant or I'm a philosopher. However I wanted to explore the ways in which political ideas change and give people the opportunity to tell their story. The self selected nature of the sample, and the unstructured nature of the responses imposes limitations on the conclusions we can draw, as you would expect.

Typologies

Generally speaking the stories came in a spectrum between two types, those which centred on leaving one's parents homes, and those that centred on other factors. There were plenty of intermediate types (e.g.- 'my politics changed partially when I left home, but further events were needed to move me to the left.'.)

Agents of change

Most stories, with the exception of some cursory one sentence responses, mentioned multiple factors of change woven together in ways unique to respondents. Some of the most common factors were:

Material difficulties or inequalities: These take many forms including encountering perceived injustice in the workplace, difficulty with financial circumstances etc.

Encountering oppressed groups: Many mentioned meeting people from previously demonised groups including LGBT people (especially trans people), people of colour, poor people etc.

Persuasive left-wing interlocutors: Many responses mentioned the role of encounters with left-wing interlocutors. Sometimes these were people known and encountered 'in real life' and sometimes these were authors, you-tubers etc.- e.g. Chomsky, Ehrenreich, Marx, Lindsey Ellis, Contrapoints and so on.

Discovering left-wing youtubers: This is a subcategory of the above, but was a common enough response that it's worth singling out. Presumably an artifact of sampling the Breadtube subreddit.

Seeing the extent of material differences: A sizable number of respondents reported that becoming aware of the magnitude of differences in wealth and income through first hand experience had an

effect. For example, moving to an area with many wealthy and many poor people intermingled, or realising just how much certain people make after taking up a job in high end sales

Disgust with the right: Whether the establishment right, or organs such as the right-wing You-Tuber network. Reasons for disgust included open racism, looseness with facts or reasoning, and aggressiveness or cruelty,

Discovering one's gender identity or sexual orientation: Self-explanatory.

Bernie Sander's 2016 campaign for president: Quite a number of respondents gave this answer.

A shift in religious orientation: Much more common than I would have anticipated. Note that this doesn't necessarily mean a shift *away* from religion although it can be that. MANY respondents recorded that becoming *more* serious about religion moved them to the left.

Independent research: Many respondents identified independent, self driven research as important.

A winding road, not a straight jump

Generally speaking transformation was step-wise, and went down many roads. We hear a lot about the right-libertarian to alt-right pipeline, but it seems there is also an important pipeline from conservative, to libertarian to the left-wing. Other respondents went a different way, moving from conservative, to economically left-wing but socially right-wing, to fully left-wing. Still others travelled from the right, to establishment centrism, to the left. No respondent described a 'road to Damascus' moment with one possible exception.

I generally dislike thinking in terms of a 'political compass' with a social and economic axis, but a number of respondents did describe their experiences in these terms. It seems movement on one axis eventually leads to movement on the other.

And what has this come to teach us?

To my mind, the respondents' answers reinforce the importance of honest, healthy, and kind engagement. Simply existing in a way which challenges preconceptions is a useful strategy. Many respondents talked about the importance of non-hostile interactions with left-wingers and/or oppressed groups. Meeting even one person from the other side who is coherent, controlled and incisive can shake dogmas. Of course, no one can be expected to be kind to those who are not being kind to them. Doing your best to engage constructively needs to be balanced with the situation and your own needs.

Another lesson here is that it's important to meet people where they are and to accept even partial and imperfect changes in ideas as victories. Very rarely are there complete jumps to the left all at once.

In the past I've argued for the value of trying to make differences in material circumstances salient and showing the magnitude of inequalities. This research tended to support the value of such an approach. Pictures, graphs, factoids- all worth a shot.

Against the disposability ideology

Consider three areas in which America is uniquely bad:

Criminal justice

*America imprisons more than twice as many people per capita as its nearest developed competitor, Israel.

*The US imprisons children at a rate of 60 per 100,000, 11x higher than the western Europe and the highest in the world.

Healthcare

*The US is the only developed country in the world where people often die because they don't have enough money for medical treatment.

Workplace relations

*No other developed country has at-will employment.

There is an underlying ideology that unites these- an ideology of disposability. If people do the wrong thing or don’t produce enough value, it’s alright to get rid of them and it's not required to try other things first. While the disposability ideology it isn't unique to America, it takes its most perfect form here. The areas we've listed mark the biggest departures of US domestic policy from other nations. Thus, we could call US capitalism "disposability capitalism". All capitalism treats people as disposable, but the United States has perfected it. Economic security, liberty and life itself can be discarded when they are inconvenient.

Even Americans who affirm that people are not disposable will make exceptions in practice. For example, murderers, rapists, violent people, and people they disagree with politically. The left may be less vulnerable to disposability thinking, but they are not immune. None of this is to deny legitimate communal-defence, but everyone seems quick to draw that blade.

The reply to the disposability ideology is often to argue that this or that person or group didn't deserve to get junked. It is true that people's sins are often less than claimed, but it is not enough to say this. It might sound trite, but we should affirm that everyone deserves certain things through their bare existence.

Chapter 7. Political sociology

The paranoid style in petite-bourgeois politics

I've found that a lot of Qanon supporters and other conspirators are relatively financially successful and/or small business owners. This isn't surprising on purely demographic grounds- these people are older, white, Republicans. Why should anyone be surprised that they often own jet-ski dealerships and diners?

Conspiracism has a special attraction for this set. Put yourself in the position of a 60 year old, white property investor or car dealership owner. You're doing well in the financial aspects of the game of life, but like a lot of people who are doing fairly well (especially older people), you feel like you haven't gotten all that you deserve.

But you're in a double bind. You can't question the rules of the game wholesale, because you want to believe that the game is generally fair, insofar as it has put you ahead of many others. Thus any kind of left-wing critique of the justice of the rules is out. You can't even hold that the problem is ordinary breaches in the rules like tax-evasion- you've probably done those things yourself.

One strategy to explain the discrepancy between what you have and what you think you deserve without fundamentally questioning the rules is to hold that other people got ahead of you by breaking those rules. Elites must be rule breakers. Since breaking these rules is normally punished by society, there has to be some way elites are circumventing them en masse. A secret, en masse violation of the rules sounds like a conspiracy. Maybe you think they're tied together by a blood that most people don't share (anti-Semitism). Maybe you think they're tied together by an ideological project to circumvent and eliminate the economic rules altogether (anti-communism). Maybe you think they're tied together by supernatural pretensions or even real supernatural powers (conspiracies about the occult and elite Satanism)

Complicating the story I've told is that these people are not entirely wrong. The hyper-successful absolutely do breach the rules all the time, often through conspiracies although this isn't necessarily the main reason for their success (the rules themselves are rigged).

This all might sound niche, but to the extent that both conspiracy mongering and the petit bourgeois are linchpins of contemporary MAGA-dom, understanding their overlap is important.

TLDR: Conspiratorial style in petit bourgeois politics arises from a fundamental conviction that they are hard done by- that you haven't got all you deserve. Naturally if you think you've been hard done by, you'll want to understand why you've been hard done by. However in explaining why you have been hard done by you do not want to admit any fundamental problem in the underlying social order, because you have profited from that social order, so instead you must appeal to the idea that the social order is being circumvented. The most natural way to explain mass, gross, but hidden circumvention of the social order by everyone who is ahead of you and doesn't deserve to be is a conspiracy.

Musings on the self-organisation of authoritarianism

Everyone has realizations they make far later in life than is normal. This is one of mine. Nonetheless, in the possibility that this essay might be helpful to someone who was also slow on the uptake, I've decided to share it.

I.

I've come to realize that most pro-authoritarian action can be self-organised- it doesn't need intervention from actual authorities. People just act on what they perceive as their joint interests with the powerful, in the hope of social, psychological or material rewards.

We're all aware of this on some level, but I think it is worth moving the process to the forefront of our mind.

Some examples:

1. A wealthy man buys a newspaper. He never says "don't run negative coverage on me" but hey, the journalists and editors aren't stupid! No one wants to be the person who wrote an article criticising the boss. Maybe the boss even wishes they were a little more critical of him, just to create the appearance of neutrality- but none of them dare. Indeed, they reason, just to be safe it might be best to moderate the criticism of billionaires generally.

2. A new government makes things easier for a specific industry for the purpose of encouraging investment. The industry has never told them to do that, it never offered a deal whereby it would invest more in exchange for regulatory changes, but politicians -rightly or wrongly- imagine it to be true.

3. The right-wing fan of a politician starts a fight with a counter-protester at a rally. Publicly the politician has said they don't want fighting, but their loyal supporter imagines this is not their real position, which they must conceal due to "political correctness" or somesuch.

4. Larry works quite a bit of unpaid overtime. He imagines this will impress his boss. His boss hasn't asked for it. Perhaps he even wishes he wouldn't, concerned about possible liability and OH&S concerns. Nonetheless Larry puts in more hours, imagining he will win greater approval.

5. This one is more speculative, but I can't help but think that many authoritarians are trying to please some internalised father figure they've created by expressing the right sentiments, partially obviating the need for actual authority figures to tell them to do things.

