

# Let's Think About It

*A collection of  
64 philosophical essays*

by

Rob Graumans



*For uncle Sjaak and aunt Toos*



## Preface

At the 1st of January 2012 the following question hit me like a cannonball: if I would come to die somewhere next month, what would I regret most having *not* done in my life? The answer was clear: I would regret most to not have started a blog at which I wrote articles that make people think. Hence, a day or two later, I started the *TheYoungSocrates*. Now, more than two years later, the site has more than 6.000 unique visitors a day, and more importantly: I have – finally – found a passion in my life.

As a philosophy student, I have the urge to think about everything. But thinking doesn't necessarily make you a happier person. So it is better - at least that's what I thought - to focus this urge on producing material that might actually have some value. To use my mind to analyze arguments, to challenge accepted beliefs and – above all – to try and refute my own beliefs. Because it is only by attacking your own beliefs, that you can claim to hold any reasonable belief at all.

The 65 essays in this bundle feature on my blog, but I have adapted them for this collection. They are philosophical in nature, and very diverse in topic. They range from a critical analysis of the existence of free will to arguments in favor of euthanasia, and from an account of why we find pedophilia wrong, to more mundane matters such as why people – in contrast to cats – can feel depressed, or why it is not always a good thing to be honest with your friends. A note of caution is required before you start reading: I don't pretend to know anything. Or, to quote Socrates, 'I know only one thing, and that is that I know nothing.' My aim is to make you think, and if I need to take a controversial stance in order to do so, I will.

There is no particular order in the essays, so you can start reading whichever one you like. You can read one when you're sitting on the couch, and feel like you want to challenge your beliefs. You can read one in the bathroom, whenever you are doing whatever you're doing. Or read one in bed, if you want to stimulate your mind one last time before putting it to rest.

All I can say is: enjoy, and I hope these essays will make you think.

January 2015,  
Rob Graumans



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# 1

## How Free Is our Free Will?

**Materialism** – which is the dominant philosophical position held within the sciences – claims that the only entities that exist are *matter* and *energy*. This implies that there is no place for supernatural powers – or *any* other ‘powers’ besides those of **matter** and **energy** for that matter. And since matter and energy are two natural components, they should in principle be able to be captured in terms of **natural laws**. But how could natural laws, that are capable of predicting the trajectory of natural phenomena *given* that certain initial conditions are known, ever be able to capture the **free will** of us human beings? Isn’t free will by definition something that is unable to be caught in terms of rigid laws? And if the latter would be true, wouldn’t that imply that free will is something unnatural – something different from both matter and energy? In order to be able to answer these questions, we should start by looking at what might have caused our ‘free’ will.

Let’s start by looking at the materialistic options. One option is that our free will is something we human beings are ‘simply’ born with. In other words: our free will has come about through nature. In still other words: somewhere in our genetic structure is encoded our ability to act autonomously. But here we face a problem: for given that our free will would be programmed in strings of DNA, wouldn’t follow from this that every part of what we consider to be our free will has in fact been codified, and thus determined, by nature? And wouldn’t this result in all of our actions, although they might seem to come about by means of free will, in fact being determined by nature? That our lives could in principle be fully predicted if only we would know what situations – and hence what initial conditions – we would be faced with in our future lives? This seems incompatible with a ‘truly free’ free will. Hence, if this picture would be true, free will might be nonexistent.

But there might be a way out. Because in the above story, we are missing out on a piece in the puzzle: *the environment*. For whenever we act, we act in a certain environment, with its own set of factors. So maybe the key to a ‘truly free’ free will must lie somewhere in this environment – in this world we live in. But here again we face a problem: since our environment is - quite

obviously - part of nature as well, and thus, in principle, fully predictable by means of natural laws. After all: if all the information for what it means to be a human being can be captured in terms of DNA, why wouldn't this also be possible for the rest of nature, through natural laws et cetera? And if this would indeed be the case, wouldn't this mean that, by taking together (1) our predetermined genetic structures and (2) the environmental predetermined structures, our free will would be fully determined and – therefore – nonexistent? It seems it is.

You might believe that this story is incomplete; that there is some 'entity' missing. And this is correct! For materialism holds that next to matter, which we've looked at, everything that *is* is energy. This would imply that – given that we've just established that it is unlikely for a 'freely' free will to be encoded in our *materialistic* genetic structure – *if* our free will would exist, *energy* must be the factor responsible for it. However, now we have to face the question of how it could ever be possible for us to control such energy *given* that our control *wouldn't* be fully scripted by our biological make-up. That is: how can energy be encapsulated within our material bodies in such a way that it would be able to *non-deterministically* steer our minds and bodies? The latter seems required in order for something like a 'truly free' free will to exist. But this question seems unanswerable as it stands: hence we cannot reasonably claim that energy is responsible for our free will.

Maybe we should set aside our current scientific lexicon and look for other, yet unknown, explanations of free-will. What about free will as a consequence of a not-yet discovered particle? A particle that is so fundamental to the existence of our consciousness that the discovery of it would shed light on all sorts of deeply philosophical questions, such as: what is the mind? What is the connection between subjects and objects? Is there a mind-independent world? Or we might have to turn to a new mixture of natural forces and particles we already know exist, like electromagnetism. Both of these explanations would be compatible with materialism, and could be consistent with a 'truly free' free will.

Or maybe there is some kind of parallel universe in which our consciousness resides. A universe that is fundamentally detached from our material bodies, but that, via some yet inexplicable connection, is able to influence our bodily actions. This might be compatible with materialism. Yet, as it stands, it comes awfully close to religion and its claim that there is a deity that has blessed our bodies with an immortal soul that is passed on to the afterlife whenever our

bodies turn to dust. And religion is not necessarily an accepted explanation for entities such as free will.

At least one thing is for sure: we better come up with a damn good explanation for free will, for otherwise the idea of free will might turn out to be nothing more than a fairy tale; an illusion that, although we are under the impression that we are in control of our lives, reduces us to nothing more than puppets. And that doesn't seem very appealing, does it?

## There is No Life without Death

What would life be like without death? Would there even *be* such a thing as 'life' without death? And why do we die? What's the purpose of it? *Is* there even a purpose of it? Is there some kind of masochistic creator who likes to hurt us? And if so, wouldn't making people die contradict its notion of creating? Or maybe even the creator became confused 'life' and 'death', and in the end decided to just go with it? Whatever the explanation, death remains a mysterious, yet inescapable, destination we all share.

Let's see: what causes us to die? Well, death might just come about because of a flaw in our biological make-up; an unintended by-product of the designer of humanity. It might only be due to physical decay that our bodies will – eventually – perish. Death is just another obstacle to overcome in our human struggle with nature, a struggle that we will inevitably come to win. Within a couple of decades from now, people will be able to change their cancerous limbs for platinum replicas. Plastic surgery will be outdated; instead of getting a face-lift at the age of 55, people will get an entirely new face. That's how we will fight nature. We know after all from history that humans are prepared to do *anything* in order for them to stay alive; so even if their opponent is Mother Nature herself.

Thoughts of death scare us. We long for certainty, for beliefs upon which we can build the rest of our lives. However, all of our intellectual powers fall short of explaining what will happen after we have exhaled our final breath. And although we will never be able to know it, we simply cannot live with the idea that we are destined to enter an unknown world for an unknown amount of time - given that there would even be such a thing as 'time' in 'the afterlife). Hence there are many stories we came up with to lighten our sense of despair about death. The issue of death is the prime reason so many religions have come into existence. After all, the idea of a cozy afterlife doesn't really seem something to worry about, right? But even non-religious people have tried to come up with 'reasonable' positions within this debate. Atheists proclaim that no deity exists, which is just claiming the opposite of what religious people do. And even agnostics, although their position might

seem more 'humble' than the atheists', find themselves to be justified in making a judgement about the afterlife by saying that 'we cannot decide whether or not a deity exists'; thereby assuming that, although none of the others are capable of doing so, *they* can close the debate in a reasonable manner. Yeah right...

Maybe we can learn something about death by looking at its counterpart: life. Because what would life be like without death? The obvious answer would be: there would be nothing left to call 'life', since life can only exist in conjunction with death. But let's approach this issue from another angle; an *experiential* angle. Given that we would be immortal, which might be something different from being either dead or alive, how would we then come to value our 'lives'? Would we still be able to appreciate the beauty of things? Would we even be able to experience emotions in any sense? After all: how happy or sad would we feel if we would come to experience an event that we had experienced an infinite number of times already? Wouldn't that downgrade the relative value of each moment of – let's say – sadness? How sad would it for example be to experience your son dying, given that you are destined to experience countless instances of this 'drama' again? Or how joyful would it be to experience your son attending his first day of school, given that you've experienced this a thousand times already?

There is no life without death. And that not only goes for life in the biological sense of the word, but just as much in the emotional or experiential sense. The notion of value would be non-existent if we wouldn't face death. In other words: our lives would contain any value if we wouldn't face death. Hence we can say that death is a beautiful invention of life. So let's be grateful for its existence.

## What Is the Value of a Human Life?

People are getting older and older and demand better and better medical care. Also, advancements in technology and medical knowledge allow what once seemed to be incurable illnesses to be cured – or at least treated. These trends result in an ever increasing rise in the medical expenditures of countries. This raises the question: how far should we go in saving a patient's life? What is the *value* of a human life? Should we be prepared to save someone at all costs? Or should we think about the financial consequences of our decisions? And if so, what is the (financial) limit?

There are several ways in which we could answer this question. One response would be that we should go as far as possible in trying to save a person's life. That is: as far as possible *given* the boundaries set by our medical and technological knowledge. And although this might cost us (as a society) a lot of money, the money spent on saving a person's life is *nothing* compared to the value gained by prolonging his stay on our planet; the emotional gain experienced by the person – and not to forget his family – is of an extraordinary value: a value that can impossibly be expressed in terms of money. Therefore any means available should be employed in order to let people experience (an extension of) life.

But there is a problem with this argument. Because given that the value of a human life could 'impossibly be expressed in terms of money', why then should we come to the conclusion that – because of that – we should be prepared to save a person's life *at all costs*? Wouldn't that be a rather arbitrary decision? After all: given that the value of a human life cannot be converted into money, why then even bother to make the transition to talk about economic costs? If a human life would truly be invaluable, it would be just as nonsensical to talk about trying to save a person's life at all cost as it would be to say that we shouldn't be prepared to pay *any* money in order to do so: the value of life is after all of an entirely different dimension, irreducible to monetary terms in any sense – no matter whether this value is in millions or pennies.

Well, that seems a little radical, doesn't it? Another option would be to say that we should go as far as could be considered *economically* reasonable. In welfare countries, where civilians have to pay relatively high taxes, that for a huge part are gobbled by the nation's medical expenses, it seems fair to not only think in the interests of the patient and his family, but to *also* consider the costs of the treatment. And from that point of view, treating certain patients might not only be expensive: it might even be *morally wrong*. For suppose that some patient's treatment costs 2.000.000 dollars. With this treatment, the patient's life can be saved. On the other hand we have four patients, each requiring a 500.000 dollar treatment to stay alive. Let's say we have 2.000.000 dollars to spend at medical procedures. In that case, treating the first patient implies not treating the other four. In other words: the life of the first patient is considered more important than the life of the other four. This seems unfair - at least from a utilitarian point of view.

