

[From "Good Governance, an Evolutionary Approach"](#)

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Q: Are you optimistic about our ability to reform government into a more efficient system?

That's a tough question.

I am optimistic that we could address the problem. I am pessimistic that we are running out the clock needlessly on arguments that are totally out of date and not worth settling. So I am fearful that we will not address this. But I think we could address it and I think we now just barely know enough to start going down that road. I don't think we know enough to describe the end state but I do think we know enough to embark and that we also know enough to figure out how to build the structure we need as we move in the direction that we know it to be.

Q: Are you talking about the environment? Or are you talking about the proliferation [preservation?] of human society?

Well, I think we've faced many potentially existential threats and that they are not independent of each other. They are the result of a small number of errors in thinking that are reproduced across a large swath of the landscape. And I think what we are lacking is not the knowledge. It's the wisdom that tells us now is the time to move. It is time to put certain things aside that have been very important in the past but have lost their significance such as the debate between right and left. It looks increasingly to me like it is a VHS/Betamax debate. it's a debate over something that no longer matters and that is successfully preventing natural alignment amongst those people who favor a core set of values that--if we were not disagreeing over these archaic questions--we would move forward together.

It has become apparent in talking to folks across the left-right divide from me that there is so much agreement about the desirability of a fair society and so little agreement over how advantageous meddling in civilization is that we are unable to confront the real obstacle. In other

words I think if you sat people down on the right and you said:"If it were true that we could hedge out the risk of capture and of unintended consequences of policies that made civilization more fair would you favor it?"<most people on the right would favor it. And they would say "but you can't."

And if you said to the people on the left: "If you had to recognize that solution making often produces problems that you did not anticipate could you accept that oftentimes the things that have noble objectives are more costly than they are valuable?" They would say, "Sure, but that's not what we're talking about."

In fact there's lots of solutions that we can just drag off the shelf and employ them and be better off. So if you can get people to recognize that what they're really differing over is not what

society we should want to build, most good people agree we want a society that works, that liberates people, that isn't authoritarian and onerous and overly interested in regulating you out of taking risks that are yours to take. People who can agree on that are really disagreeing over how likely it is that a particular policy proposal will bring us closer to that objective or take us farther away.

But we're not talking about policy that has been updated for modern circumstances. We're talking about solutions that are antiquated and frankly just simply don't make sense because the people who engineered them could not possibly have been aware of what effect the internet would have or robotic manufacturing or what the downsides of small changes in the composition of the atmosphere would be. So we have to update our understanding of how to make solutions that work. That is much easier now than it was for our ancestors in governance.

The most powerful idea to me is that if you push any value to an extreme it creates a dystopian nightmare. If you love freedom and you say: "Well I want everybody to be free at all times to do anything they want," you create a total catastrophe for justice. On the other hand if you say: "I know you love freedom but you got to be adult about it. You can have 85% of the freedom that you would get if you were totally free and in exchange you're gonna get a system that protects you from unforeseeable medical mishaps, that is going to enhance the ability of your children to engage puzzles that will make the smarter as adults you're gonna get all of these other things and you're gonna get them very cheaply you're gonna give up 15% of something that you have an awful lot of and what you're gonna get is 90% of some other stuff that is really important to you." You just don't realize it. People would accept that.

So recognizing that there are tensions between all of the things that we want and that an adult is somebody who's capable of recognizing that those tensions have an implication for what you should actually pursue. You don't pursue any one thing obsessively. You don't. Even if you know you are passionate about art and you want to spend all your time at it you don't pursue art to the point that you starve to death. Right? You take some time off and even if our art is what you want to do with every bit of free time you have you don't want it to take over from fundamental functions in your life.

So governance is like this. We can have most of the things that we would all agree are good. We can't have all of any of them but we don't need all of any of them. We can actually engineer a system it's totally non-utopian but it's very successful at delivering outcomes that are desirable without being the nanny state, without being onerous and meddlesome and dictatorial.

I don't think a hundred years ago that was foreseeable. I think we were stuck with partial solutions and people became entrenched in the idea that they were correct and so they lost sight of what was incomplete about them. And you know I don't want to fall into that same trap. That's always a danger and you have to be aware of whether or not you've become convinced of something that's really a fiction.