6. Jessica wants to be an entrepreneur. She rails against socialistic government and the man in Washington who takes from the sweat of the business owner's brow. She joins her local young Republican chapter. She imagines this is what entrepreneurs think, and how they act, so she believes she is making herself more like her heroes.

Hence, because they imagine it will win them either emotional or tangible rewards, or both, people organise on behalf of the existing authorities. The authorities need not lift a finger for this to happen, in some cases they might even wish it wouldn't. No paper trail is required. It's a dark take on the Taoist idea of ruling through inaction.

II.

As a strategy for ruling class individuals, saying little that is clear but allowing people to meet what they believe to be your needs especially suits those figures who rely on an image of infallibility. Letting others organise around your perceived desires without explicit intervention allows you to simply disown those actions which would embarrass or fail you.

Sometimes action by the powerful is synthesised with self-organising authoritarianism through the use of oblique and deniable statements and requests. For example, Henry the II's infamous utterance:

""Will no one rid me of this turbulent priest?"

As long as I can remember I've been aware that kings play this sort of game, but what I want you to consider is the possibility that this sort of game isn't just a feudal curiosity, it's the substance of any system of power.

III.

Indeed self-organised authoritarianism may actually end up being rewarded- even without the intervention of an authority. It may self-organise its own rewards. After all, rewarding those who have served the master well seems like something the master would approve of. This means that even if you know better, participation in it might still be rational, a sort of social version of the economic concept of a rational bubble.

We've done so well, so we mustn't stop now: An ethical & political homily on Peter Abelard

In the high medieval ages, the philosopher Peter Abelard- who is usually considered quite modern in his outlook- discusses the case of a slave being attacked by his owner. Knowing that he will die otherwise, the slave strikes out with a sword, killing his master.

There is no equivocation in Abelard that the master was acting wrongly. Nor is there any question that the slave is driven by their circumstances to do what they did. Nonetheless Abelard maintains that the slave has committed an incredibly grave sin- a sin worthy of damnation in the next life, and capital punishment in this life- in choosing to kill his master, even though the only other alternative was death. Temperance required him to accept death.

It's tempting to discuss this case from the point of view of Singer's concept of an expanding circle of moral concern- yet it does not quite fit. There is no doubt in Peter Abelard's mind that the servant is fully possessed of human dignity, and moral bearing, just as much as his master. It's just that, because he's a slave, morality requires him to die, rather than to kill.

You, dear reader, almost certainly do not share Abelard's view. In fact almost all of you would go further and say that even if the slave's master did not threaten his life, the slave would have a right to kill him if it were necessary for his escape. Despite being a relatively modern thinker, Abelard's views on this topic are alien to our own.

Whatever our many failings, and whatever the harsh realities of our world, this is enormous moral progress. Don't ever listen to anyone who tells you society can't fundamentally change, it has fundamentally changed over and over again. Thus in all likelihood it will continue to do so. Whether these further changes will be for the good isn't yet known, but moral and political progress have happened before, and so it is not inconceivable they will happen again.

"We live in capitalism. Its power seems inescapable. So did the divine right of kings. Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings."

-Urusula K. Le Guin

The egalitarian past (and future?) of politics

Let's say that politics is the creation and use of coalitions for determining social questions.

I was listening to a talk today about human evolution as a process of finding a cognitive niche by Andrew Whiten when he made two critically important points.

1. Among early hunter gatherers, we have strong evidence that political coalitions were far more likely to be used to oppose the ascension of a person to a position of social dominance than support it. This is well known- there's a tonne of research on counter-dominance strategies among hunter gatherers. This is one of the reasons such groups were so internally egalitarian.

2. Even among chimpanzees, some of the primary uses of coalitions include supporting the interest of groups of weaker individuals against a single stronger individual, and acting as king-makers. This prevents a single male exercising absolute dominance. Powerful chimpanzee males would actually benefit greatly if coalition formation weren't possible, and social conflict were only between pairs of indviduals.

While I was aware of these points abstractly, I'd never considered them as points about the inherent character of politics.

These days we mostly view politics as a tool of the powerful, and yes, it is. In the beginning though, we have reason to believe that politics was an innovation of those less powerful- the formation of coalitions to control charismatic or physically powerful individuals.

In other words, pervasive use of political strategies once made human societies more egalitarian than those of other species. Now the opposite is true- politics, the use of coaliations, enables certain individuals to possess billions of times more wealth and millions of times more power than others.

How did the orientation of politics become inverted from its original use? I wish I knew, because this seems to me to be one of the most interesting questions you can ask about humans.

Reevaluating our conception of the origins of politics might enable egalitarians to relate to politics differently, and with less revulsion, viewing it as most naturally 'our' tool, not elites.

The alternative conception of politics has, after all, never gone away. Even today, leaders of human groups are required to at least pretend to rule in the common interest. This is a necessary throwback because of the way political power is structured, as an exercise in the perceived interests of the many who form the coalition.

Chapter 8. Future-gazing and speculation

For communism and against foreclosure on the future

By communism here we mean a system in which the principle of:

From each according to their ability, to each according to their need

Is implemented as the sole principle of economic distribution.

There has never been an advanced communist society- only societies that aspire to communism in the long run. Money still existed in the Soviet Union, China and Cuba. The state paid some people more than others, and not solely on the basis of extra need. It is not clear that there has even existed an advanced society with the capacity to build communism.

There are I think two main objections to the possibility of a technologically advanced communist society, viz:

1. The incentive problem
2. The calculation problem

The incentive problem is the problem of making sure the work gets done, especially boring, dangerous and stressful work. If everyone gets paid on the basis of need rather than effort, why would anyone want to do these kinds of work?

The calculation problem is more technical. I can't do full justice do it here, but the problem centres on trying to plan production of hundreds of thousands of different types of commodities without the decentralised signal and response system of the market. It's worth browsing the Wikipedia article if you are unfamilar.

These are tricky problems. One way to respond to these difficulties is to give up on communism. For years I did just that, in favour of social democracy or democratic socialism. Another response comes, ironically, from a libertarian I knew in University.

II.

I was putting to this libertarian the well known technical problems with anarcho-capitalism. These include the provision of public goods and the management of externalities. I argued that such

problems showed anarcho-capitalism was either impossible or undesirable. His response to this was twofold:

1. A) Anarcho-capitalism is a regulatory ideal- an organising concept for political action. Something can serve as such an ideal even if we don't yet know if it is possible.
2. B) The world we live in would have been unimaginable through most of history. To foreclose on the possibilities of the future would be foolish. Shocking changes in technology and social institutions await.

Although I'm no anarcho-capitalist, I think this is a good defence of aspiring to anarcho-capitalism, despite the technical difficulties. While there are good arguments against even aspiring to anarcho-capitalism, the technical arguments alone will not suffice.

This is how I feel about communism now. There are forces that push in the direction of communism. Communism is a good regulatory ideal for those forces. It unifies the most radical progressive tendencies in society. Will communism ever happen? Predicting the direction of social and technical advances with any accuracy is impossible, so it would be foolish to rule it out. Consider especially advances in AI and transhuman enhancement in this regard. Insomuch as communism centres human needs in the productive and distributive process it is a good aspiration.

We need to be exact about what is being proposed here. I'm not arguing "No one can prove communism is impossible, hence we should believe that it is possible." That would be to substitute faith for reason. Instead, I propound "We don't know whether communism will ever be possible but it may well be. Moreover, there are reasons to think it is desirable, and we can take steps to try and approximate it better in the present. Thus it is right to aspire communism."

The danger of an aspiration like communism is that it can overwhelm more specific social plans for the coming decades. So long we avoid this danger, we can happily regard ourselves as aspiring to communism.

III.

I wanted to talk about another issue which is quite logically distinct, but which I regard as emotionally linked: reform vs revolution. What I say here will not be new to anyone who has thought about this for a few years, but I remember that there was a time that I didn't understand it. Maybe it will be helpful for some.

There is no absolute divide between revolutionary and reformist strategies. There are only degrees.

The most obvious reason this is true is that winning reforms can increase revolutionary morale and organisation. Conversely, the threat of revolution can win reforms.

The deeper often missed point is that winning elections can create legitimacy for an anti-capitalist movement. If the deep state then responds through a coup, a revolution can happen in the defence of an elected government- revealing and hopefully defeating the true nature of the repressive apparatus. If successful, such a revolution can then dismantle the existing capitalist state. For this reason, revolution and electoral victory shouldn't be counter-posed absolutely, although in certain contexts the counterposition might make sense.

Engels describes how revolution can be a defensive option, once the state represses legal methods:

"[…] Be that as it may, for the time being it is not we who are being destroyed by legality. It is working so well for us that we would be mad to spurn it as long as the situation lasts. It remains to be seen whether it will be the bourgeois and their government who will be the first to turn their back on the law in order to crush us by violence. That is what we shall be waiting for. You shoot first, messieurs les bourgeois.

No doubt they will be the first ones to fire. One fine day the German bourgeois and their government, tired of standing with their arms folded, witnessing the ever increasing advances of socialism, will resort to illegality and violence."