One could of course decide to increase the medical budget to 4.000.000 dollars, because of which all five lives could be saved. But then you run into the ever increasing medical costs, that are paid by the taxpayers. Hence, if you want to keep these costs to a hold, you have to make decisios about which patients to treat and which not: and the costs of the treatment seem, from a utilitarian point of view, the best criterium for deciding whether or not to treat someone.

A practical solution to determine the value of a human life, although it might sound counter-intuitive, would be to make people *decide* for themselves how much they are prepared to pay for saving a patient's life. Subsequently, it would be this amount of money that the person would contribute (in the form of taxes) to pay for the country's medical expenses. However, the other side of this plan would be that, whenever the person himself would have to be treated in hospital, his treatment costs will be compared with the amount of money he contributed to society to pay for its medical expenditures. Based on this comparison will be decided whether or not the person should be treated. If the person's contributions exceed the costs of his treatment, he - apparently - finds human life to be worth the costs. If not, then not. When the contribution-fee is decided upfront - *before* the person 'officially' enters society (let's say at the age of 18) - no conflict of interests can occur, and everyone's wishes are taken into account.

A totally different option would be to shove the full responsibility for covering one's medical expenditures down to someone's own wallet: to make

people pay for their own medical costs. After all: who would mind a person spending thousands of dollars coming from his own pocket? No-one I suppose. Unless, of course, this person is *you*. Because what to do if *you* don't have the money required to cover *your* medical expenses? It doesn't seem fair to let you die just because you haven't earned as much money as - let's say - the richest ten percent of the population, right? But it could of course be true that, even if you would be the person having to pay for his own medical costs, you still consider this libertarian attitude towards 'paying my own costs' the truly righteous manner to live your life.

It is in no way an easy question. It is about much more than medical costs/finance: it's about values/ethics, which implies that there is likely to be no definite answer to this question.



## Honesty and Friendship: A Bad Combination?

I am sure you know the dilemma: should you tell your friend the not-so-positive truth or should you lie in order not to cause a stir? 'Of course you should tell him,' you might think. After all, what is the value of friendship without honesty? Isn't that where friends are for, to be honest with each other, no matter what? No matter how tough the message might be, someone should tell you the truth. And that someone should be your friend, right? But then, after having thought through the consequences of being honest, you might start to think differently: 'I don't want to be rude to him. Maybe he'll think that I am not respecting him. Maybe he'll avoid me in the future. Maybe I will lose him as a friend.'

I have to make a confession: I am not always completely honest with the people I talk to. And not only with random people I meet at birthday parties: even with my very own friends. But let's be truly honest: that's not shocking, is it? Not because I am such a jerk, but because no-one is always completely honest with his friends, right? A more interesting question is: *should* you always be honest with your friends? Being honest might hurt your friend's feelings, so maybe you should rather lie and keep you and your friend happy, than telling him the 'painful' truth. Or would that prevent you in some way from bonding – with your friend – on a deeper level? A 'friend' level? Or maybe the entire dichotomy – between kindness on the one hand and honesty on the other – is just completely wrong: who says that honesty and kindness cannot go hand in hand? After all, isn't being honest *always* a kind gesture, even though the content of this gesture might not always be flattering? Let's take a look at that.

We human beings are afraid to be honest. We are afraid that people – including our friends – might not want to hear us say negative things about them, even though these negative things might be said with the best intentions. Friendships are valuable to us; so valuable, that we don't want to risk losing them. But what if you had to choose between (1) your friends being always honest with you (but not necessarily positive) or (2) your friends always being positive (but not necessarily honest with you)? And, more importantly, what

category of friends would you consider to be 'better' friends? Not the first category, right? Not those superficial and cowardly creatures. No. A true friend should be willing to tell you the truth, no matter what. That is what true friendship consists of.

But that implies that you should also *accept* the comments of your friend. That you should be grateful for him having the courage to tell you what he thinks. You would have to show him that he is a true friend to you and that he is valued for being honest with you. Don't criticize your friend's comments. See them as a sign of true friendship. And, on the other side, interpret flattery for what it really is: a mask to hide feelings of insecurity and neediness.

To end on a personal note: I believe that you should always be able to tell your friends the truth. And if it turns out that they cannot handle the truth, then you probably weren't true friends in the first place. On the other hand, we all want to be happy, and sometimes hearing the truth might make us sad. After all, how happy would we be if everyone around us, including our friends, would constantly share their negative – but true – conceptions of us? Nonetheless, we must grow up and dare to face the storm of well-intended criticism. Because you will never be able to improve if you don't know what you're doing wrong.

## What Makes Someone Intelligent?

Who is more intelligent: (1) a construction worker voting for a progressive, responsible and tolerant party or (2) a mathematical whizkid working at a bank and voting for a party whose main goal it is to get rid of minorities? In other words: *what* is it that makes someone intelligent? Is it how good he is in calculating the inverse matrix of a particular order? Or is it how thoughtful he is about our community and whether or not he contributes to how society might become a more caring and productive institution?

I recently had a discussion with a friend of mine who I believe belongs far more to category (2) than (1). He spoke to me about his discontent with pretty much every Moroccan around; including the ones he had never actually met. He considered it to be a good idea to send each and every Moroccan back to his country of origin.

In the same week I had a discussion with my uncle. My uncle is a very nice man – just like my friend by the way – and belongs far more to category (1) than (2). Although my uncle admitted to be rather slow in absorbing and processing information – reading, calculating et cetera – he also told me the following: ‘Rob, you are free to do everything in life that you want to do. Truly. But please, promise me one thing: never *ever* vote for those discriminating parties. Ever. Will you?’ I ask you again: who is more intelligent?

Before we might be able to answer this question, we first have to explicate the notion of intelligence. I believe that someone’s intelligence ultimately comes down to his actions. The fact that a friend of you might say, ‘I could have easily passed that English test if I hadn’t just started studying the night before the test’ shows to me that – apparently – this person is not very intelligent. A truly intelligent person would have known better. And it is for the same reason that someone who is good in mathematics or physics, or any other discipline we usually associate with intelligence, is not necessarily intelligent. Look at the banking sector, I would say. Have those mathematical ‘geniuses’ been acting very intelligently lately? Not judged by the consequences

of their actions.

You could of course argue that I am mistaken the concept of *intelligence* for the concept of *wisdom*, where intelligence is about the 'processing power' of one's brain while wisdom is about the reasonableness of one's decisions. I would reply by saying that even the processing power of one's brain can in the end only be judged by the manner in which the person acts. That is the only objective criterium we have for making any claims about that person's intelligence. Since no matter how many areas of one's brain turn yellow/green/red in a f-MRI scan, we are still unable to know the true processing power of the person's brain. Maybe the person's brain is just very inefficient, using a lot of brainpower for very little output. And the other around: someone might produce great results without maximally utilizing his brain. Or maybe intelligence consists in the ratio of output versus brain power used: that the more output you produce per brain region, the more intelligent you are. But even then, the actions - since the output - of the person are a criterium in determining the persons's intelligence.

Hence we can say that intelligence is not determined by what one's brain *does*, but what one does with his *brain*.

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### **Antinatalism and the Right to be Thrown Into this World**

A fair trade is always based on a sense of mutual consent: you want something, I want something, so let's trade. The participants can deliberately weigh the pros and cons of the trade and decide – based on this information – whether to take part in the exchange or not. That's a *choice*: the choice between doing and not doing something.

How different is it for the 'choice' to be born? Well, there isn't really much of a choice there, is there? No-one has asked you: 'Hey. Do you want to be born?' You don't have this choice; you don't have a right to decide for yourself if you want to be thrown onto this earth. No-one has asked you whether you want to experience the suffering, and joy, that you do. No-one. You are born. Period.

There is a philosophical position called 'antinatalism' that assigns a *negative* value to birth. This makes it different from all the christian doctrines that praise birth to be a miraculous phenomenon; a true gift from above. There are different arguments in favor of antinatalism. One – put forward by Schopenhauer - is that life is always filled with more pain than pleasure; therefore a living person would have always been better off if he wouldn't have been born at all. After all, Schopenhauer claims,

*A quick test of the assertion that enjoyment outweighs pain in this world, or that they are at any rate balanced, would be to compare the feelings of an animal engaged in eating another with those of the animal being eaten.*

As I hinted at before, there are arguments for antinatalism that point to the lack of autonomy or freedom of choice involved in the 'decision' to be born. See it as a trade in which, no matter what your preferences are, the deal will always take place. Peter Wessel Zapffe – a Norwegian philosopher – said about this,

*In accordance with my conception of life, I have chosen not to bring children into the*

*world. A coin is examined, and only after careful deliberation, given to a beggar, whereas a child is flung out into the cosmic brutality without hesitation.*

This decision, the choice whether or not to bring children into the world, is of course a choice you have to make for yourself: do you find it okay to throw a person into this world without ever being able to know whether this person *wants* to be thrown into this world? If you do, you are likely a natalist: someone who puts a positive value on human reproduction. And if most people on this world would be natalists, there are some problems we will inevitably run into. And these problems are getting closer and closer.

I am talking of course about the ever increasing world population. In 2011 the 7th billion person was added to our world's population. It is expected that in 2050 this number will have increased to 11 billion and – given that the fertility rate keeps constant (an average of 2,5 children per women) – the 27 (!) billion will be reached in 2100. It seems save to say that these numbers are going to pose some problems. Events like a Malthusian catastrophe - a situation in which the increase in food production can't keep up with the increase in the world population – might happen if we don't do something. Darwin and his survival of the fittest-doctrine seem to become ever more apparent in this world of ours.

But let's keep the logistical problems aside, and focus ourselves solely on the (philosophical) issues attached to (anti)natalism. All these issues culminate into one question: is it okay for anyone to throw creatures like him- or herself into the world, without having their approval? Surely: *we* might want children; *we* might want to reproduce ourselves because *we* find children cute or *we* find this the most reasonable thing to do. But what about the children's self-determination? Shouldn't we pay any attention to that? Or are we just so self-centered and so egocentric that we don't even care about throwing other people into a world without even knowing – or caring – whether this is what they would have wanted to happen?

It's obviously impossible to ask children whether they would like to be born before they are born, but why would we, based on that knowledge, decide to do – instead of *not* do – it?

## What's Wrong with Pedophilia and Bestiality?

Pedophilia and bestiality: sex by an adult with a child and sex by a human with an animal. Most people consider the former to be disgusting and the latter to be twisted. Both of these activities are illegal in many countries. And that's the way it should be, right? We all feel that both pedophilia and bestiality are wrong. But why is that exactly? What is it that makes us so creeped out by the thought of an adult having sexual intercourse with a child? Or the noise of the neighbor enjoying the companionship of his dog a little too much? And in what way do both pedophilia and bestiality differ from rape? Aren't they 'just' rape, but disguised in a different form? Let's take a look at these questions.

I believe that – as it is with all matters in life – you have to come to understand *why* it is that you find something right or wrong, and that you should not just take society's word for it. After all, there are many societies in which gay marriage is believed to be morally wrong or even illegal, but that doesn't imply that gay marriage is *in itself* morally wrong or illegal, right? Of course not. It is morally wrong or illegal because the society in which it is morally wrong or illegal *made* it so. And so it is with pedophilia and bestiality. However, in contrast to gay marriage, there might be more compelling reasons to make pedophilia and bestiality wrong and illegal.