But what I would say is--I think this is why you're hearing this from a biologist--is that biology is a totally non utopian landscape. Every creature every creature I mean down to the tiniest bacterium is an absolute marvel of engineering with no engineer. Right? It all happened because those tensions were capable over long periods of time of writing themselves into the code that creates these entities.

And it is not inconceivable that we humans, now understanding the rules of complexity space, can build a system that does the same thing for us. So that governance is highly successful but not it does not impose itself on us in ways that make us feel constrained. Well, it constrain us a bit. Sure, it has to. The fact is we have lost the ability to say: "You know what? I don't want to be part of civilization I'm gonna go be a hunter-gatherer." We can't do that. You're signed up for civilization. And that means that you're signed up [and] you can't decide on your own that you want to drive on the other side of the road. We're gonna regulate you into driving on the correct side of the road and if you demonstrate that you're not interested in listening to us you don't get to drive.

Right? That's natural and it's acceptable. It's a small price to pay. Do you really want the freedom to drive on whatever side of the road you feel like on any given day? Or would you rather be constrained into driving on a predictable side of the road so that you don't end up killing somebody or being killed? Of course, you'd prefer it. Any reasonable person would. So there's a lot that looks like that--where if you could really see the view from 30,000 feet--you'd understand. Yeah, I don't love the idea of regulation. Nobody does. But these regulations are more liberating than they are constraining. Whey actually free you to drive and get to work rather than--you know--be terrified at any moment that somebody's gonna come careening out of nowhere and hit you.

So you're an optimist. I'm a very optimistic pessimist or very pessimistic optimist. I mean--you know, I don't know how to put this --I think the thing is I'm I don't know what it means to or what the term is for somebody who defines themselves as an optimist or a pessimist. I'm post whatever that is. And the reason that I'm most whatever. [There's glass--yeah well there's a there's a unfortunately I didn't come up with it but] There's a saying I like which is: the optimist thinks the glass is half-full; the pessimist thinks the glass is half-empty; and the engineer thinks it's too big.

How much do refills cost?

[Well my question yeah spoken like a recently starving student]

So I would say I'm not I'm not an optimist or pessimist. What I am is somebody who recognizes that there's only one way out of this. And that is we have to figure out how to escape the dysfunctional conversation that is preventing us from fixing our system and find our way to a system that at least knows how to itself. And until we either fail at that or succeed at it there's no point in investing in anything else.

Q: You brought up this term of maturity, or acting like an adult. Is that a heuristic? And is there such a thing as in the natural world or in the animal kingdom as maturity that the human beings need to grasp and develop in themselves?

Well, that's a really interesting question. I mean, I would say you certainly see, if you were to survey animals of some type--all right, let's say we looked at jaguars--if you were to survey jaguars, you would surely find that the oldest individuals actually invested their efforts in a way that was sensitive to subtleties in the environment that matter and insensitive to things that were a distraction. Right? And that happens for two reasons. One the jaguar is a smart animal and they learn over time. So the older you are the more experience you've had and this wiser you get. The other reason is because those jaguars that aren't very good at behaving in a wise way are eliminated over time. So the ones that are left after a large number of years tend to be the ones that got it right in the first place. So: are older jaguars wise? Undoubtedly. Undoubtedly. They're wise about the stuff of jaguar existence in a way that young jaguars are probably foolish.

So wisdom does have analogs. I mean, maybe it's not even analogs. It's just real real wisdom. But then I guess there's a question - about structures. And actually this is going to be--yeah it's it's a fractal. You will surely find that the oldest clades of organisms have a design that anticipates changes in the environment that are greater. So in other words, when we look at what [our]--I think the term has a certain resonance to it but I think it has the wrong emphasis--we call certain things "living fossils." Right? So if we look at dragonflies, for example, or sharks, these are designs that have existed for a very long period of time and the versions that we see today are modern versions but they're less modified from that original design than something like a fly [you know] or a trout.