On critical social-technological points

I want to introduce the idea of a critical social-technological point (CSTP). A CSTP is a technological discovery or implementation after which the existing hierarchies and ruling class of a society is locked in, in the sense that removing them from power, or even resisting them in any practical way, becomes much more difficult.

Saying that a technology is a CSTP is different from saying it is an inherently authoritarian technology- A CSTP generally only threatens authoritarianism if it is achieved in an already authoritarian society.

Examples of conceivable CSTP's include:

1. Genetic engineering. Genetic engineering could be used to lock in the existence of an unequal power structure by genetically writing obedience into the underclass, (or it could be used to lock in vibrant democracy by amplifying the human tendency to treat power critically).

2. Surveillance technology. While the mere existence of widespread surveillance has not locked in authoritarianism a la 1984, the creation of artificial intelligences capable of monitoring all surveillance channels for disobedience simultaneously might. If such technologies are successfully deployed by existing illiberal intelligence apparatuses, the capacity for resisting power will be greatly reduced, and those apparatuses might become impossible to dislodge.

3. The creation of artificial super intelligence. Writers like Nick Bostrom have worried a great deal about an out of control artificial super-intelligence totally out of control of humanity gaining a decisive strategic advantage. This is indeed terrifying, but only slightly less terrifying is the prospect of an artificial superintelligence under the control of the wrong segment of humanity gaining a decisive strategic advantage on behalf of its masters.

4. I have previously suggested that, <u>even in the absence of technological unemployment as such, automation might represent a critical change in the balance of class power and thus a CSTP, permanently removing much of the power of the working class to resist.</u>

2. Past CSTP-lite phenomena

If the thrust of the above is correct, a lot of potential CSTP's are coming up soon. You might rightly wonder if there has been anything like a CSTP in the past? Obviously not in a *permanent* form because there is, at present, no almost omnipotent ruling class, and probably not as sudden and dramatic as some of the possibilities I outlined above- but something along those lines?

While I am not an antiquarian a few possible candidates include:

A) The invention of agriculture generally.

B) The invention of the ox drawn plow

C) The invention of the chariot

D) The invention of the stirrup

E) The discovery of bronze working

3. What must we do?

The nature of CTSP's is that they act as a block on our ability to see into the future. Technological advance is inherently hard to predict, as is social transformation and the combination forms a cataract on our crystal ball. Nonetheless, I think that, cumulatively, between the four possible cases I described, we have enough evidence to believe that one or more CTSP's are approaching.

The more power ordinary people have, and the more accountability to which elites are subject, the better our chances. The creation of a culture of real, conscious democracy in which we jointly and responsibly design the future- in which bodies like the military and intelligence cannot simply always plead secrecy- in which the spoils of advancing automation is something we all share in, rather than being immiserated by- is an urgent necessity.

Technological unemployment isn't the point

At the moment there's debate over whether or not advancing robotics and artificial intelligence will lead to permanent technological unemployment.

I think this discussion over technological unemployment elides a scarier prospect- technological marginalisation. By technological marginalisation I mean a process in which human workers are necessary for fewer and fewer of the socially critical tasks– agriculture, construction, health, defence, electricity generation, transport and so on.

Technological marginalisation can happen even in the absence of technological unemployment. For example, if jobs critical to keeping things running are replaced with dispensable luxury positions, or even if the critical jobs could be replaced by robots, but are not for contingent reasons. Under these conditions, overall employment can remain constant while the number of truly indispensable workers falls.

As a political realist and a materialist, it's my belief that the reason non-elites in rich countries usually do pretty well for themselves is because they have bargaining power. They have this power in large part because they run critical infrastructure- they are nurses, builders, engineers and train drivers. The sheer interdependence of everyone on everyone sustains the those political, civil and economic rights we do have.

Perhaps the scariest single case of automation here is the automation of military forces. While it is strange for a leftie like me to think of the military as a democratic bulwark, a volunteer army made up largely of the working class is safer for democracy than an automated military run by a small cadre of elites.

We have reason to act quickly and create authentic worker's democracy while we still can.

Of fake fire-starters and real panic-mongers

As the Paris Commune was ending, there was a great fear that the city was filled with crazed women who, out of pure bitterness and spite, were roaming the streets, and setting buildings alight- the so called Pétroleuses. Modern historians regard this as a fabrication, but at the time, France was gripped with the idea of such women, who represented fears of political excess, the lower classes, and of course, women. The nature of fire itself encourages such paranoia- its effects are much more visible than is causes, making a gap for speculation. The history of attributing arson to political enemies is well documented extended at least back to the medieval ages, and most famously includes the Reichstag fire.

In Australia during the 2019/2020 fire season things have gotten bad. Vast tracts of land have been burnt, more so than in any single previous fire season. The overwhelming consensus among scientists ranging from meteorologists to fire behaviourists is that this is, in large part, a result of climate change.

Naturally this is awkward for those who passionately reject the existence of climate change. For the terrible injustice of being required to explain something inconvenient to their world view, many denialists decided it would not be enough to simply refute the claims. These denialists seek to find some way in which the fires were caused by their mortal enemies, the environmentalists. Deniers first tried to argue that the Greens had caused the fires by opposing hazard reduction burning. This was an obvious lie- the Greens have never held government anywhere, people involved in hazard reduction burns say it isn't true, the Greens support hazard reduction burning and so on. Their next narrative, now emerging, also conveniently places the blame on their enemies. *Enviromentalists arsonists are deliberately lighting fires in order to create fear of global warming.*

As global warming gets worse, we should expect to see more attempts by the right to shift the blame for the effects of warming onto the left, and other enemies of the right such as ethnic minorities. Fires will be blamed on environmentalists and Islamic terrorism. Food shortages will be blamed on left-wing conspiracies. Power outages will be blamed either on progressive policies, or on sabotage. Steel yourself for it now.

Because conspiracies and denialism are unaccountable to reality, they can turn any event into an expression of lurid fears or dreams, a political weapon, or all of these. As it becomes more and more unmoored from evidence, denialism becomes a mental playground for petty hatreds. The denialist can play out fantasies about the wretched evil of their enemies and various frustrations and fears- whether about ongoing catastrophes, or just about the life-, can be displaced onto the hated foe.

In this fantasy world, we see an inversion. Minorities and the politically disenfranchised are no longer weak- rather they are strong, strong enough to carry out malicious and global schemes. This inversion enables hatred. Only a handful of utter psychopaths will admit, even to themselves, that they hate the weak. Thus it is necessary to paint the weak as strong if one craves to hate them. It's an upside down ghost-world, but its popularity shows it must make emotional sense. What strange creatures we are, to find pleasure in hate?

Chapter 9. Political philosophy

Against Libertarian Criticisms of Redistribution

Pt 1: Nonaggression tells us nothing about the morality of redistribution

According to the non-aggression principle one should never interfere with the person or legitimate property of another without their permission, unless they have initiated aggression against one first. The non-aggression principle is sometimes taken to be a master argument for libertarian views against the redistribution of money or property- e.g., left wing proposals to redistribute money from the rich to the poor. I won't argue either for or against the principle of nonaggression, as there are far more pressing ethical issues. Instead I'll be contending that the non-aggression principle tells us *nothing*, at least directly, about the topic of redistribution.

In the definition of the non-aggression principle I insisted that the non-aggression principle applies to *legitimate* property. I'm not trying to smuggle anything especially controversial in here, by insisting on the term *legitimate* I'm simply insisting that you actually have to rightfully own the thing in question, it's not enough to simply proclaim that one owns it. A moment's reflection will show that this stipulation is necessary, if one owned everything one proclaimed one owned then many things would have multiple inconsistent ownership claims.

Consider the case of Bob. Bob passionately claims that he owns the Atlantic ocean, he actually seems to believe this, and insists that no one should cross the Atlantic without his permission. When asked to justify this, he responds by saying that crossing his ocean without his permission is aggression, and everyone should accept an ethical norm against aggression. When confronted with this argument, there is no need to say anything for or against the non-aggression principle, one simply has to say that the Atlantic Ocean is not actually Bob's, therefore no aggression against Bob has occurred.

This is where the champion of the non-aggression principle as a basis for libertarianism hits a problem. the supporter of redistributive taxation typically does not accept that the goods and monies to be redistributed are, in fact, the legitimate property of those they are being taken from. They hold, on the basis of a differing theory of distributive justice than that held by the libertarian, that they are the rightful property of someone else.

The libertarian will respond by insisting that, yes, the prior owner is the legitimate owner of the goods or monies in question, but notice that the argument has now strayed beyond the issue of non-aggression into a debate about who owns what. Our point is simple then, non-aggression tells us nothing about redistribution unless we assume that redistribution is a process of removing something from its rightful owner and giving it to someone else *but this is part of what is under dispute in debates about distributive justice.* The debate is really about who is the rightful owner of what, and unless one can win this debate, one might as well be Bob insisting that he owns the Atlantic. Just as there is no aggression against Bob implicit in sailing across the Atlantic ocean and 'breaching' his sovereignty over that ocean, so perhaps there is no aggression in 'taking' money off

Beezos to pay for redistribution, if the recipients of that redistribution are already the rightful owners of that money.