Let me ask you the following question: what is it that you find so repulsive about grown up men (and women) having sex with (little) children? Responding with, 'They are children!', is not an argument; merely a shout of disgust. A better – but still unsatisfying – response would be, 'Children aren't outgrown yet. Therefore an adult who has sex with a child does not have intercourse with a "complete" human being, only with some entity that has the *potential* of becoming a fully developed human being. And it is not until someone is having intercourse with a full-grown member of his own species that he is engaged in a "normal", or "morally right", endeavor'. But that's nonsense, right? That would imply that sex with any person who is not

believed to be ‘fully developed’ according to the moral rules of society would be an act worthy of condemnation. Also, if you make this claim, you might be asked to answer the question of *when* it is that someone is fully developed; when someone has ‘reached’ his full potential as a human being. When he has reached the ‘normal’ IQ-level? When her breasts are ‘sufficiently’ matured? When he has got the ‘right’ amount of hair on his chest? These measures seem utterly arbitrary and incapable of explaining our repulsion with pedophilia, let alone bestiality.

The reason why we find sex by adults with children – and sex by humans with animals – inappropriate (to say the least) is because we believe that the someone, or the ‘something’, we have sex with should *in potential* be able to assent to you and itself engaging in the sexual transaction. Note the prefix ‘in potential be able to’. Why is the addition of these few words so important? If we would skip them, the act would still be worthy of our condemnation, right? If you engage in whatever kind of relationship with another person (whether this is trading collector-cards, selling a motorcycle or having sex), it is always ‘appropriate’ to make sure that both parties agree to the deal, right?

That’s true, but somehow we find pedophilia and bestiality to be different from – or even ‘more wrong’ than – rape. Thus, it cannot *only* be the absence of mutual agreement for entering into the sexual transaction that explains our repulsion with both pedophilia and bestiality. No, it is the fact that a child or an animal does not even *possess* the capability of making a conscious decision to enter the deal or not. They don’t even *have* the sense of consciousness required to deliberately consider the ‘pros and cons’ of having sex with a person. And where in the case of rape, the rapist doesn’t *take into consideration* the intentions of the person being raped, the case of pedophilia and bestiality is different because children and animals *might not even have* – or at least not to the same extent as human adults – the *potential* to consciously reflect on the situation they’re in, and hence to decide whether or not to engage in a (sexual) transaction. And it this absence of potentially being able to consciously reflect on the situation, of consciously (ab)using another living creature while knowing that it is – in principle – incapable to consent with ‘the deal’, that we as a society seem to find more inappropriate than the act of don’t paying attention to another person’s intentions. And that’s why we think that the former should be punished more severely than the latter.



## Depression: Thinking Too Much and Doing Too Little

Why do dogs never seem to be depressed? Why do they always appear to be happy, no matter what it is they are doing? Well, the answer might be very simple: because they *are always doing*.

Let me clarify this. Dogs are always involved in one activity or another. They always got their little heads occupied with all kinds of biologically induced juices – whether they are aware of it or not. And it is because they're always 'busy', doing whatever seemingly irrelevant activity it is they're doing, that they are happy. It's because they're always busy, that they feel the effects of that constant stream of dopamine, rewarding them for their evolutionary beneficial behavior: the act of acting itself.

Not acting frees the mind from the duty to allocate resources to the execution of tasks. However, the mind cannot simply do nothing. In fact, doing nothing, as in thinking about nothing, might be one of the hardest things to do for the brain. And that's what you would expect, right? After all, not thinking about anything can hardly be beneficial to your, and therefore your brain's, survival. While you've got your brain, it's better to use it, than to let it be idle, like an empty fridge waiting to be filled with postponed protein-intakes. That's why the brain will do anything in order to try to be busy, even if there are no tasks it has to be focused at. It is at those moments that the brain 'thinks' it is good idea to use this 'break' to think about your worries, your goals in life, your purpose and other fundamental questions. And it is at these moments that your mind explores the deepest purposeless of life, and triggers the feelings of depression that so frequently haunt us.

So – in case we want to get rid of the seemingly unproductive (and surely depressing) reflections on life – we must keep the mind, and therefore the brain, busy. We have to make sure that there's no time, and no capacity, for it to become filled with soul-searching thoughts. Because although a little soul-searching might be good, and might point us to what we should do with our lives, too much of it inevitably results in feelings of purposeless and

depression. Hence it is only by being busy, by focusing our minds on completing tasks, by avoiding boredom and by don't risking to become drowned in the most existential questions of our being, that we can live a 'happy' life. It is only then that we can unleash the dopamine flows triggering those feelings of happiness we're longing for. Or, to return to the fridge, it's only by filling the fridge to the maximum, that we feel it is a worthwhile investment.

## Why the Notion of Chance tells you Nothing about the Future

We all think we're familiar with the notion of 'chance'. But are we really? And if so, what are the consequences we should attach to our interpretation of chance? For instance: are chances purely descriptive in nature, in the sense that they refer only to *past* events, or do they have a *predictive* power that might be based upon some kind of underlying 'natural' force producing the structured data? And why would it even matter how to interpret chance? Let's take a look behind the curtains of a probabilistic interpretation of chance, right into its philosophical foundations.

On average, 12,3 per 100.000 inhabitants of the USA get killed in a traffic accident. Also, 45 percent of Canadian men are expected to develop some form of cancer at some point in their lives. So, what do you think about these data? First of all: does the fact that 12,3 out of 100.000 inhabitants get killed in traffic tell you anything about the likelihood that *you* are going to be killed in traffic? I guess not. It is merely a descriptive notion invented to condense a large amount of data into an easy to read figure. It says nothing about your future, or anyone's future for that matter. After all: you will either die in traffic or you will not, and you will either get cancer or you will not. At this point in your life, you are absolutely clueless which way it will turn out to be. For all you know, it might be a 50-50 kind of situation.

Although this interpretation of chance might feel counter-intuitive, it seems a more reasonable position to take than believing you are expected to die in traffic with a probability of 12,3/100.000. You are after all a *unique* person, and you don't have 100.000 ways to go. You either go one way, or the other. It is only by adding together huge amounts of data, about huge numbers of people, that scientists can come to compressed figures (like chances), thereby *describing* what has happened in the past. But description does not equal prediction, and totality does not equal uniqueness.

Scientists too make use often of the notion of chance or 'probability'. So what are the implications of this manner of looking at chance for our

interpretation of *science*? What about the inferences scientists make based upon data, like the one about cancer mentioned above? Are they making unjustified claims by posing that 45 percent of men are expected to die of cancer? I believe this might indeed be the case. In case scientists want to be fully justified in getting at their conclusions, they should do away with any claims regarding the *likelihood* of any event happening in the *future*. That seems to be the only manner for staying true for 100 percent to the data available.

But watch it: this is not to say that the scientific enterprise, when talking about probability, has lost its value. Science can still be the vehicle best-suited for gathering huge amounts of data about the world, and for presenting these data in such a way that we are able to get a decent glimpse of what is going on in the world around us. And that is where – I believe – the value of science resides: in the provision of data in an easy to understand manner. Not in the making of predictions, or inferences of any kind, as many scientists might happen to believe: just the presentation of data, a job which is difficult enough in itself.

You could say that I am not justified in make this claim. You could back up your argument by saying that a difference should be made between cases such as '45 percent of men are expected to get some form of cancer' and 'one specific man has a 45 percent chance of getting cancer'. Where the latter might be untrue, because of the fact that a man will either get cancer (100 percent probability) or not (0 percent), the former might be more justified. That is because it *divides* a group into units that will either get cancer or not. However, although this might be true to a certain extent, it still seems an unjustified manner to make predictions about the way the world will turn out to be. After all, considering 100 men to be the unit of selection is only to replace the level of the individual with the level of the group. On an even higher level of abstraction, you could consider the 100 men to be one unit, which subsequently would make the conclusions reached unjustified again.

Also, when choosing to make predictions on the level of the group, why choose the higher- instead instead of the lower level? Why wouldn't it be okay to say that, instead of human beings, cells are the true units that either get cancer or not? That's only a difference in the level of analysis, right?

So, next time you read somewhere that 99 of 100 people fail in achieving something, interpret this for what it is: a description of what has happened in the past that can inform you in making the decision about what you should

do right now. Don't interpret this as meaning that you only have a one percent chance of being able to achieve a certain goal, because that would be *a totally unjustified inference* to make: an inference that goes way beyond what the data can support. And don't consider a scientific fact to be a prediction about the future. Consider it for what it is: a useful description of the past, but no legitimate claim about the future.

## The Butterfly Effect: How Small Decisions Can Change Your Life

The butterfly effect: a term often used within the context of ‘unpredictable systems’ like the weather and other ‘natural’ systems. For those who don’t know it, the butterfly effect refers to a system being ‘(very) sensitive to changes in its initial conditions’. As the name implies, think about a butterfly flapping his wings and, because of this small flapping, causes a hurricane to occur at a later point in time and possibly an entirely different region in space. The butterfly in this example is the symbol for how small changes in an earlier stage can cause huge changes to occur at a later point in time.

But can’t this concept be applied to life as well? Think about it: have you ever experienced a small phenomenon occurring – like you receiving a mail, you stumbling upon something on the internet or you meeting a person who happens to change the way you think – that, looking back, has influenced your life significantly? Let’s take the example of you talking to a person who made you change your mind. I can only speak for myself, but I definitely have had a couple of such experiences in my life. Let me give you an example of my life that illustrates the effect utter randomness can have on the course of your life:

I didn’t know what kind of Master to attend after finishing my Bachelors. While thinking about studying economics in Rotterdam (the Netherlands), I came in touch with a professor philosophy of science, who – at the time – was supervising my bachelor thesis. I had always thought about attending a Master philosophy somewhere at a university, but I had difficulties with the ‘vague touch’ Philosophy masters tend to have; none of them seemed analytic or logical enough to me.

The professor and I – during one of our supervising sessions – accidentally stumbled on the question what I wanted to do after my Bachelor philosophy; so I told him about my plan to go to Rotterdam. When he asked me why I wanted to study Economics there, I didn’t really know what to say. I said, ‘Well, I always dreamed about studying abroad at a nice university; Oxford,

Cambridge or something along those lines. But there don't really seem to be Masters over there that suit my interests. That is: thinking about the world in a "non-vague" manner.' He responded, 'Have you tried the LSE (London School of Economics and Political Science)? They have a Master Philosophy and Economics and a Master Philosophy of Science. Isn't that something for you?' 'Also,' he added, 'A good friend of mine – someone I hang out with on a regular basis – is a member of the selection commission of that Master Philosophy of Science. It might be interesting for you.' I took a look at this Master and I was sold right away. I applied, got accepted and have studied a year in London.

What if I wouldn't have talked to this professor about my ambitions? What if I would have had a different thesis supervisor? What if I would have had a headache that day and didn't feel like talking? Then my future would very likely have looked very differently. So what can we – or what did I – learn from this story: I learned that I shouldn't hesitate to take opportunities, no matter how small they might seem. Because those small opportunities might cause a stream of new possibilities to arise later on. And the same goes for the opposite: I should avoid bad actions, no matter how small. I remember that – a couple of years ago – I said something mean to my football trainer, and I have regret it ever since. In other words: small actions can have significant consequences.