So what can we say about those designs? You know, the term "living fossil" tends to suggest that there's something not very up-to-date about them. When really the answer is they got it right so early that the design has remained largely unchanged. Because they can compete even with that design. So if you look at a dragonfly, for example, it has four large wings. If you compare it to a fly, two of those wings have been reduced to control structures called halteres. You know it sort of seems like the dragonfly is missing those special control structures that allow flies to do certain things. On the other hand, if you've ever watched a dragonfly do what it does it's an amazingly acrobatic creature. And the only reason that it exists in the present is that that ancient design is totally capable of keeping up in at least some environments in modern Circumstances.

So I would argue that although there's no intelligence to it that there is wisdom in those older designs that have persisted without as much change. And that sometimes these younger designs seem great but then some change in the environment will reveal that actually it wasn't [It wasn't] wisdom. It was it was like youthful exuberance about something that then loses its appeal when the climate changes and that design no longer functions.

Q: The tensions that give rise to wise designs that's found in the biological landscape--can we use the checks and balances inherent in that tensive system to refine government kind of by the leeward to submit governance to certain pressures that propel it towards more and more wise functionalities?

That's exactly it. And that is exactly why you find me focused on the group of topics that I'm focused on. So I started out studying trade-offs and I started out studying them for my own reasons because they actually just simply were the key to cracking the puzzles that I found entertaining. But once I began to reverse engineer what the rules of trade-offs were--and these were rules that you can't look up, [we don't] they're not things that people are well enough versed in that there's some place you can go and say "Well what are the rules about how trade-offs work." So that's what I worked on for my dissertation.

And those rules, it turns out, have nothing to do with biology. They have to do with complex systems in which there is an objective. Any complex system with an objective has to abide by these rules. And knowing that means that actually you're in a position to infer from dragonflies, spruce trees, whatever it may be--you're able to infer what these tensions must look like and how a wise individual or a process that weeds out unwise designs and preserves the wise designs--you can figure out exactly what that would look like and you can map it onto governance. It's really a perfectly natural thing to do.

You can also map it onto engineering space. We can look at--you know for example--the design of aircraft and you can use the very same rules that govern--you know--a plant. [you know] It's more obvious when you're talking about something that flies. But you can take the rules of tradeoff land and you can abstract them from plants and you can apply them to aircraft or governance or markets.

You can do it in those circumstances. And the amazing thing is: it doesn't take a whole heck of a lot of retooling. The real work is just figuring out how the mapping goes. Right? So, you know, it's very tempting for you to imagine that corporations are like creatures. They're not. That's not the right mapping. And so if you try to map the creature rules onto corporations it won't work for various reasons--including the fact that corporations don't die. Right? And so their uncreaturelike in this way. But there is a proper mapping and if you can find it, the rules are quite intuitive, in fact. And [the ability] if people were more aware of what the implications that these rules were, we could take a lot of people who are trapped in one version of utopianism or another and we can say: here's why utopianism will never work.

It's not that your idea isn't quite right or it is. Your idea can't **possibly** be right right to the extent that it is utopium it violates a rule of nature that doesn't yet have a name.

Q: I'm still wrestling with what you mean by utopia? Is it because it's a closed system in some way and nature won't abide by something that that's perfect and in a certain sort of closed simplistic fashion?

No. I mean there may be elements of that. But first of all, what I mean by utopian is two things. Utopians tend to focus on a single value that they wish to see maximized. Right? And whether that value is freedom, or justice, or..

Q: ..free love?

Yeah, whatever it is. Anything that maximizes one value is a catastrophe, because of its massive cost in every other value. And so the other thing that utopians do is they tend to imagine that they know what the system needs to be structured like in order to reach their one value. Right? And so they ignore the collateral damage of the other values. They assume that those will be prettied up later or something. It's impossible, actually. And they assume that they know what structure creates the elevation in this value. And they are always under-imaginative in the the unintended consequences.

So what I would say is: effectively, utopians are searching for perpetual motion machines. And they don't realize that just as with perpetual motion, there's a law of nature that says no such thing can exist. And as soon as you know that no such thing can exist then the question is, alright, step down from searching for that thing. There's no obstacle to an incredibly efficient machine. There's an obstacle to be perfectly efficient machine. Right?