Put simply, taking your stuff is not aggression unless it actually does rightfully belong to you, and the whole project of the advocate for redistribution is to try and prove that, in some cases, it doesn't.

In fact if the supporter of redistribution is correct about who rightfully owns what, then the non-aggression principle would imply that action resisting redistribution is impermissible, as it would be a form of aggression.

Now of course the libertarian has responses to the advocate for redistribution. They can critique the arguments in favour of redistribution and propound their own theories of who owns what that do not allow for much redistribution. For example, as Nozick does in Anarchy State and Utopia. However such arguments are not primarily appeals to non-aggression, rather they are total theories of who owns what. Non Aggression simply doesn't cut at the space between the libertarian and the redistributivist.

Pt II: History and Property Rights

In the previous part I outlined why I don't think non-aggression is sufficient grounds to prove that redistribution is bad. I said that what the libertarian really needs is a theory of entitlement to property that provides a defence against redistribution. Of course many libertarians have aimed to produce such a theory.

Here are two desiderata for a theory of property rights that can act as the basis of a case against redistribution:

D1. It must justify the existing distribution of property.

D2. It must do so without appealing to the state or any collective body for legitimation.

Let's unpack desideratum one (D1) a little. It is not enough to establish that people have property rights or that property rights are important to fulfil D1. One can imagine proving that there are lots of property rights, but that they do not correspond to the existing socially recognized distribution. Such a conception of property rights would not be a defence against redistribution, instead it would *require redistribution*. Instead the opponent of redistribution must simultaneously prove that property rights exist, and that they are similar to the existing set of socially and legally recognized property rights.

Desideratum two (D2) is equally important. A proof that property rights exist because the state makes it so would presumably leave the state in a position to change the distribution of these property rights, thus it would be no defence against redistribution.

The most common libertarian approaches which aim to meet these constraints are historical theories of distributive justice. These theories typically hold that you are entitled to something if you justly acquired it from nature, or if you acquired it consensually from someone who did acquire it justly from nature, or if you consensually acquired it from someone who acquired it consensually from someone who justly acquired it from nature, and so on.

I'm sceptical of the claim that any historical theory of distributive justice will ever meet both desiderata because existing regimes of property rights have been arrived at through morally contorted historical processes that libertarians do not accept the validity of. There is no just chain of transmission for the computer I am typing this on. It was built using raw materials from land that was many times stolen and re-stolen. The company that made it was funded using government subsidies that libertarians object to. Every good was made using numerous other goods, and all of those goods made with many other goods in turn, and you don't have to go back far in the history of anything to find numerous interferences with what libertarians would regard as just.

These problems ripple through the whole. If I purchase something from you that you don't really own, I don't really own it either, and if I then sell that thing in turn, I don't really own the money I gain from selling it and so on. Call this the problem of spreading contamination. Spreading

contamination applies even on common sense ideas of property, but is an especially sharp problem for historical theories of distributive justice.

At this point most libertarians I've spoken to have responded with something along the lines of the following:

'look, it's the best we've got—sure actually existing society is riddled with theft and misappropriation, and this can be found in the history of practically any consumer goods, land or capital that is owned by anyone, we have to go with what we've got because the alternative is even more theft and misappropriation.'

The problem here is that by definition it's not actually theft unless you own it, and on the historical theory of distributive justice you don't own it because it wasn't acquired justly. Thus you can't even say that redistribution now would mean further theft. You might say "so you're alleging that taking anything from anyone isn't theft- that's absurd." My reply is that I'm saying no such thing, what I am saying is that, taking the historical theory of distributive justice seriously, this is what it entails. This is not an argument that you can take anything you like from anyone; it's an argument that we need a better theory than the historical theory of distributive justice to explain why you can't.

I'll admit I'm simplifying a for brevity. There are additional defences the libertarian can play, you could fill a book with them. Ultimately though, I don't find any I have yet encountered persuasive.

LAND REGISTRY
LAND TRANSFER ACTS 1875 & 1897

E R

DISTRICT LONDON
PARISH
TITLE No.

LAND CERTIFICATE.

This is to certify that the Leasehold Land in the PARISH of St Paul Deptford and COUNTY of London known as the London High Road

shewn and edged with red on the filed Plan is registered with POSSESSORY TITLE under the above Number.

Copies of the Entries in the Register and of the filed Plan are within.
Dated this 6 day of May 1905

Assistant Registrar

NOTE. Section 8 of the Land Transfer Act, 1897, requires this Certificate to be produced to the Registrar on every Entry in the Register of a Disposition by the registered Proprietor of the Land and on every registered Transmission or Rectification of the Register but not on a Transfer under a Power of Sale conferred by a registered Charge.

Appendix A: The contention that objecting to capitalism is objecting to private arrangements purely between private individuals

Sometimes Libertarians argue that capitalism is just a series of private arrangements between consenting adults, so there is no grounds to dissent to it. The thing is, most actual exchanges under capitalism involve claims to capital goods and land *that society might well contest the ownership of.*

Let's suppose I found a television by the side of the road, dumped there by some thieves, and was about to sell it. Whereupon you discovered me, and explained that, actually, you have a better claim to the television, and so the transaction can't go ahead.

If I then reply "but this is a contract between consenting adults!" this would be wholly irrelevant *because our agreement involves infringing the rights of others*. The libertarian begs the question by

assuming that the consensual transactions don't involve trading in things which someone else (say, the state) has a better claim to. This is not to say that the state actually does have a better claim- to work this out we will have to consider difficult questions of moral philosophy and economics, *but merely to say that the \fact that a transaction is voluntary between two consenting adults does not in itself establish its legitimacy.*

Indeed the "voluntary" arrangement might even infringe the rights of a party to the transaction. Suppose that you are the buyer, prepared to buy back your own television at considerable expense. In some sense you are a voluntary participant to that transaction, in another sense you aren't really a voluntary participant at all- you have a right to get the TV back either for free, or at only the cost of a finder's fee.

Appendix B: The tyrannical king as a benchmark

Suppose that a merchant went before a king and said "My lord, your taxes doth oppress me fiercely." To which the king replied "Begone vagabond! It is only by my clemency that I do not charge you far more! For this whole land is mine. Truly what you pay is not taxes, but a fee I impose on people who dwell on my property. What you think of as "your" land is really mine, and the land taxes you pay are but rent! It is nothing less than the natural laws of liberty which permit me to tax you."

From a deontic libertarian point of view, the only option here is to challenge the king's claims to own everything. I want to suggest that for many purposes we can use the king as a benchmark for assessing the plausibility of Libertarian defences of the status quo.

For example, if the merchant sayeth to the king- "But my lord- thou hast stolen all that thou possess, or inherited it from those who have!" and the king responds- "Certainly it is so- but further theft at this point to 'rectify' the situation would just perpetuate the cycle of stealing- best leave things as they are!" This argument would be transparently absurd, yet I've heard libertarians make exactly this argument for why we should not engage in mass redistribution to correct past wrongs, (and things libertarians regard as wrongs, such as government subsidies).

Appendix C: There are no golden strings, just institutions

Although this doesn't strictly prove anything, I think it's useful to take a breath and clear our mind when we think about property. A lot of people imagine property as somehow metaphysically tied to a specific owner by intangible golden threads, and it's worthwhile to remind ourselves that this is not so.

Never forget that ultimately there are just objects. Tables, chairs, parts of land, and people, which are a special kind of object. What is property then? Property is a kind of social arrangement giving certain people certain bundles of permissions regarding certain objects, and denying those

permissions to everyone else. In the final analysis then, like all permissions and refusals, *property is a collection of threats of social sanction, including violence.*

It seems deeply unlikely to me that we will ever be free of property understood in this way, or that this is even desirable. Even a communist state wouldn't want people trespassing in the nuclear power reactor without the right expertise- and what is the right to collectively exclude all people who lack special permission from a site but a kind of collective property?

Re-framing property as the threat of sanction and violence, and not some metaphysical linkage, brings it into a new perspective. From this standpoint there is nothing especially 'non coercive' about, say, anarcho-capitalism, unless you take it as given that the claims it makes about who is entitled to what are ethically just.

Money and the Sceptic: Why arguments for redistribution are probably stronger than you think

I saw someone the other day put forward an argument against redistributive taxation based on a study. A second person said ‘but that study is from the Cato Institute’. More parties then jumped in to object that this was an ad hominem argument, and the study should be evaluated on its own merit. This ordinary interaction on the internet got me thinking about the social epistemology of arguments like this.

Consider this thought experiment:

You’re aboard a spaceship and you crash land on a mysterious planet. To your surprise you discover an advanced technological civilisation there.

Upon discovering the locals and resolving communication difficulties, you are asked to resolve for them an ancient dispute. You, they feel, are in an excellent position to be impartial. At first you try to decline the offer, but they are very insistent- the issue simply must be resolved.