## What is the Value of Beauty?

Beauty is ‘*a characteristic of a person, animal, place, object, or idea that provides a perceptual experience of pleasure or satisfaction.*’ Okay, now we have a definition of beauty; but what exactly *is* beauty? Let’s zoom in on the human part of beauty: why are some persons beautiful and others not? Why do men become ‘happy’ when they see Kate Upton, but not as much when they see Queen Beatrix?

Studies have shown that when we recognize someone’s face as beautiful we are in fact making a judgement about the health and vitality of that individual. We take facial symmetry (the similarity of the left and right half of a face) and a smooth skin to mean that a person has good genes and is – and has been – free from diseases. But what exactly we find beautiful differs per sex. For example, women attach less value to the looks of their partner than men do. But that raises the question: why do men attach so much value to the looks of a woman? Aren’t men – by chasing the pretty girls – nothing more than puppets of their evolutionary determined instincts?

If you think about it, beauty is – next to its evolutionary function – a totally useless characteristic. The only way in which a woman’s beauty can be of value is in the seduction of ‘primitive’ – or at least superficial – men. Well, that’s not completely true; beauty is not *totally* irrelevant. For example: if men see a woman – or if women see a man – that is very fat, it might be a good idea to stay away from this person. You don’t want to waste your food – or your fertility – on that one. And being so fat might not be very healthy. And we don’t want a sick partner, do we? But here again the value of beauty comes from its evolutionary function: its function as an *indicator* of someone’s health, which is useful to some extent. But ‘facial symmetry’? Does that really affect your life in any way? On a global scale, what does facial symmetry contribute to our society?

Beauty might be the single most overrated characteristic a person can have. Beauty is either present or it isn’t: you’ve either got it, or you don’t. Just like you can be tall or short, black or white, handicapped or ‘okay’, you can be



beautiful or less beautiful (ugly). But although it is fully determined by nature, and she cannot do anything about it, we men still go crazy when we see a beautiful woman. The beauty of a woman alone can be sufficient reason for men to chase her. A phrase often heard is: 'She's stupid? So what? She's beautiful, right?' But the real question is: who in this example is really the stupid one? The one being chased, or the one chasing? If you value someone for her looks, aren't you just better off taking a picture and hanging it above your bed? Not only will a picture last longer, but the beauty depicted on the picture will last longer too: beauty, after all, has the tendency to stay only until gravity shows its face. Intelligence, wisdom and experience, on the other hand, come with age.

So: what to do? Should we listen to our primal instincts and perceive beauty as it is dictated to us by nature? Or shall *we* take control of who we find beautiful and who not? Are our bodies leading the way; the happy feelings we get when seeing someone beautiful? Or do we listen to our minds telling us that an asymmetrical face doesn't imply Down syndrome? The ever recurring philosophical dichotomy returns: the battle between the body and mind, determinism and control.

Who do you think is going to win?

## The Mind or The Body: Who Is In Charge?

We are under the impression that we are in charge of our bodily actions. We believe that by steering our *thoughts*, we are somehow able to steer our *bodies*. If you are hungry and want to grab some food, ‘you’ – the entity that is in charge of your mental processes – seem to somehow *cause* your body to move to the refrigerator and grab a sandwich. But how is that possible? How can something that is *immaterial*, which our thoughts seem to be, cause reactions in a *physical* world? Is there some kind of causal linkage between these two domains? Or are our thoughts nothing but a by-product of the physical existence of our bodies, and thus unable to – although it might appear to be otherwise – cause any physical activity?

You could say that there are two ‘kinds of explanation’ we could turn to in order to explain our sense of consciousness or our sense of control over our bodies. The first kind consists of explanations pointing to what might be the *biological* causes for our sense of consciousness. The other kind consists of explanations pointing to what might be *religious* or *spiritual* causes. I will not zoom in at the second kind of explanations because – frankly – I have very little to say about it; except for the fact that *if* there would be some kind of deity which has endowed us with our sense of consciousness, there would be little left to explain. But even if that would be the case, it is still highly unlikely that we will get to know this during our stay on this earth.

Within the biological spectrum of explanations, again a distinction can be made between what appear to be two incompatible ‘stories’. The difference between these stories does not so much reside within the *causes* they say are responsible for our sense of consciousness, but more in the *consequences* attached to each of these causes. The first branch of biological explanations claims that our human consciousness has come into existence at some point during the stay in our mother’s womb; at a certain point in the growth process of ours, our neurological development crossed a certain naturally determined threshold, thereby *initiating* what might be an ever recurring neurological signal; a signal that is *coextensive* with our *mental processes* (our thoughts, so to say) and that has a **causal influence** on our bodily behaviors.

This explanation thus explicitly points to our thoughts as being causally related to our neurological activities. This explains why it seems to us that we are able to steer our bodily actions.

However, the question that immediately comes to mind after thinking about this explanation is: how could it ever be possible for something like *the mind*, that is involved with the ‘realm of thoughts’, to be connected to the *physical* world? That is: how can thoughts, that most of us consider to be *immaterial*, steer our bodies, that are *material*? This question remains yet unanswered.

The other type of biological explanation seems to do a better job at explaining the mysterious connection between our minds and bodies. This explanation claims that our consciousness is nothing more than an *accidental byproduct* of our neurological development, and has, subsequently, **no causal influence** on our bodily actions. That is: although we might have the impression that our thoughts are steering our bodies, in reality our physical bodies are, via our brains, *steering our thoughts* and therefore the content of our sense of consciousness (our thoughts). Our consciousness is no more than the activation of different regions of the brain, triggered by bodily actions in the physical world. Our mind is, as it is being called, ‘epiphenomenal’ on the body. And although this explanation might appear to be (very) counter-intuitive, it does a remarkably good job at clarifying the connection between our thoughts and actions.

Maybe one day science will be able to provide us with the final answer to the question of who is in charge: our *minds* or our *bodies*. Until that moment has come, we should stay ‘open-minded’ about what this relation might look like. No matter how counter-intuitive the explanations might be.

## Why Are there Only Men and Women?

Have you ever heard of the New Mexico whiptail? Probably not. Well, the New Mexico whiptail is the only animal species – that I know – whose members all have the same gender: all New Mexico whiptails are female. There is no need for mating with male New Mexico whiptails in order for the females to lay eggs, which is a good thing since there *are no* male New Mexico whiptails. This made me wonder: why are there so few species having only one gender? Why do we human beings, and so many other animals, need two ‘versions’ of our species in order to prevent ourselves from extinction? Why not three or four? Is this number utterly random? Or might there be some reason behind it?

Before thinking about this question, I saw absolutely no reason for there to be this dichotomy of men and women ruling the animal kingdom. I always thought to myself, ‘Why can’t there just be one “type” of human – which we could then simply call “human” – that, just like the whiptails, gives birth every now and then, *without* requiring any “intervention” of a different sex? What would be wrong with that?’

Maybe it’s inadequate to ask whether it is ‘right or wrong’ for there to be both men and women. Nature, after all, doesn’t seem to care much about being morally right or wrong. Why else would it give AIDS to babies, who have done absolutely no harm to this world of ours? It is more likely that – assuming there is a reason explanation – there is a biological explanation for there the widespread division between men and women.

So let’s see: what could be nature’s ‘purpose’ in making two types of human? How could that ever be beneficial for so many animal species – including our own? Well, the distinction could be nothing more than a very fundamental evolutionary developed instance of Adam Smith’s idea of division of labor. A division that appeared to be working so well that nature extinguished almost all species not conforming to this division. However, for this evolutionary explanation to be true, it would have to be the case that men

and women *together* should be able to achieve more than *only* men or *only* women could ever do. Let's take a look at that.

One could claim that a division of labor in which the woman carries the baby and the man gathers food (for the woman, the baby and himself) could benefit the reproduction chances of both the woman and the man. Because think about it: chasing swine while being pregnant does not seem to be very convenient. In this case, having the woman at home – safely warming herself at the fire – and having the man out hunting – not having to worry about endangering the life of his unborn child – could be a set-up benefiting both parties.

Another explanation could be that the existence of both men and women provides both parties with some sort of purpose in life: the purpose to form little groups, called 'families', thereby creating structure into – what otherwise might have been – chaos in the animal kingdom, or an utterly meaningless life; a structure that would make every creature better off. Because, again, think about it: what would the world be like in case there was only one type of purposeless creature wandering around? Wouldn't that lead to an utterly unstructured and – therefore – unsafe environment? The families that provide the confines in which each one of us can live relatively safe have fallen away.

If that would indeed be the case, it might have been evolutionary beneficial for our species to 'develop' the distinction between men and women; simply in order to program the species members with a goal: to create that safe little world they can call 'my family'.

However, none of these explanations explains why there are only *two* sexes; maybe humanity would be even more organized – and even better off – if there were three, four or even more sexes. So why only two? Well, maybe nature 'decided' to go for only two because creating more than two might have complicated things a little too much. Now it's at least clear what everyone has got to do: find a man or a woman, make a family, and live happily ever after.

## An Application of Freud's Theory of Mind

You must have heard the name 'Sigmund Freud' at some point in your life. Thinking about the name, all kinds of images might pop up in your mind, such as: the mind being like an iceberg, notions like 'The Id' and 'The Ego', and Freud's ideas about sex as the explanation for pretty much everything. But you might not fully remember all of it. You could say that the ideas are floating around somewhere between your consciousness and your unconsciousness – to keep speaking in Freudian terminology. But what is it exactly that Freud claimed? And why do many philosophers of science condemn his theories to the realm of 'pseudo-science'? And what's the value of Freud's ideas? Let's apply Freud's ideas to an everyday situation and find it out for ourselves.

Let's imagine that you are a guy who goes out with some friends. You guys are 'chilling in the club', while suddenly an absolutely gorgeous woman enters the room. You notice a certain feeling taking control over your body: attraction, the feeling of you wanting – in whatever sense defined – that woman. This is not a feeling for which you might have any arguments. No, the feeling is just there. This feeling comes down from the part of your personality that Freud calls 'The Id'. The only thing that The Id cares about is receiving pleasure, loads of it. It has an inextinguishable urge to grab on to everything within its reach, just for it to calm down its perpetual longing for pleasure; no matter how short the satisfaction might last.

You can imagine that society would be a rather chaotic institution if every one of us would just give into his animalistic urges at all times. Rape would be little different from our custom of shaking hands. Therefore some basic rules of conduct need to be ingrained in each member of society: 'Be gentle to others,' 'Help an old lady cross the street' and 'Don't have sex with someone unless that someone wants to'. It is within this domain of 'The Superego' that all kinds of religious and political beliefs nestle. Beliefs that will guide you in living your life like a caged monkey.

Surely: it's all nice that we try to control our animalistic urges by coming up

with a set of reasonable rules. But who makes sure that the needs of The Id and the rules of The Superego are properly matched? After all, as we have just seen, they might contradict each other: The Id might want to have sex with that gorgeous woman, but The Superego tells you not to. So you cannot always satisfy both at the same time: you can't just rape everyone and be a gentleman at the same time. And that's where 'The Ego' - the third and final part of your personality - comes in. The Ego is the controlling power, the power that tries to satisfy the needs of The Id while taking into account the rules of The Superego. The Ego is the house of *reason*, of the economically thinking part of you; the part that decides to fulfill the most pressing urges first – like hunger – and postpone less pressing urges – like the urge to have sex – to a point in time at which satisfying this urge might be more 'appropriate'.