So as soon as you recognize that you shouldn't be searching for a perfectly efficient machine, then you can start searching for a marvelously efficient machine. And so that's really what I'm arguing is that the state of governance, which we cannot describe from here but that we should be pursuing, is marvelously efficient, marvelously effective, and minimally invasive. That it can be all of those things.

But as soon as you say: "I don't want it invasive at all," well, you're screwed. It's going to be somewhat invasive. If you say: "I want it to be perfectly efficient." No, you're done. It can't be perfectly efficient. It can be marvelously efficient.

So this is the maturity: recognizing that not only are there trade-offs in the world but that they are absolutely 100% guaranteed to apply to the thing that you value most. Right? That that thing that you value most has a cost in terms of everything else. And the more of it you want, the higher the cost in every other thing you care about. Once you realize that then the question isn't: "How do I get all of that one thing," it's "Well, how do I get most of that one thing and get enough of everything else in order that I can make a life out of it." And it's just not that hard a problem once you spot the the the siren song of perfection.

I think you need to be careful in one regard. I don't want to say you can judge the system based on the economic well-being, let's say, of the students it produces. Because first of all, students in one generation don't face the same market that students in another generation do. You certainly can't compare between generations that way.

The other thing that's true is that economic well-being is not the only kind of well-being. I would say that an education that does not leave students in a position to manage their lives is a failure but that students, some students, will choose to prioritize other things over getting rich and there's nothing wrong with that. It may well be healthy and in fact most of the members of the Academy are choosing to be part of a system in which getting rich is almost impossible.

And so it's not surprising, in some sense, that the values that are alternative to those that the market pays for have been highly esteemed within the Academy. On the other hand, to the extent that the Academy is producing people who are talking utter nonsense and imagining that it is sophisticated and enlightened, that system is a failure. Now I don't think that we can say that the entire educational apparatus is a failure. But we can say that the part of the apparatus that is a failure is taking over more and more territory. The number of classes in a university that are immune to this extremely broken way of thinking is ever smaller and I think we can even see from here the day in which it will be no classes that are immune because every class is going to be subject to some set of rules that is built around this very naive notion of privilege and white supremacy and all of that. So that day is coming.

Q: And those who are hired will be hired based on their willingness to go along with that program, too.

It's absolutely part of the program. And if there's one thing that people fail to appreciate about the social justice movement where it interfaces with the Academy is that--just because what is being said is crazy to the point of absurdity--does not mean that the strategic plan is absurd. The strategic plan is far more effective than you would expect based on the sophistication of the ideas that are being promulgated.

Q: So in a certain way the system itself is pretty strong robust and anti-fragile even if the ideology inside of it is broken, corrupt and...

The insurgency? Yeah, yes the insurgency is far more effective than you would expect it to be based on how correct the things that it claims are true actually are.

Q: How it is that disconnect happen that that belief the belief the beliefs themselves are incoherent and destructive but the system which houses the beliefs is incredibly efficient?

I suspect that the answer is weirdly evolutionary. So, Heather and I encountered the postmodern stuff in 1992 at the University of California Santa Cruz. We took an anthropology class that described itself as about human evolution and it turned out to be a postmodern take on evolution. Those ideas have been morphing and bubbling through a quadrant of the university system since that point--and of course a bit before.

Each cohort that has encountered them has wielded them in some circumstances. And those arguments that were hard to defeat has persisted and those arguments that were easy to defeat have perished. Which means that the new crop of students shows up and they're handed this toolkit of arguments that are incredibly hard to confront, right? Not because they're true but because the way they're structured. They are built, you know, each of these definitions can't be pinned down. You can't figure out what they mean by equity. On the other hand if you start asking questions about equity you're gonna run afoul of a booby-trap that's gonna have you portrayed as a white supremacist.

So that is a very potent combination.

Q: Brilliant!

It's brilliant, but it isn't brilliant on the basis that those who are wielding it are brilliant. It's brilliant on the basis that selection has weeded out those parts that didn't work. So I think that's what we're up against and it's very frustrating. But I would I would argue it is a mistake, just because the movement looks so full of foolishness, to dismiss the structure as foolish. It's really much stronger than and you would imagine.

Q: Or even wise in a certain way.

It's wise in the way that a dragonfly is wise you