They explain what the issue is. The juice of a certain fruit needs to be distributed between them. Ancient custom has acknowledged that for various reasons, some of them are entitled to vastly more juice than others. The issue to be decided is whether a more even distribution of juice should be adopted, or whether the customary distribution should continue.

One of the powers of this juice is that it can fuel special thinking machines, and working together these thinking machines can make powerful arguments- but always working under the direction of, and for the purposes of those who fuelled them with the juice. Naturally most of the argument producing robots are operated by those with a lot of the juice, and thus most of the arguments they have produced on the topic are in favour of the existing uneven distribution of juice.

These robots however are not the only intellectuals in this society. The juice has the property of allowing its imbiber to go with less sleep than they would otherwise require. These creatures normally sleep for three quarters of the day, but those who possess the most juice can go for days without sleeping. This means that they can spend more time writing and to discussing ideas. Very often the juice-rich write and think about the topic of the optimal distribution of the juice. They most often come to come to the conclusion that the existing distribution, or a slight tweak on it, is optimal- although a minority of them do support redistributing the juice.

Considering the situation, you find yourself with a problem. You suspect that the existing literature on the optimal distribution of the juice is probably quite biased, that results which seem to support its unequal distribution are found more often and receive undue prominence due to the structural advantages which support the status quo. However you are not an expert on the juice literature, it is very confusing and contains many mathematical symbols. There are a lot of stats, and every time someone puts forward a stat, someone else says that this is actually a misunderstanding.

What should you do?

We can debate exactly how much weight you should put on the lopsided origins of this society’s thinking about the distribution of the juice. We would all agree though, that in the absence of the cognitive resources necessary to sort through the arguments in ideal detail, if one has to make an assessment on the basis of one’s limited intellectual powers, surely some weight should be placed

on the reality that the side supporting the status quo commands greater resources. This is bound to make the richer side's arguments appear stronger than they otherwise would.

Lifting the thin veil, if you haven't already guessed, the juice is money. The moral of the thought experiment is that in assessing the arguments for and against redistribution you should absolutely be acutely aware that there are not a lot of think-tanks funded by poor people. Even if you happened to be a trained economist, your mental capacities are still limited, and you do not have infinite time to check all things. You should, at a bare minimum, prioritise listening to and finding material by the side of the argument that is likely to be less well funded since you are less likely to encounter such material organically than you would be if both sides were funded equally. You should also remember that, even apart from funding, the kind of people who write on this stuff (academics and policy wonks) are above average in income, and tend to be friends with others who are above average in income.

The Culture Novels and the deaestheticisation of politics

I.

You know that old cliche in science fiction? The hardy explorers find a society that appears to be a utopia- but not all is as it seems!

In many ways, The Culture novels by Iain Banks are an inversion of that. Characters either live in, or encounter, The Culture- a society that appears to be paradise a*nd really is.* However the protagonists rebel against it- seeking a world where maybe things are a bit tougher, but damnit it, there is glory! They convince themselves that the Culture is a fake utopia. Tragedy results.

Characters embodying this trope to a greater or lesser degree are especially prominent in the early books and include:

Horza from *Consider Phlebas,*

Gurgeh from *The Player of Games* (long fantasises about joining contact to escape ennui although he has to be pushed in the end)

and Zakalwe in T*he Use of Weapons.*

It runs throughout the culture series, but I think it is especially pronounced in the first few books. A case could be made for many others as well, for example Ziller in *Look to Windward,* although he is content mostly to complain.

Some of them oppose the culture altogether, like Horza, others like Gurgeh want to go somewhere else for a little while, imagining great adventure. Some of them die, others escape relatively lightly with a large to moderate to degree of trauma. All suffer because they want existence to have more friction than the Culture offers. Implicitly or otherwise, they romanticise suffering only to realise in the throes of suffering that there is little romantic about it.

"No, Andrea: Unhappy is the land that needs a hero"

-Bertol Brecht, *Galileo*

II.

It is difficult to tell a story in a society in which there are no objective causes of suffering. No risk of violence, no ill health and no risk of poverty, not even a risk of unhappiness unless you are unwilling to use the appropriate chemical correctives. Even boredom is banished for all but the most jaded tastes. There are a few possible stories that remain: comic sitcoms or romantic comedies, tales of unrequited love or a memoir of the grief of those left behind when someone voluntarily dies.

These are real possibilities to be sure, but far fewer than the stories one can tell in a world like ours, still bound up in the realm of necessity. Banks for his part doesn't even try to tell a "purely Culture" story. Every Culture novel is about the culture encountering other societies that are not so utopian.

I think these difficulties are the reason why so many authors instinctively rebel against utopias, and why there are so many fake utopias in fiction which are unmasked as hidden dystopias. Authors instinctively don't like utopias, because they make bad stories. Thus fiction writers, consciously or otherwise, judge the sociopolitical structure of societies on aesthetic grounds, equating poor soil for narratives with poor soil for human flourishing- in the words of Walter Benjamin, they aestheticise politics.

III.

It's a shame that authors instinctively aestheticise politics, because this reflex, as Benjamin argues, is one of the wellsprings of fascism.

This was true in the time of the original Nazis and its true of the cheap knock offs we have now. If you've ever seen Nazi memes they're an ideological mess, but one of the themes that comes through is an obsession with beauty and good narrative as a political goal. From talking about "the ancestors" (always romanticised beyond recognition), to the content of the fourteen words, to bromides about honor that clearly come from the pages of boys own adventure books (and of wars imagined), to complaints about "decadence" which basically boil down to "I don't like looking at it".

In this regard I do not mean to suggest that a bunch of science-fiction and fantasy authors are closet fascists, I'm sure they're good centre-leftists and all that. I'm not judging them either- it really is very difficult to write a good story set in utopia. Nonetheless, we must recognise some basic truths. Suffering, want and involuntary death are bad, and if we do not destroy ourselves, or permanently prevent our own technological progress, we will one day abolish them. Our sharpest want and most urgent action should be to speed this day. Romanticising suffering is cosmic Stockholm syndrome, boot-licking for the brute forces of the universe. Portraying utopias as really secretly evil is a lazy and overdone trope, but, moreover, it values a certain kind of narrative satisfaction above our soaring possibilities.

Jones's island and property rights

A ship sinks, and a few dozen survivors make it to shore on a deserted island. One of them, by the name of Jones, is a mechanic. By pure happenstance he is carrying his tools when he gets on the lifeboat.

The island is resource rich, although conditions are difficult. The survivors manage to eke out an existence for themselves requiring approximately 40 hours a week of labour from each. Jones' tools are of great help in achieving this standard of living.

Then one evening around the fire Jones announces that he will no longer be working. Instead Jones expects the labour of others to be used, in part, to feed and shelter him. He argues that since the tools belong to him, his contribution is providing capital. He expects the others to not use the tools unless they pay him with the necessities of life. Naturally, the others are unimpressed.

Should the contribution of Jones' tools be regarded as a contribution by Jones?

Is Jones' decision reasonable?

If his decision is not reasonable would the others be justified in seizing his tools and expecting him to work for a living like everyone else?

If so, is this situation properly analogous to our society?

Chapter 10. On identity politics

Mistaken identity and misunderstood interests: Haider on Identity politics

I just finished "Mistaken identity" by Asad Haider, and like anyone who has just finished a good book I'm a proselytiser for it. My aim here is to draw out one thread: that the whole of the working class share a joint interest in abolishing racism in a way that is not recognised by what is often called identity politics. Like Haider we will only be discussing racial identity politics here. We will focus particularly on the problem of white supremacy in America.

Consider this quote from Ignatiev reproduced in *Mistaken Identity:*

"To suggest that the acceptance of white-skin privilege is in the interests of white workers is equivalent to suggesting that swallowing the worm with the hook in it is in the interests of the fish. To argue that repudiating these privileges is a "sacrifice" is to argue that the fish is making a sacrifice when it leaps from the water, flips its tail, shakes its head furiously in every direction and throws the barbed offering."

What Ignatiev is suggesting- and Haider concurs- is that we should reject the view that white members of the working class benefit in any unequivocal sense from white privilege. As Haider puts it when discussing the history of racism and slavery in America:

"In exchange for white-skin privilege, the Euro-American workers accepted white identity and became active agents in the brutal oppression of African American laborers. But they also fundamentally degraded their own conditions of existence."

In other words, Haider contends that white supremacy is ultimately bad for white workers and thus all workers -even white workers- have an interest in abolishing it, whether they do or do not recognise that interest. What I want you to consider is that this might be the real hinge of the whole argument over identity politics, insomuch as it is a useful debate. Do you accept that the best strategy for the whole proletariat, people of colour and whites alike, is to oppose racism, or do you believe that the objective interests of the white section of the proletariat lie in supporting and upholding white supremacy?

1.

There's a sort of cognitive trap here that it's easy to fall into. It's easy to think that obviously all whites have an objective interest in supporting white supremacy. After all, by definition, white supremacy is a situation in which whites are better off than non-whites.