Now you can understand why Freud sees our sexual drives as the prime reason for our psychological problems. After all, it isn't easy to suppress our animalistic needs, as put forward by The Id. This can only be done by repressing the beast that lives inside of us. But repressing the beast, doesn't kill it. In other words: we still have our animalistic urges - even if we are not allowed (by our Superego: the rules set by society and ingrained in our minds) to give into them. Therefore our urges have to be channeled in a different way. But sometimes these urges get channeled in a way that might cause psychological problems. For example: someone who has been taught to never disobey authority. Then, in order to channel his 'urge to have control over my life', he develops some kind of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder - to try and have at least a little control over his life, in whatever seemingly irrational way possible. In this example, the psychological disorder is not necessarily caused by a sexual drive, but you can imagine that there are examples in which the need to suppress a sexual drive is the cause of the psychological problems.

There are – and have been – many criticisms about the scientific status of Freud's ideas, and you might see why. It's after all quite difficult to capture something as intangible as 'The Id' in terms of empirical data. For how should this be done? Nonetheless, Freud's ideas have found to be very influential within the domain of psychiatry, even though the current generation of psychology students hardly learns *anything* about them.

Ah well, scientific or not, it's still a pretty fascinating point of view, right? And if it happens to work in psychiatry, then why not apply it? Oh, and for the

guy at the bar: he took the girl home.



## We Are the Masters of Time

I am sure you know the feeling: you have been focused at completing a task – let's say studying – and then, when you look up from your desk and look at your watch, you see that a couple of hours have passed. A couple of hours! It feels like you have just started. But, when you take a closer look at the situation, you come to realize that it is not just that time seemed to go *faster* while you were deeply involved in the activity: it is more like the entire notion of time *did not exist at all*.

While you are 100 percent focused on doing something, whatever this 'something' might be, nothing outside of that something seems to exist. No outer world, no expectations, no time. Not even you. Only the world of the something 'you' are immersed in. But what does this momentarily 'non-existence of time' tell us about our common perception of time?

Let's start by picking an activity in which your consciousness is put outside of the scope of time: sleeping. When you wake up from a good night of sleep, you have no idea – given that you did not look at the clock – how long you have actually slept. A period that in reality might have spanned a couple of hours might feel like only a couple of minutes. An even more extreme example would be a comatose patient: patients who awake from a coma usually have no clue how long they have actually been in the coma.

But it is not only while you are sleeping that time seems to play tricks on us. Also in our daily lives we are constantly bothered by its remarkable properties. For think about it: how slow does time go when you are waiting for your dentist, and he is already ten minutes late? Ten minutes can feel like eternity, right? But what if you are hanging out with your friends, laughing and having a good time, but you know that you have to leave in ten minutes? Then ten minutes might feel like a second. And you know who also pointed out this weird feature of time? The same man that shocked the world with his theory of relativity: mister Albert Einstein. This is what he had to say about our experience of time:

*When you are courting a nice girl, an hour seems like a second. When you sit on a red-hot cinder, a second seems like an hour. That's relativity.*

Although our experience of time – and even time itself – might be relative, there is one aspect that remains constant throughout all frames: the seemingly uni-directionality of time. For it seems like time is always going forward, to the future. But even though nature pushes our *bodies* forward in time, we can decide where in time we want to be: do you want to be in ‘the now’, or would you rather dive into your past or dream about the future? It is your consciousness that determines where in time you are situated *mentally*. It is pretty much like the movie *The Matrix*: your body stays put on planet earth, while your mind lives a life on its own. What this observation shows is that time does not equal the hands on the clock. Our *perception* of time is not always moving in fixed units in a fixed direction. The fact that we have invented the notion of time because it is convenient within our daily lives does *not* prevent us from experiencing time in any form we want. And if we take our experience of time to be the *true meaning* of time, instead of - let's say - the movements of the hands on the clock, then time is intrinsically relative: not only in Einstein's farfetched physical laws.

But of course: we cannot live our lives totally detached from the ordinary – constantly forward moving – property of time. After all, our human bodies are earthly constructs and will break down after a quite predictable period of time. However, within the fixed time frame we have been offered, the unit of time is variable: within this fixed time frame a minute does not have to be like a minute and a couple of hours can be like a couple of seconds. Within this fixed time frame *we*, instead of our bodies, are the masters of time.

## Happiness and Ignorance or Appreciation and Wisdom?

As John Stuart Mill said in his *Utilitarianism*,

*It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied.*

The question that immediately comes to mind after reading this quotation is: Is this true? Is wisdom truly worth more than satisfaction? Would someone truly rather be happy and ignorant than face the absurdity and meaninglessness of life, and thereby touching upon – what might – be the ‘true’ nature of our existence? In other words: a happy fool or an enlightened absurdist, what to choose?

You can look in the mirror every morning and think to yourself, ‘I’m going to be wiped from this earth within – at most – a few decades,’ ‘I don’t have a clue what I’m doing here, and I’ll probably never figure it out’ or ‘Does what I am about to do today contribute *anything* to the course of humanity?’ Each of these questions seems to come from a very reasonable reflection on life. Philosophy, being the human quest for wisdom, should not turn walk away from questions like these, even though they might turn out to be unanswerable or depressing. Philosophy is not a quest that should be focused on creating finished products, like carpentry or painting. Philosophy, like any attempt to obtain ‘the truth’, is a never-ending activity, whose value resides within calming down our feelings of despair. It might be comparable to drugs, but instead of deciding *not* to face the absurdity of life by lowering one’s state of consciousness, one tries to convince one’s consciousness that there *must be* a road to certainty; a road that one, in blinding naivety, hopes to stumble upon. This is the life of the absurdist.

But there is another way to live. You could look in the mirror every morning and think to yourself, ‘I’ve got to hurry up, I’ve got to be at work at 8 o’clock,’ ‘I still have to tell John that he has to cook dinner tonight, since I will be home late’ and ‘Oh it’s Tuesday! That means that there will be soccer on

television tonight! You could force yourself to try and turn off the existential, reflective part of your mind and commit to living the robotic or auto-pilot-like life. You could try to become immersed in the rat-race called life to such an extent that all of your thinking power is required just for sticking to your rat-race-like planning. There is no time for reflection; all your time is needed for action. Life consists of the ever recurring 9 to 5 cycles strung together by knots of transient and superficial moments of happiness. This is the life of the fool.

The advantage of being a happy fool is that one, in contrast to the absurdist, is able to experience happiness, no matter how superficial this might be. The fool is able to get lost in the dopamine-flow triggered by the utterly irrelevant phenomena he finds interesting or amusing. He turns his back towards the absurdity of life; he lives his life the 'normal' way: the way (almost) *everyone* lives it. Moreover, it is the manner in which *any* animal on earth lives its life. And that's exactly where the sadness kicks in. Since, we could ask ourselves, how 'human' is a life that doesn't differ in any fundamental sense of the life of a pig? A life that is lived on cruise-control, only taken control of when our biological urges seem incapable of doing the job, when humans seem equal to mice? And even though we – in contrast to the mice – *have* the thinking power to live a different life at our disposal, we rather let our animal brains control our bodies: no thinking means good thinking.

And this is where the Socrates comes in. Although the Socrates realizes that he might not have chosen the hedonistic path to happiness, it is the outer part – the 'human' part – of his brain that gets freed from the shackles of social and biological conditioning; he takes control of his life. Happiness gets bypassed, and fulfillment is being striven for. And it is by accepting the inability of his mind to ever find the path to certainty that he enters a vicious circle that starts and ends with absurdity: the highest state of enlightenment attainable for the human mind. It is only in the absurdist spheres of consciousness that happiness can be judged for what it really is: an empty goal created to prolong the dominance of the animalistic parts of our brains.

Should we see it as our duty to enlighten ourselves, to reach the level of consciousness we *can* reach; a level that is filled with reflection on the absurdity of life? Or should we succumb under the temptation of hedonism, give up the analytic and logic reflection on 'this thing called life', and long for bursts of momentary happiness? What is the human way to live?

## Why Are We?

Before you embark on reading this essay, I have to warn you that this essay might appear to be depressing. And if it does, it might be because it *is* in fact a depressive article. Having said that, here we go.

Do you ever ask yourself the question where all of this is about? Not only *why* we are here on this planet, but why we even *are*: why we *are* capable of experiencing; why we *are* capable of tasting; why we *are* capable of complaining. We are 'just' living our lives, going with the flow, but do we ever think about what this 'living' might actually consist of? Let's take a look at that.

'Purpose' is an inherently unstable concept. The reason for this is that the Purpose of everything, from which all other purposes (which a small 'p') can be derived, will always lie outside of our reach - given that it would exist at all. Whenever we embark on the journey of trying to grasp this Purpose, we'll inevitably end up in an infinite regress. It's like a diver trying to reach the bottom of the sea, but each time he thinks the bottom is near is forced to return to the surface to grasp fresh air. Our human limits will deter us from reaching the limits - both of the Purpose and the sea.

We have a (very) limited framework of beliefs within which we can claim to 'know' things: in which we can claim to 'know' that the world consists of particles; in which we can claim to 'know' that we descend from the fish; in which we can claim to 'know' that we are alive. But how *big* is this limited framework of beliefs in the scope of which we believe to know? That's an unanswerable question, since we don't know what we don't know, and therefore we don't have a benchmark to measure our sense of ignorance (or omnipotence) against. We believe we know a lot, but we can never *know* how much we actually know. We might know almost anything there is to know, or we might know less than 0.01 percent of all these is to know. And we don't even know that what we know is true - we think so, but these 'facts' might be refuted by future discoveries. So we won't know how much we know.

Don't you find it – at times at least – frustrating that we cannot deny the fact that we've got no clue about all of the things we don't know? That we can try all we want to unravel the mysteries of the universe, but that we don't know if we're getting any closer to 'the truth'? Closer to the way the world really is? Closer to the true Purpose behind all of this? It's like we're forced to always look into one direction, and that even within that direction our line of sight is limited because of the horizon set by our human limitations.

A depressing thought? Maybe or maybe not. Since there are two ways to deal with this thought: either (1) by drowning in it and feeling the total absurdity and seemingly insignificance of our existence, or (2) by shutting down the part of our minds in which this thought resides, and keep on 'shooting for another perfect day.' But, irrespective of the option we choose, we've got to remember that closing our eyes doesn't hide the truth; it only makes us unable to see it. So it is with the question: why are we?

Are you happy? Are you content with the way you're living your life? And if so, why are you happy? Are you 'just' happy because you don't allow yourself to see the only absolute truth in our existence – the meaningless of life? Or are you happy for other reasons? If you are happy because of the former, then that's a noble – or at least understandable – sense of 'constructive' happiness. But have you ever thought to yourself: why *should* I even be happy in life? Just because it's a nice feeling – or at least nicer than unhappiness? And aren't we making it a little too easy for ourselves by striving for nothing more than a feeling of 'just being happy'?

What if it's just one big joke whatever it is that we're doing here? What if there are a couple of aliens that have put our ancestors (the monkeys) on this planet just so that they – the aliens – could have some fun? Just to be 'happy' for themselves? Maybe. All we know is that we *are*.