To see why this doesn't necessarily follow, consider a cute little meme that goes around the internet sometimes, usually an image or text that is a variation on the following:

"Bob gives Luke two cookies, Samantha one cookie, and keeps twenty seven cookies for himself. He then turns to Luke and says "Watch out! Samantha is going to take your extra cookie!"

(For clarity, this is not a quote from Haider)

Bob represents the largely white bourgeoisie; Luke represents the white portion of the proletariat; and Samantha represents proletarians of color. It is simultaneously true that Luke is better off than Samantha because of white supremacy AND that both Luke and Samantha would be better off were white supremacy dismantled. Luke is better off than Samantha under this unjust distribution of cookies, but would still benefit from, and be better off under, a more equitable distribution of cookies. This isn't just about money. Cookies also represent power, status, security and other goods.

2.

What does the capitalist gain from racism?

Our first clue should be that the most open and vicious racists are also the most open and vicious in opposing workers rights. The struggles are linked if for no other reason than the clearest opposition to both is one and the same.

Racism is used by the right (even the respectable right) to constitute an alternative *nexus of political struggle.* What I mean by this is that politics is always a struggle between forces, but even the nature of this struggle is itself subject to conflict. The right benefits from conceptualising the fundamental political struggle as a struggle between races and nations whereas the left benefits from conceptualising that struggle as a struggle between classes, in which racism is used as a crucial weapon by the ruling class.

Someone who sees politics as fundamentally a struggle between races will engage in cross class collaboration for the perceived advantage of their race. They may vote for those they see as having linked racial interests, but who do not share their economic interests, such as white supremacist capitalists, or rich persons of colour with bourgeoisie values. They may also be reluctant to collaborate on issues that should unite workers, such as joining a union that includes workers of color. Another example would be contemporary white workers who refuse to oppose police violence, despite police violence being a threat to workers everywhere, because they identify the police with their racial interests.

Thus racism creates a disoriented working class that doesn't even conceive of itself as sharing interests. It is a win for capitalists.

3.

Arguably at least, The mistake of thinking that white supremacy isn't ultimately counter to the aims of the whole proletariat leads into all the other problems with identity politics.

For example, a common complaint about identity politics is that it is moralistic and preachy, and that this leads to a culture of infighting and vicious online arguments. This follows from believing that there is no common linkage of interests in the proletariat in opposing racism. If you truly believe that some workers benefit in the long-run from racism, you will naturally resort to preaching and moralism. Since on this view the white portion of the working class has no material interest in abolishing white supremacy, any reliance is tennous and will rely on guilt and moral appeals, rather than shared interests.

Another complaint that's frequently made about identity politics is that it is overly liberal, and not sufficiently committed to abolishing capitalism. Again, this flows from the view that the working class is not unified with respect to its objective interests on white supremacy. It's a pretty major blow to a Marxist anti-capitalist view of things if the supposedly universally emancipatory working class has no basis for a solidarity of shared interests in opposing racism. If the working class is nothing special, if it is not the standard bearer for the common goal of human liberation, a space is opened for class collaborationism.

4.

As we talk here about common interests, please keep in mind an important caveat from Haider:

"A common interest is constituted by the composition of these multitudes into a group. This is a process of political practice."

In other words, it is not so much that the working class already has a common interest in smashing both racism and capitalism, as that there is a potential liberating political strategy *which could infuse it with a common interest and program*. This is not a matter of a voluntary or subjective element deciding ex-nihilo to form such a coalition, rather it is a possibility already present in the class which comes to the forefront in certain circumstances.

5.

If the root of identity politics is a rejection of the revolutionary anti-racist potential of the whole working class as a group with a common interest in abolishing white supremacy, where does such pessimism come from?

This quote from Stuart Hall reprinted in Chapter 5, discussing economic despair in the 1980's and its interaction with racism in the UK captures it:

"As economic circumstances tighten, so the competitive struggle between workers is increased, and a competition structured in terms of race or color distinctions has a great deal of mileage. It is precisely on this nerve that the National Front is playing at the moment, with considerable effect. So the crisis of the working class is reproduced, once again, through the structural mechanisms of racism, as a crisis *within* and *between* the working classes"

In other words, as Bob gets a larger and larger portion of the cookies, the idea that both Samantha and Luke's situation could get better at the same time seems more distant. Since Stuart Hall wrote this, the wage share has been in almost continual decline in the developed world- for over three decades now.

Crudely speaking these material realities come to be reflected in our souls, or as Haider more eloquently puts it:

"I have come to think that this sadness is the primary cause of the restriction of politics to one's personal identity. Not only has the idea of universal emancipation come to seem old-fashioned and outmoded, the very possibility of achieving anything beyond the temporary protection of individual comfort seems like a delusion. Hence a call for universally beneficial social change is often heard as a personal affront: instead of an affirmation of my individual demand for security and recognition, I am presented with a goal that lies beyond my powers to achieve."

We need to move our imaginations beyond the equitable distribution of crumbs, towards a coherent anti-racist, anti-capitalist program that roots itself not merely upon an abstract notion of 'social justice', but upon a recognition of our common interest in dismantling white-supremacist capitalism. Rousing our imagination in this way is supremely difficult, because our despair is not merely a voluntary choice, but an outcome of circumstances.

There are however reasons to hope. It is difficult to read the political weather, nonetheless it seems to me that over the last two or three years, an understanding of the inseparable linkage between anti-racist and anti-capitalist struggle has continued to deepen, one sign of which is the publication of the book that we have discussed here. As both capitalism and white supremacy continue to be exposed and treated with greater cynicism there is space for us to draw the links, and an urgency for us to do so.

A few theses about "identity politics" and its false oppositions

I see a lot of critiques and defences of "identity politics". No doubt we will be seeing even more as the US Democratic Primary gets started.

It's a debate about definitions. If identity politics is understood as "politics concerned with the struggles of oppressed minorities", then the debate is pointless because the answer is obvious. Oppressed minorities will always struggle against their own oppression, and demand support from the working class and left as a whole *as they should*.

If instead "identity politics" is understood as referring to a family of phenomena primarily exhibited on social media- callout culture, disinterest in economics and a focus on the interpersonal to such a degree as to obscure the role of the state and capital, then yes, identity politics has "gone too far".

This vagueness has allowed definitional questions to become a fixture of the debate. Partisans of both sides start with a definition of "identity politics" useful to their argument. They then expand their analysis to more general senses of the term through rhetorical sleight of hand, conscious or otherwise.

In the past when I've grappled with these debates I've tried to begin by defining"identity politics". I no longer think this approach is useful. "Identity politics" is an inherently contested term, vague and charged. Instead I want to put forward a few claims that, hopefully, sketch a path to bypass the controversy.

1. *There is real no separation between "identity" issues and "economic" issues*

The point isn't to argue about whether "culture war" issues of racism, sexism and so on, or "economic issues" are more important. The point is to critique the notion that economy and culture are separable.

Clearly the right uses racism and sexism as a wedge to strengthen its position in the class struggle. At a deeper level of analysis, oppression is a load bearing pillar of class society (see: Selma James in Sex, Race and Class). Thus the struggle against oppression is, consciously or otherwise, a struggle against a critical organ of capitalism. It is a class struggle. Asking whether fighting oppression is more important or less important than the class struggle is somewhat meaningless. It is like asking your mechanic to focus on fixing the car, not the engine.

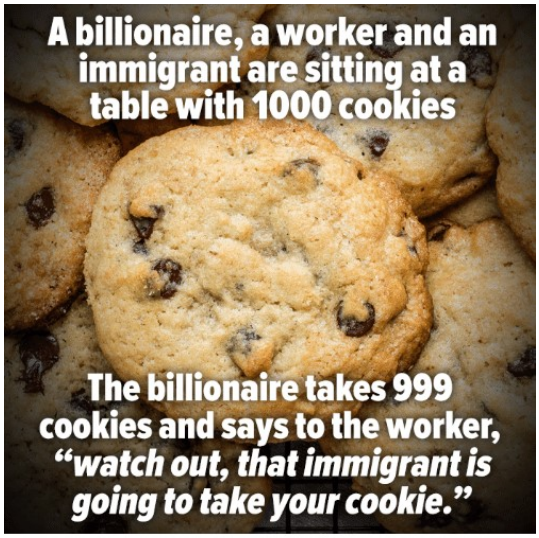
This is the first blunder by many people on both sides of the debate. They seperate out the "cultural" from the "economic"- the oppression of minorities from the exploitation of workers. They then assign a value judgement about which one is more important- the only thing they differ on is the value judgement they make. On both views the social ontology of separable cultural and economic spheres is the same.

2. ***The whole working class loses out from oppression, and the whole working class gains from struggling against it. That gives us a basis to trust each other.***

Oppression of every form is a load bearing pillar of capitalism. Opposing capitalism means opposing its load bearing pillars. As a result, the whole working class wins from fighting against racism, sexism etc., insomuch as the whole working class has an interest in opposing the domination of capital. Thus we reject the view that the oppression of sections of the working class is irrelevant to the welfare of the rest of the working class. In the long run and often in the short run, we're all in this together. This reasoning gives a material basis for cooperation in demolishing oppression.

Although a material basis for cooperation isn't enough alone, it does give trust a chance to grow. Trust that we're all ultimately working together- even if we stumble- is the basis for solidarity. Solidarity leads out of the excesses of bitter social politics that people are often complaining about when they talk about "identity politics". Conversely, thinking that oppression is good for parts of the working class leads to suspicion. Sam might say that he is opposed to racism or sexism or whatever, but why should you believe Sam if you think that he wins from systems of oppression? Failure to recognise shared interests leads to paranoid "Vampire castle" style interpersonal politics.

3. The concept of privilege is a flawed tool for understanding oppression



Racism's harshest and most direct effects by far are on people of colour. Ultimately though, it is used to drag down the entire working class of all races. Hence the phrase, "divide and rule". It is certainly true that under racism, white people have it better than people of colour. This does not entail that things are overall better for working class whites under racism than they would be in a non-racist society. To say that someone has privilege due to a social arrangement (e.g. white supremacy) implies that they are better off as a result of that social arrangement existing. Yet racism and sexism are essential to the continued existence of capitalism. So it would seem to me that racism and sexism are not, in the long run, good for working class whites and men, at least if we are anti-capitalists and believe that the working class suffers due to racism. The category of privilege is

a bad way of understanding the real effects of racism and sexism for working class people. I think Ignatiev, himself a champion of the concept of privilege, captured the illusory nature of white privilege for workers best when he said:

""To suggest that the acceptance of white-skin privilege is in the interests of white workers is equivalent to suggesting that swallowing the worm with the hook in it is in the interests of the fish"

So I would argue that, at least in an ultimate sense the concept of privilege is deeply misleading. This is not because (for example) white workers aren't better off than workers of colour, but because it conceals the possibility that racism in the long-run makes things worse for all workers. We need to convince the class that racism is fucking them over through divide and rule tactics as part of the process of dismantling it. From a practical point of view this has always bugged me about the concept of privilege. If you want people to dismantle racism or sexism, why on earth would you go around telling them they are better off because of it?

4. Don't condemn activism, build connections

I've recently seen some material claiming that the left is doing "too much" of certain forms of anti-oppression activism. Not only is this wrong, it's useless. Condemning activism you don't think is useful does nothing- people have the energy to do what they have the energy to do. In the case of anti-oppression activism, this energy is often driven by personal experiences. Even if it would be a good thing if queer, anti-racist or anti-sexist activism were to be toned down (and it's absolutely not!) wishing would not make it so. The only thing down this path is aimless bitterness.

The alternative to wishing that activists were engaging in "real" class struggle is to deepen the connections between anti-capitalism and social movements. Forge connections between movements, and deepen the class content of different struggles, revealing their broader meaning against the backdrop of class struggle. The right want to use these issues to wedge the left- don't let them. If anyone ever tells you that workers in hard hats don't take kindly to that sort of thing, tell them about stories like the pink bans and the long history of workers sticking up for minority rights.

Chapter 11. Intersex people and Catholicism

The Catholic Church is dangerously mistaken about intersex people

I.

TLDR: The notion that every person can be clearly categorised as either male or female on the basis of biology appears to be increasingly popular in Catholic circles, but the biology and medical science disagree

At least if Father Tad Pacholczyk of the National Catholic Bioethics Education Center is correct about current theology, the Catholic church takes some strong positions related to sex:

1. That every single person is either intrinsically male or female, without exception.

2. That each person's intrinsic sexual identity is manifest in the body of that person without exception.

Father Tad Pacholcyzk goes so far as to say:

"Human beings, along with most other members of the animal kingdom, are marked by an ineradicable sexual "dimorphism," or "two-forms," namely, male and female. When problems arise in the development of one of these forms, this does not make for a new "third form," or worse, for an infinite spectrum of different sexual forms. Instead, intersex situations represent cases in which a person is either male or female, but has confounding physiological factors that make them appear or feel as if they were of the opposite sex, or maybe even both sexes. In other words, the underlying sex remains, even though the psychology or gender they experience may be discordant. Put another way, intersex individuals may be "drawn away" from their intrinsic male or female sexual constitution by various anatomical differences in their bodies, and by opposing interior physiological drives and forces."

In other words, whatever the complexities may be, every single human being has one gender or the other, even if we don't yet know what it is. Resting theological presuppositions upon big empirical generalisations is a dangerous game, but some are still keen to play.

Father Tad Pacholcyzk is not going out on a theological solo mission here. The Vatican statement: "*Male and female he created them. For a path of dialogue on the issue of gender in education"* states:

"The process of identifying sexual identity is made more difficult by the fictitious construct known as "gender neuter" or "third gender", which has the effect of obscuring the fact that a person's sex is

a structural determinant of male or female identity. Efforts to go beyond the constitutive male-female sexual difference, such as the ideas of "intersex"…"

These very strong positions seem to me to be defensive in character. Catholic thinkers feel (perhaps correctly) that the existence of intersex people is a threat to their deeply essentialist metaphysics of gender. The result is palpable anxiety. A majority of material I've found on these questions from Catholic sources runs together ideas about the nature and status of trans people with ideas about the nature and status of intersex people, even though they are very seperate issues. The failure to recognise such basic distinctions, in an issue which affects lives so profoundly, is shameful.

It seems to me that the existence and variety of intersex people make the presuppositions underlying the church's position untenable.

II.

The notion that everyone can be unambiguously classified as either male or female on the basis of their physiology or genetics is wrong, even if you accept that physiology is what defines gender. The range of variation in human genetics and primary and secondary sexual characteristics defeats any attempt at a clear division of everyone into either male or female. Every single criteria that one could point to has some counter-example. Biology doesn't provide the kind of exceptionless laws that theological binaries require.

For example, one of the most popular approaches is to claim that people are differentiated by their chromosomes. Men have XY chromosomes, whereas women have XX chromosomes. However in at least one case, a woman with majority XY chromosomes in her cells (predominant XY mosacism) got pregnant and gave birth. See the write-up here. Surely a catholic theologian would not wish to describe this situation as a man getting pregnant. Yet if one wants to define sex in terms of chromosomes, one will be forced to do just that. Thus chromosomes won't do.

But reproductive roles won't work as a dividing line either. Many people are born infertile so we cannot use reproductive capacities to draw the demarcation.

Internal or external genitalia won't do. Pretty much all possible combinations of genitalia or lack thereof are possible and exist somewhere. Hence, no firm distinction can be made using these features.The same is true of secondary sexual characteristics.

The problem then is that in some cases it is possible to know every single physiological and genetic fact about a person, and still not be able to unambiguously classify them as either male or female. Now you might say "but this is unfair- these are extremely rare conditions". That's true, but the nature of the Catholic church's position seems to be that biology can be used to classify absolutely every single person as male or female. Such a strong claim fails in the face of even one exception.

Tad Pacholczyk provides us with no criteria for making the demarcation. He simply expresses the view that human sexual dimorphism is “ineradicable” and that it might be hard to detect intrinsic gender, but it is always there. Since he himself seems to acknowledge that chromosomes will not always mark the demarcation cleanly, one wonders at the nature of this “inerradicable” dimorphism and how it might be detected. Despite this vagueness he asserts: “While a newborn’s “intrinsic maleness” or “intrinsic femaleness” may be difficult to assess in certain more complicated intersex cases, the point remains that there is an “intrinsic” or “underlying” sexual constitution that we must do our best to recognize, respect, and act in accord with.” We are asked to accept that there must always be a unique correct answer about which category every single person belongs to. This strong claim is made despite a total lack of clear criteria, let alone an attempt at the difficult task of justifying those criteria.

It appears that there is no clear way to define a boundary between male and female which neatly resolves all cases. Having had an amateur interest in biology for years, I’m not surprised. Life constantly mocks attempts to pin it down into clean categories.

In many ways its odd that Catholicism wants to fight on this hill. Judaism, Islam and many other branches of Christianity are far more pragmatic about the possibility that some people may not be clearly male or female. Judaism, perhaps unsurprisingly, has elaborate rules and classificatory schema for handling people with both male and female sexual characteristics. So does Islam. Neither religion assumes that all cases of ambiguity can be resolved to male or female. There are also prior Catholic and Christian traditions of acknowledging the existence of intersex people.

III.

While for a philosopher like myself these conceptual holes in the Catholic church’s approach to sex might be interesting, for committed Catholics who happen to be intersex, and who fall in these gaps, the situation can be devastating. The Catholic church has a moral obligation to grapple with the science around this issue. It is not good enough to simply claim, abstractly and without evidence, that everyone can unambiguously be classified as “biologically male” or “biologically female”.

And of course, the Catholic church’s position, as a powerful organisation, has consequences far beyond the church. As the organisation Intersex Human Rights Australia puts it in a discussion of the problems from an intersex point of view with the document: *Male and female he created them. For a path of dialogue on the issue of gender in education*

“All around the world, intersex people face gross human rights violations, including medically unnecessary “normalizing” interventions, and the concealment of such practices on individuals from themselves and from society. Consequences include insensitivity, sterilization, chronic pain, osteoporosis and depression.”