## The Purpose of Life is to Look for a Purpose

Bam! You are born. What now? What are you going to do? Well, for the first couple of years, it is pretty clear what you will do: you will listen to your parents, go to school, play with your friends, and do all those other things ‘children just happen to do’. You don’t even think about what might be the purpose behind all of it. The only purpose you think about is training your Pokémons to level 100 and ruling the Pokémon League.

After this period, you start attending high school, in which you are forced to deal with all the insecurities that arise: what do I have to do to be popular? What do the cool guys do? How can I be more like that great – but not so nice – guy in my soccer team? But you’ve still got the child-like purposes driving you forward; purposes that make you know what you have to do.

Then you start attending university. The first two years or so are as usual. You get your points, work on your social life and do all sorts of stuff you like. Until suddenly disaster strikes: you don’t know it anymore. You start reflecting upon your life and ask yourself: what the fuck am I doing? Is this who I am? Is this truly what I want to do for the rest of my life, just becoming another brick in the wall? And it is at this point that your life really starts.

Living someone else’s life is easy. You just follow the rules and you will get by. You might not even be consciously aware of the rules, like when you were a kid. You just live your life, not even thinking about what it is that you’re doing. But at some point in your life, whether it is in your ‘mid-life crisis’ or in your twenties, you become aware of the rat-race you’re a part of. You become aware of the goals that society has imprinted on you: ‘Get a good job,’ ‘Get married’ and ‘Think about the career possibilities’. And you are slowly but steadily approaching the point of destruction; you’re slowing reaching the *why*-phase.

When you’ve reached the *why*-phase, all social conditioning you have been put through in your life will be reconsidered: ‘Why do I need to get a “good” job?’, ‘Why do I need to get married?’ and ‘Why do I have to think about my career possibilities?’. And while the *why*-phase you had as a child was innocent

and happened without you even being aware of it ('Daddy, why do we celebrate Christmas?'), this *why*-phase you're involved in happens fully consciously. Maybe even a little too consciously.

Everyone experiences this (in fact second) *why*-phase in life. However, the point at which it kicks in is likely to differ from person to person. You might know those 50-somethings that get divorced, move to France and start a Bed and Breakfast? That's their *why*-phase. Or do you know students that quit their study after a year or two? That's the *why*-phase as well. But it is not only the way you live your life that gets reconsidered – and revised – in the *why*-phase, it is the entire notion of life itself. What is life? Or more importantly: what is *my* life?

When you start asking these existential questions, you encounter a whole range of different answers, each one being just as much – or even more – dissatisfying as the one before. You keep coming up with answers that have been imprinted in your head, the indoctrination as I mentioned before. But when you start asking yourself why it is that none of these answers satisfies you, you stumble upon an eye-opening but scary conclusion: maybe your life doesn't have a purpose.

That is: maybe there is no purpose in life besides the one you've created for yourself. Maybe there is no inherent meaning of life, or goal you should strive for in order to be able to live happily ever after. But then – suddenly – *the* answer shows its face: if I want to live happily ever after, I better create a purpose for myself. And if I don't, I will be dead soon enough anyway.

You'll always have to create a purpose in your life, no matter how mundane this might be. Although there might not be an inherent purpose of – or meaning in – life, there is always an underlying drive present in your life, and that is the drive forcing you to create a purpose in life. That is not to say that there is one static purpose you should live your entire life according to. No, your purpose might be changing. But still, there must always be a purpose, and it's yours to find out. That's the one and only true purpose of life.



## An Unequal Distribution of the World's Wealth: Is It Fair?

50 percent of the world's wealth is owned by 2 percent of the world's (adult) population; the bottom half of the world's population barely owns 1 percent of the global wealth; 10 percent of the population account for 82 percent of the world's wealth; Africa owns 1 percent of the world's wealth, while Europe and North America account for respectively 30 and 34 percent. These are figures, and figures don't lie. So: what to infer from these figures? Or, more importantly, what *should* we infer from these figures? One thing is for sure: the world's wealth is not fairly distributed, or at least not in an economical sense.

I am not going to make a plea for worldwide communism, in the sense that the world's wealth should be distributed equally among all of its inhabitants. For that would be unfair, right? To have people working to pay for other people's laziness? No, that doesn't seem to be the optimal option. It could work, of course, if everyone would be *prepared* to work his ass off in favor of a more prosperous world overall. But we don't want a world that is more prosperous 'overall': we want *our* wallets to be filled with more prosperity; we want to make sure that *we* are fairly rewarded for our contribution to society - or to the world for that matter. Because, as is the case with the worldwide pollution and exploitation of fossil fuels: you can play the nice guy but, in the end, the nice guy will get screwed by the more selfish - or more intelligent; depends on your perspective - people. The prisoner's dilemma seems unsolvable in a world like ours that is crowded by insecure people; people that see each opportunity to cooperate as an opportunity to get screwed.

Nonetheless, I want to trigger your imagination with the following (unrealistic) idea: what if we could take the world's total wealth as it currently exists, and divide it by the total number of people living on this earth, and give *every* individual this amount of wealth to start their lives with. In our world this 'starting amount' of wealth would be 26.202 dollars. See it as a kickstarter: when you are thrown in this world of ours, you will be given

some certainty; a buffer, so to say. You can decide for yourself what you want to do with your buffer: you can spend it on drugs, or you can use it to start your own business; you can decide to buy a car that you don't actually need, or you can save your buffer money for buying a house later on. You could even bundle your wealth with the wealth of others in order to create bigger and collectively shared goods (like roads, schools etc.)! It's totally up to you.

This 'wealth sharing kick-start idea' can be thought of as a practical variation of John Rawls' idea of the the veil of ignorance. This is a well-known philosophical thought-experiment, that goes (more or less) as follows: imagine that every person on this world wouldn't have been born yet. All of us would be standing behind some sort of curtain separating us from the earth that we are about to enter. We don't have any idea yet what our own capabilities (where we're good at), and the capabilities of others, will turn out to be when we do enter the world. Also, we don't know what our fate will be: we might become a plumber, but we might just as well become a CEO. All you know is that you have to make one decision now, and that decision is the following: when all of us will enter earth, what will be the 'fair' manner to distribute the income we will come to earn and the wealth we will come to accumulate? Are we prepared to pay for the medical care required for someone's handicapped son (which, remember, could be you; you after all don't have a clue about how your life will turn out to be), or don't we find that fair? And if we would find it fair, how much money would you be willing to set aside for these expenditures? Again the question is: what is fair?

Rawls' message with this veil of ignorance is that, if everyone of us would imagine himself standing there, behind the veil of ignorance, we might come to notice what a *truly* fair world might look like; irrespective of our own particular situation and egocentric ambitions. Like any thought experiment, one can debate whether it would even be possible to think about 'how the world should be' without knowing *anything* about yourself or the world. You could think that morality, which is where Rawls' idea of fairness is based on, is to an extent socially constructed. Hence, given that the people behind the veil of ignorance have not entered society yet, their morality - and thus their basis for decisions - might be *asent*. Let's however, for the sake of the argument, assume that morality would exist already.

Now I ask you: what do you think of the wealth-kickstarting plan? Would you commit to it, or would you gamble and hope to become the next Bill

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### Free Will and Why Determinism Would Not Change a Thing

I want to take a look at what – at first sight – might seem to be a dichotomy between free will and determinism. I've written a couple of articles dealing with the question whether there actually *is* something that can reasonably be called 'free will', and – if so – what this might consist of. These are important questions, for if it turns out that there is no free will – or that there's nothing 'free' about our free will – then we are left with determinism, a position many people are uncomfortable with. I want to look at what the implications might be of assuming determinism to be true, and in particular at what this assumption would imply for our experience of free will.

When we think of free will, we usually think of a certain autonomous power, residing within our minds, that is capable of initiating (our) actions. Whether it is picking up a teacup or stroking a dog, if we *want* to perform an action, we seem to be able to *decide* (consciously or unconsciously) to execute this action. Now, let's ask ourselves: how would this picture change if it turned out that we are *not* fully autonomous in deciding to pick up the teacup or stroking the dog? What if it turned out that our brains are just responding 'automatically' (that is, by triggering evolutionary developed neural networks) to the stimuli received from our environments? What if – in case of you picking up the teacup – the stimuli of (1) you being in the living room and (2) it being cold, trigger your neurons into making you believe you want to pick up the teacup and making you in fact pick up the teacup? Note the 'what if' in the former sentence, because theoretically it is possible that this is how we come to 'decide' on what actions to perform; just by means of nerve cells responding to external stimuli.

The truth of the matter is that we don't know – and we might never know – whether this is the way our actions come about. It might indeed be that our

actions – and thus our decisions – are fully deterministic in nature. However, it wouldn't make a difference if this would be the case: not as long as we keep on having the *perception* of having a free will. Even though we might come deterministically to the actions we perform, we still *experience* the sense of free will. And this experience will not change, not even if we'd come to know that our actions come about fully deterministically.

Because think about it: what if it would turn out that you – who considers him- or herself to be a creative person – depend fully upon the aforementioned neural networks and stimuli for coming to your 'creative' ideas? Although you believe you came up with the ideas 'all by yourself', fully autonomous and purely free, it turns out that your ideas are a logical result of the environment you're in and the configuration of your neural networks.

At first you might feel a little hurt in your ego, but when you start thinking about it, you quickly come to realize that this observation doesn't change a thing. After all, your *experience* of having a free will is exactly the same as it was before – when you truly believed to have free will. You can still do anything you want to; you've merely come to know where this "want to" finds its origin. You have come to *know* that you don't have a free will; but you still *experience* having a free will. And since experience is all we have, nothing has practically changed.

## Why the High Taxation on Cigarettes is Unjustified

According to a survey held by the *British Action on Smoking and Health* (the ASH, for short), 20 percent of the British adults smoke. Is this a good thing? I don't know. I believe that the act of smoking isn't intrinsically good or bad; it is something that each person should decide for himself. However, what I do believe is valuable in its own right is human autonomy. By autonomy I mean 'the right each person has to decide for himself how to live his life *without unjustified intervention from external parties*'. And it is this latter point I want to draw attention to.

According to the ASH, in 2012, 77 percent of the price of a pack of cigarettes consisted of tax. Multiply that by the number of cigarette packs sold, and you get an amount of £10,5 billion raised through tobacco taxation. This is six times as much as the spending by the the National Health Service (the NHS) on tobacco related diseases; these were 'merely' £1,7 billion. So the question that comes to mind is: what justifies the £8,8 billion that remains after subtracting the NHS costs from the money raised through tobacco taxation?

The ASH claims that the inequality between the two numbers is no issue, for 'tobacco tax is not, and never has been, a down payment on the cost of dealing with ill health caused by smoking'. But what then is the purpose of this tax? The ASH claims that the high level of tobacco tax in Britain serves two purposes: (1) to reduce smoking through the price incentive, and (2) to raise taxes from a source that has little impact on the economy. The latter point has been scrutinized extensively by economists, and I don't think I can add anything to that discussion. So let's focus on the first point: the aim of reducing smoking through the price incentive.

By making this claim, the ASH implicitly assumes that it is within the government set of rights to reduce smoking among its citizens. But is it? One can justify tobacco taxation on the grounds of the (health care) costs incurred by the non-smoking part of society. But, as we have seen, this amount by no

means adds up to the taxes levied on tobacco. I believe this question ('But is it?') directs us towards the fundamental question of where the boundaries lie between justified government intervention and morally objectionable behaviour. One could say that, as I believe, it is one thing (and justified) to prevent non-smokers from being financially hurt by the actions of smokers, but that it is a completely different thing (and not justified) to promote non-smoking values among citizens, merely for the sake of – what appear to be – paternalistic motives.

As with any government intervention, the benefits of the intervention should be weighed against its costs. Presumed that there might be an intrinsic value in having a non-smoking society – a point the ASH doesn't provide any argument for – the costs of violating what might be an intrinsically valuable human right (autonomy, that is) should be included in the calculation as well. And until this has been done, the question of whether the £10,5 billion in tobacco taxation is justified remains open for debate.

## Religion and The Absurd

There are times at which I envy religious people. Their sense of determination, of knowing where all of this is about and what to do with it, can seem very alluring. Like it can really put your mind at ease. And why wouldn't it? After all, theists know that, no matter what they are faced with in life, they can always come up with an explanation that is 100 percent bulletproof. An explanation that always points to the single source of everything. Down to God himself. That truly must be a peaceful mindset, right?

Wrong. Reality contradicts this assumption. For it seems fair to say that religion, or *differences in* religion, is an important – if not *the* most important – cause of war in this world of ours. And since war is – by definition – not peaceful, it is fair to say that not all theists experience peaceful consequences by adhering to their religion. But I do not intend to bash religion. I want to take a look at the different positions regarding religion, and their reasonableness – or unreasonableness.

First of all atheism. I have established that I am not an *atheist*. For to be an atheist, you must reject to believe in the existence of deities. And I most certainly do not reject believing in deities. At least: not as long as it is *someone else* who does the believing; not me, for I don't believe in any deity.

Neither am I *agnostic*. An agnostic claims that one will never be able to prove or disprove the existence of deities. Therefore you should postpone judgement (possibly indefinitely) about the existence of any deity. This doesn't seem to be very unreasonable. However, given that you want to be consistent in your agnostic beliefs, this leaves you with an unwanted consequence, being: you can reflect only on those entities that *definitely do* or *definitely do not* exist.

Let me clarify this. Suppose that I say that – somewhere in space – there is a teapot floating around. The existence of this teapot can neither be proved nor disproved. Should we hence be agnostic about its existence? This seems unreasonable, for we might have *reasons* to suppose that the existence of such

a teapot is extremely improbable. But notions such as probability do not make any sense from an agnostic point of view. For how can something be more or less probable, given the agnostic assumption that you cannot make any reasonable judgement about the existence of entities that cannot be *proved* or *disproved*? If the latter would be true, you cannot talk about probability: for probability, or at least everything between 0 and 100 percent, is not absolute, hence cannot be *proved* or *disproved*. So, being an agnostic, you cannot reasonably speak about things being more or less probable. And if you cannot accept this consequence, you should not be an agnostic.

But then the unavoidable question pops up: what then am I? Is there a group of like-minded people I belong to? Is there a religion or a philosophy that suits my particular ideas and intuitions? Or am I forever doomed to wander around lonely on this earth of ours, searching for my very own, not yet formulated, views on life?

The answer is no. Because recently something special happened: my very own baby Jesus was born, my lord and saviour. While surfing on internet, I stumbled upon the philosophical position called 'absurdism', and I was hooked right away. What is absurdism? The best way to explain it, is to zoom in at its most fundamental notion: 'the Absurd'. The Absurd refers to '*the conflict between the human tendency to seek inherent value and meaning in life and the human inability to find any*'. Note that absurdism does not consider it to be '*logically impossible*' to find meaning in life; it just considers it '*humanly impossible*' to do so. This is a subtle but very important distinction. It is this distinction that implies that, even though there *might be* an absolute meaning of life floating around somewhere in this universe of ours, we – simple human beings of flesh and blood – will never be able to find it.

And that's it, right? We simply cannot come to know how things 'truly' are, including the 'true meaning' of life - as given by God, or otherwise. We are doomed to live within the boundaries of our own little worlds. We are unable to trade our points of view for any other humanly conceivable point of view. The latter implies that we can never come to have an absolute grasp of 'the truth'; supposing that such a thing would exist at all. Surely: if everyone would develop the same beliefs about what is true and what is not, about what is right and what is not, seemingly universal ideas tend to emerge. But the question we must always ask ourselves is: were the ideas universal *before* people considered them to be so? Or did they become universal *because* everyone believed them?



A note of caution is in place. For an absurdist (an adherent of absurdism) does not always lead a happy life. There is always a major danger hiding in the corner. Absurdism implies the absolute freedom of humanity, the non-existence of any shackles besides the ones we have created ourselves. But sometimes this destined freedom of ours conflicts with what is the human longing for certainty. A longing to know how things *truly* are; a need to know who or what is behind all this craziness we call life. Absurdism claims that we cannot have such certainties. And when this observation strikes, it strikes hard: a feeling of powerlessness tends to take control over your mind and body. That's an inevitable consequence of appreciating the Absurd.

But then, a little later, when you get yourself together, and taste again of the juices coming from the total meaninglessness of life, of total freedom, you realize that you found true love after all. You will realize that it is the only path leading to something that at times comes close to meaning. For even though the absurdist knows that he will not find any *absolute* meaning of life, it is in the very act of trying to find it, that he finds fulfilment. The fulfilment he is longing for. The fulfilment he proudly calls life.

## Why do People Enjoy Talking about Themselves So Much?

Do you know those people who always seem to interrupt you when you are talking? Those people who always seem to find a way to make the conversation go about themselves? Or maybe you consider yourself to be just that kind of person? And if so, how does that make you feel? Personally, I get very uncomfortable around people using the word ‘I’ more than five times per minute. It makes me feel like I am attending a lecture instead of having a conversation. But do you know what bothers me even more? I *am* that kind of person.

Too much using of the word ‘I’ can be an indication of either of two things: (1) *a lack of empathy* or (2) *a disproportionately large longing for validation*. Let’s start with empathy. Any human being living in this world of ours has a need to socialize with its fellow species-members, whereby socializing consists of keeping an adequate balance between the *giving* and *taking* of thoughts. It is an endeavor that allows us to live together in the dense populations we have. However, whenever the balance between giving and taking gets distorted too much, we don’t consider ourselves to be engaged in a conversation anymore. By talking about ‘I’ too much, the conversation has stopped and the plea has begun. By talking about what ‘I’ believe too frequently, you implicitly take away the right of your conversation partner – or even his duty – to contribute to the conversation. And that is what we usually consider to be anti-social behavior.

The other reason for using the word ‘I’ too frequently is that you might have a disproportionately large need for receiving validation from your social environment. This need consists of a sense of ‘wanting to be listened to’ that is significantly larger than what people generally consider to be pleasant. The question is: why would someone do that? Why would someone keep talking about his own ideas while knowing that his interlocutor might not find this pleasant? Well, maybe it is because the person doesn’t understand *yet* or doesn’t understand *why* his behavior is considered to be anti-social.

Maybe it is because he just started interacting with his species members and still needs to experience the nature of giving and taking which is present in a pleasant conversation. Or maybe the person knows all of the above but still doesn't consider himself to be anti-social; maybe the person believes that what he says is right and that what the others say is wrong, and that this observation justifies him in talking about his ideas disproportionately much. However, it often is very difficult to draw the line between what is a healthy contribution to a conversation and what is a narcissistic urge to express one's ideas. The former is praiseworthy and can function therapeutically, constructively and even emphatically.

Speaking is after all the best medium we have at our disposal for us human beings to make others aware of our beliefs. You could of course say that works of art and other human creations also have the capability to pass on their creator's message. And although that might be true, social interaction in terms of the spoken word still seems to dominate each other medium in making your intentions clear to another human being. Face-to-face communication allows people to absorb the often subtle gestures, facial expressions and tonality that are required in order to truly understand the creator's beliefs. And, as you might have experienced, passing on a well-intended *written* ironic statement is much more likely to be misinterpreted than the same message being *spoken* out loud. The subtleties present in human speech can make all the difference for interpreting a message in either the intended or unintended way.

But although it might be annoying, sometimes we just have to let the 'I-talkers' rush out and talk about themselves. Sometimes we just have to let them release the tension that is underlying the painfully unidirectional 'conversation' you appear to be engaged in. We might even learn something from it; that is at least what I hope your response will be after reading this self-centric plea of mine.

Therefore the right question to put all the above into perspective would be: what do you think?

## Why Would You Ever Study Philosophy?

I am curious to know how many of the people reading this article studies – or has studied – philosophy. I guess the percentage is rather low. And that's a pity. It truly is. Because although philosophy doesn't necessarily make you a multimillionaire, it can give you a great sense of satisfaction. Getting down the most fundamental of fundamentals of your thinking, and slowly starting to see things make more and more sense, is pretty much like an orgasm to the mind; or, to put it less sex-oriented, like candy to the mind. Personally I believe that philosophy should be *the number one course* taught to children. Starting on high school, since primary school is for chasing girls...

I am not saying that philosophy is the 'one and only discipline seeking for the truest of truths'. No, there are many more disciplines sharing this ambition. What I am saying, however, is that philosophy is an 'activity – *not a topic* - that can be very helpful in thinking within the conceptual frameworks of any discipline around. You can compare it to riding a bike; riding a bike is useful in a wide variety of environments: the city, the forest, at a farm...You get it. That's how it is with philosophy as well: no matter where you are situated, no matter whether you are a mathematician or a physicist: you will benefit from philosophy.

When people ask me, 'What exactly *is* philosophy?' I tell them – like a true philosopher – that there *isn't* 'some thing' that can be called philosophy. Philosophy is not a subject: it's a manner of thinking. A manner of thinking that can be applied irrespective of the particular subject at issue. That's why well-known philosophers have been – or are – involved in so many different disciplines: one philosopher can 'easily' be involved with such apparently different subjects as the mind-body problem (psychology and neuroscience), rationality (economics) and scientific realism (physics, chemistry and more). That is because philosophy is a 'system of thinking' one can apply to the world; it's an angle from which you look at the world.

Why am I telling you this? Well, I am telling you this because philosophy has

truly changed my life. It has made me – I believe – a more respectful person: more understanding towards opposing points of view. It has forced me to think about *why* I believe what I do, which made me appreciate my beliefs much more. And I am convinced that – besides the intellectual merits – philosophy has a *therapeutic* value. By that I mean that philosophy can ease your mind when you feel lost; when you need a shoulder to cry on. Pretty much like music, but then aimed straight at the mind.

Use philosophy like a hammer for the mind; to hit the mind it in the right shape. The ‘right shape’? What does that mean? To be honest: I don’t know. But it sounds philosophical, doesn’t it?

## Violence against Public Servants: Should It be Punished Harder?

Ambulance personnel, police officers and firemen: people that, day in and day out, prevent our society from turning into a complete chaos. They support us so that we can live our lives without having to worry about our human rights being infringed upon. But what if these servants *themselves* become infringed upon their basic human rights? What if they are violated, both mentally and physically? There are governments, including the Dutch one, that have made explicit their intention to punish violence against public servants *harder* than violence against 'regular' (non-public servant) citizens. But, is this decision justified? And, more importantly, why would that be so?