The position of the Catholic church has been used to justify these human rights violations, including unnecessary and harmful surgeries. The Catholic church has, at least in the recent past, usually been sensitive to the importance of not trying to turn scientific questions into theological ones. I hope this

spirit of respect for science might lead to a reevaluation here. It is unacceptable that the existence and rights of intersex people be denied to prove an abstruse theological point.

Part 3. Difficult

Extending the veil of ignorance argument for utilitarianism into an argument for 'egalitarian' interpersonal utility comparison

There are at least two distinct problems of interpersonal utility comparison- the epistemic problem and the ontological problem. The epistemic problem is the problem of how we could know that a given comparison is correct. The ontological problem is the problem of why we should think such comparisons are meaningful- anymore than measuring temperature against length would be. The ontological problem is the more fundamental problem, in that establishing a method for knowing a given comparison is correct only makes sense if comparisons are meaningful. Assuming a solution to the ontological problem, the epistemic problem is, at least arguably, well addressed as a practical concern by Lerner's (1944) equal ignorance theorem.

What I want to argue is that if the logic that we are bound to endorse policies that we would endorse behind a veil of ignorance is correct, then there may be an argument for the sort of "utility-function egalitarianism" indicated by the equal ignorance theorem where the scale factor of everyone's utility is treated the same, regardless of the actual meaningfulness of interpersonal utility comparisons. That is to say this is a *normative* solution to the problem of interpersonal utility comparison- it aims to show that we are obliged to act *as if* interpersonal welfare comparison is possible, and do it at a certain egalitarian 'rate'.

II.

Happyville is a society run by utilitarian monks. You are about to join it.

(Assume there is no difficulty with constructing an interval scale of utility over income. Perhaps we extrapolate from preferences under risk, or from time preferences, both of which give sufficient information to construct such a scale, or perhaps we use Fisher's method.)

On the day before you make your journey to Happyville you receive an email. While the monks know the shape of the curve of everyone's utility on income, the data concerning the scaling of the curves has been lost. This includes your own curve, which they have added to the database in preparation for your arrival. The monks have decided to delegate you the task of setting the scale of the curves relative to each other. The magnitude of the curves will determine how they distribute a finite pool of income.

(Assume you can't recognise your own curve of utility over income- even probabilistically-, or even narrow it down. Assume you aim to maximise your own EU and your preferences are entirely selfish.)

I do not yet have a proof that all rational agents would converge on a single answer to this question, but I would contend that their answers are likely to be similar- they are unlikely to decide, for

example, that one of the agents cares 100,000x more about their 10,000th dollar than another, for if they are the person whose preference is made to matter 100,000* less they will lose out greatly, and given the concavity of income, the possibility of being the person who matters 100,000* more isn't adequate compensation. They will at least approximate something like a Lernerian equal ignorance approach.

Of course our society doesn't have utilitarian monks, but many societies including our own do operate on an 'each according to their needs' basis, at least to some degree. Arguably this argument gives an ethical reason to treat the scale factor of different interpersonal utilities as similar.

III.

If this were an argument for *the possibility* of interpersonal comparisons, it would be a rather bad one, in essence, simply amounting to a statement that people make relatively similar judgements about these sorts of things which is, at best, relatively weak evidence. Such an argument offers little or nothing on top of the standard extended sympathy treatment. The point is subtly different though. It is that we are ethically obligated to engage in these kinds of comparisons, at this sort of egalitarian rate, simply because this is what we would do to protect our own interests were it to come to that. Hence by veil of ignorance type logic, we are obliged to treat others similarly, lest we arbitrarily prefer ourselves. As mentioned above, this is a normative solution to the problem, we are left agnostic on whether such comparisons are "really" meaningful, yet we are obliged to treat each other as if they were.

References

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Carving up the philosophical terrain around personal identity differently

I haven't studied personal identity since a single undergraduate subject, so I'm guessing this distinction already exists in the literature and I just didn't find it with a cursory search. I claim no originality for this, just playing with ideas.

Many people are aware that there is a debate between the *psychological* and *bodily* continuity theories of personal identity over time. I want to carve up the logical landscape in a way which introduces a second, fully independent axis. I call this the *substantive vs pattern* continuity axis. According to the substantive view of personal identity, you survive if whatever object makes you up survives. According to the pattern continuity view, you survive if the pattern that you consist in continues, even if that means destruction of the object that currently instantiates the pattern which makes up you, followed by its replacement with an object that continues that pattern. The substantive view is often conflated with the bodily view, and the pattern view is often conflated with the psychological continuity view, but as we will see, they are independent questions.

In order to demonstrate that these views diverge, let's consider two classic thought experiments (brain transplantation and teletransportation).

1. A brain transplant

If your brain is placed in a new body and your old body is destroyed, have you effectively "changed bodies", or have you simply died?

According to both psychological views of identity (pattern & substantive) you survive a brain transplant in which your initial body is discarded. According to both bodily views of identity (pattern & substantive), you do not, since you are constituted by your whole body, not just your brain. So far we are in agreement with the standard account which treats all psychological theories as pattern theories and all bodily theories as substance theories.

2. Teleportation

If you are annihilated, then reconstructed elsewhere by a teletransporter, have you survived?

Here's where we diverge from the normal account. Teleportation is often thought to separate the bodily and psychological continuity theories of survival, with the psychological view contending that one survives teletransportation and the bodily view contending that one does not. Instead, on our taxonomy, what this case really separates is the pattern and substantive axis of views on personal identity. According to both pattern views of identity (bodily and psychological) you survive teleportation. In both cases the pattern or arrangement that, according to these views, is what you consist in, continues. Also in both cases, the substance of what you are (either the actual

mental states instantiated in the brain, or the body as a whole) is destroyed, so both substantive views (bodily & psychological) rule this is death.

Thus we see that the four possible combinations of views in our taxonomy are logically distinct. None of them give the same answers as another to both cases above. The bodily substantive theory holds that one survives in none of these cases, the psychological substantive theory holds that one survives in the case of a brain transplant, but not teleportation, the bodily pattern theory holds that one survives in the case of teleportation but not a brain transplant and the psychological pattern theory holds that one survives in both cases.

Through-going subjective Bayesianism as a solution to the problem of scepticism

Through-going subjective Bayesianism as a solution to the problem of scepticism

A common argument for the existence of God is that there is something rather than nothing. There are many good replies to this argument, but one of the more sophisticated challenges our sense that 'nothing' is the ordinary state of things and 'something' is an exception that needs explanation. There is an enormous, uncountably infinite plurality of ways the world could be. The 'nothing' world is simply one of these ways, and no more inherently 'natural' than the others. Why must the initial state of the universe be nothing unless we can give a reason otherwise?

We might talk then of the 'nothingness is natural' fallacy in relation to the initial conditions of universes. Scepticism seems to me to commit a variant of this fallacy in relation to epistemology. The set of permissible beliefs is assumed to start empty or near-empty, and then we have to fill it. A very low probability judgement for all statements is assumed to be the real correct default. Any exception is in need of justification.

There is an alternative view of epistemology that does away with scepticism. I see it as a development of G.E. Moore's argument against scepticism to a whole epistemology by way of subjective Bayesianism, though this might simply be reading my own ideas into Moore's work. It is a development of subjective Bayesianism into a full epistemological standpoint, a kind of alternative to coherentism and foundationalism, or a dissolution of the questions they attempt to solve, depending on how you look at it. The view goes like this. There are no rationality requirements beyond consistency on the initial assignment of priors. Rationality only governs the *updating* or changing of our beliefs and does not impose any constraints on our *initial beliefs* beyond consistency requirements of the kind given by the Dutch book argument. The real province of normative epistemology is purely the assessment of *changes* in probability assignments. The demand for some ultimate justification of the *initial* judgements is an illusory over-generalisation from the practice of justifying *changes* in levels of belief. Our priors start non-sceptical, and so our beliefs remain throughout a lifetime of updating. On the subjective understanding of probability, we do, after all, have to have some priors, and there is no agreement on a general non-arbitary method of assigning them.

Thus we arrive at some rather simple anti-sceptical proofs. For example, mirroring Moore's proof of an external world, we simply observe that our prior belief in an external world is rather high, and nothing has decreased it.

So why does the problem of scepticism appear to be a real problem? Over-generalisation. If I tell you that Susie is a lecturer in mathematics, you might ask how I came to know that, because you adjudge that it is very unlikely that it's simply built in to my priors that Susie is a lecturer in mathematics. This is true of basically all statements worth talking about outside a philosophical context, thus we get into the habit of thinking in terms of justifying our beliefs. When I then tell you that I believe there is an external world, and you ask how I know this, and I cannot give an adequate

reply, it appears something is wrong. Really though this is a sort of illusion, all we are ever doing is justifying why we have decreased or increased our credence. Since your *a priori* belief that Susie is a mathematician is presumably low you need to explain why it has risen but the same is not true of belief in an external world, or causation, or the like.