Let's think about it. You could claim that abusing a public servant is more severe than abusing a regular citizen because, by abusing a public servant, the perpetrator not only violates the rights of the servant but *also* the rights of the other members of society who are entitled to the services of the servant. After all, attacking the staff of an ambulance not only harms the ambulance workers, but indirectly *also* the patient that is (supposed to be) treated by these men and women. The same goes for police officers: abusing these men and women not only harms them, but also the citizens waiting to be helped by the police officers. Thus the physical or mental abuse of a public servant not only hurts the servants themselves, but also the citizens who are *supposed to be served* by the servants. And therefore, you could say, should the abuse of a public servant be punished harder than the abuse of a regular citizen.

Also, by abusing a public servant you are infringing upon what might be the *controlling* or *correcting* power of the state, which might be a violation in itself. That is, public servants are appointed to guard the laws we have set as a society, including the law condemning violence against other persons. Therefore, by abusing a public servant, you are not only attacking a member of our society, but you also *resist the authority* (ambulance personnel, police etc.) a (democratic) society has decided should safeguard our rights. Hence, abusing public servants is more wrong than abusing a regular citizen, and thus should be punished harder.

One the other hand, a public servant is just as much human as a regular citizen. Therefore, you could say, should the abuse of a public servant be punished equally hard as the abuse of a regular citizen. There is no reason why the live of a public servant would be *worth more* than the life of a regular citizen, right? Just because he or she fulfils a certain position within our society? Isn't someone's profession totally irrelevant when it comes down to our most fundamental rights, including the right not the abused by others? If that would indeed be the case, then there would be no justification for punishing the abuse of a public servant any differently from the abuse of a regular citizen.

Also, you could say, the abuse of a public servant is in no way a more severe violation against the state and its controlling power than is the abuse of a regular citizen. That is to say that the violation of another person's well-being is just as much a violation of a fundamental right as would be the violation of the state's controlling power, and thus should be punished equally hard. After all: the state's integrity is no more important than any citizen's integrity. Hence, attacking the former should be punished equally as attacking the latter.

Personally, I believe that both positions are well defensible. However, I consider the first position to be more reasonable. By taking away another person's right to be saved or defended by a public servant, more parties seem to be hurt in abusing a public servant than in the abuse of what is 'only' a regular citizen. And surely, it might not only be a servants' duty to assist other people when they are in need; you and I might be just as capable in doing that. This might cast doubt on the idea of granting them an extra form of protection. But that doesn't change the fact that a public servant is *explicitly appointed* to fulfil this duty within our society; and that might have to be taken into account.

## Euthanasia and the Right to Voluntarily End your Life

*Ladies and gentlemen. Because of a collision with a person, the trains to Amsterdam will not run for the next three hours. We thank you for your patience and hope to solve this issue as quickly as possible.*

Fuck, another person jumped in front of a train. That wasn't very nice of him: ending his life by traumatizing an innocent conductor and delaying hundreds of people who *do* want to live their lives. Why did he chose this option? Why not jump of a bridge, take a few too many pills or buy a shotgun from the nearest creep in town - and use it?

Such a train 'accident' – which is by no means a sporadic event – should open the debate about voluntary life ending, and in particular about legalization of euthanasia. But it never does. In many countries – except for the USA, in which it is illegal in *all* states – euthanasia is reserved only for people who 'are incurable, or suffer without having any chance of improvement'. Only then, the doctor can drop by and make an end to it. And even then, even when someone is terminally ill and sees no reason to prolong his life, it is often extremely difficult - and tiresome - to be allowed to end your life in a humane manner – by means of euthanasia, that is. But why is that? And – to take it one step further – why is euthanasia reserved for terminally ill people only? Let's take a look at that.

If you don't like going to the cinema, you don't go. You aren't forced to go. The same goes for a football game or a birthday party. If you don't want go, that's fine: you don't *have* to go. Applied to the act of giving birth, the same choice, although to a lesser extent, is available. You don't want to produce offspring? That's fine: use a condom. And if something went wrong during the protection process? You still have the possibility, in many countries at least, to abort the fetus. So giving life is an *option*. And so it should be. For why would the government – or any institution for that matter – have the right to decide whether you should or shouldn't give life? We aren't sheep, right? We aren't living in a totalitarian regime, are we?



Well, maybe we are. Because although we are mostly free to do what we want, if the government doesn't like what we decide during our 'freedom', it can – and will – try to stop it: 'Smoking? No, that's bad for you. Let's try to stop it.' 'Fast-food? Think about your cholesterol! Let's tax it (just to help you! Always remember that!).' And so it is with dying: 'Dying? No, that's bad for you! You shouldn't die?! You should stay alive and be happy! Let's make "voluntarily dying, in a decent manner, illegal."' That's the situation as it currently is.

Of course: we should have some rules to make sure that we live peacefully together and don't smash each other's brains out. Or, to put it less dramatically, to make sure that people don't exploit others generosity – like smokers' exploiting non-smokers' health expenditures. But deciding who should stay alive is something of a completely different order, isn't it? It touches upon the most fundamental rights we people are born with: the right to live, and its counterpart: the right to die.

But, apparently, the government has a veto to decide who dies and who doesn't. As long as it can make money out of people dying – as in a war – death promotes 'a world free of suppression.' But when death enters home territory, and the wish of suffering citizens, the choice to die *voluntarily* is no option. How does that promote 'a world free of suppression'?

## Why Euthanasia should be Legal in any Democracy

It recently came to my attention that euthanasia, the act of deliberately ending a person's life to relieve suffering, is illegal in the United Kingdom. Being a Dutchman, and the Netherlands being a country in which euthanasia is legal, I was surprised to notice this. But even though I was surprised to read this, I was literally *shocked* to read that euthanasia is – depending on the circumstances – judged as either *manslaughter* or *murder*, and punishable by law up to life imprisonment. Just to put that into perspective: assisted suicide is illegal too, but punishable by up to ‘only’ 14 years.

Being fully aware of the fact that euthanasia is a controversial topic, I want to make a claim in favor of legalizing euthanasia – whether this is in the UK, or in any other democracy. The first argument for this claim might sound dramatic, but I believe it hits the core of the issue. It is the following: no single individual has decided to come into this world. Our parents ‘decided’ to have a child, and there we were. From this it follows that none of us chose to live a life with perpetual (and incurable) pain, which is the life many terminally ill people live. So, having been put on this world without his consent, and not having chosen for the extreme pains he – being a terminally ill person – suffers, it would only be fair for any terminally ill person to be able to ‘opt out’ of life whenever he wants to; in a humane manner that is, thus excluding suicide.

Note that I am talking about the option of euthanasia *for terminally ill people only*. And this brings me to my second point, which has to do with the position of doctors. Let's ask ourselves the question: what is the duty of doctors? Is it to cure people? If so, then terminally ill people shouldn't be treated by a doctor in the first place, since – by definition – terminally people cannot be cured from whatever it is they are suffering from. Hence, given that terminally people are in fact being treated by doctors, there must be another reason the medical community has for treating them; I presume something in the form of ‘easing their pain’.

Now, given that we have a doctor and that he wants to ‘ease the pain’ of the terminally ill, I assume that he wants to do so in the best manner possible; that is, by using the treatment that eases the pain most, keeping in mind any future consequences the treatment might have. But what if a patient has crossed a certain ‘pain threshold’, and the doctor knows with great certainty that the patient cannot be cured from his disease? In this case it seems that *not* performing euthanasia is equivalent to *prolonging* the patient’s *suffering*, without improving his chance of recovery (and the chance of recovery is, by definition, absent for terminally ill people). It is in those cases, and those cases only, that euthanasia seems to be the optimal method for easing the pain, and should therefore be applied by doctors (in case the patient wants to, of course).

It is not that the National Health Service (the ‘NHS’) hasn’t thought about these matters. On the contrary; they have an entire webpage devoted to ‘Arguments for and against euthanasia and assisted suicide’. Although I agree with none of the arguments the NHS gives against euthanasia, there is one that I find particularly wrong, and which they call the ‘alternative argument’. The alternative argument states that ‘there is no reason for a person to suffer because effective end of life treatments are available’. Hence euthanasia should be no option. One of the ‘alternatives’ the NHS puts forward is that ‘all adults have the right to refuse medical treatment, as long as they have sufficient capacity to make a decision’ (which, by the way, in practice has the same effect as euthanasia: the patient will die).

But refusing medical treatment is clearly in no way a valid alternative to euthanasia, for the aims of refusing medical treatment and the aims of euthanasia are profoundly different. While refusing medical treatment is about – clearly – the *refusal* of medical treatment, euthanasia is about *wanting* (a form of) medical treatment. Therefore, the fact that there might be another way in which the aim of the former can be accomplished is irrelevant and ineffective from the perspective of pursuing the aim of the latter. Also, the cases to which a refusal of medical treatment might apply are likely to be very different from the ones to which euthanasia is applied.

Imagine, for example, a car accident, in which one of the victims is severely injured, and needs acute medical treatment in order not to die. This is an accident, in which no terminally ill people are involved. Refusing medical treatment seems a reasonable option; euthanasia not. Now imagine the life of a cancer patient, who is terminally ill, and who realizes that his suffering will

only become worse. Euthanasia seems a reasonable option; refusing medical treatment not.

To end this essay with a personal note, I would like to say that I hope that, in this 21st century we are living in, where everyone gets older and older, and prolonging life seems to be the preferred option *a priori*, irrespective of the specific circumstances, I hope that we can engage in a healthy discussion about a topic so relevant as euthanasia. Of course: many of us are still young and hope not to experience severe illness soon, but looking at the people we love and seeing them suffer unbearably seems to me sufficient reason to not condemn euthanasia straight away.

## The Subjective Nature of Scarcity

‘Mum, I want an iPad too!’, ‘Really?! You’ve got tickets for Glastonbury? Aah I envy you so much right now!’, ‘You’ve gotten a bonus of 150.000 dollars?! Jesus...well, believe me: in a couple of years from now, I’ve got that too.’

More opportunities and more possibilities create more wants and more needs. Hence it is very plausible that we – the ‘Rich in the West’ – have more unsatisfied desires than the ‘Poor in Africa’, numerous of which are starving each day due to a lack of food. After all, we want an iPad, MacBook and iPhone; they only want some bread and water. Hence we are the ones having more unsatisfied needs, so we are *less satisfied* than the Poor in Africa. Poor old us: it isn’t easy being rich ...

Scarcity is defined as the ‘insufficiency of amount or supply’ of a good or service. Note the word *insufficiency* in this definition, since it is this word that points to the root of the problem. Unlike things such as ‘supply’ or ‘amount’ – that are quantifiable and hence (at least partially) measurable or objective – ‘*sufficiency*’ is an intrinsically subjective judgement. Whatever you find sufficient, I might not find sufficient, and the other way around. I might find that I need a Ferrari to suit my needs, while you find your Chevrolet sufficiently good. The problem with something being *subjective*, is that it might be *relative* : what is sufficient is - at least partially - determined by means of comparison to what goes on in your surroundings. If you’re living in a rich environment, an environment in which iPads and MacBooks are within reach for everyone, then this environment is likely to make you want extra goods next to the goods you would have wanted if you’d been living in the poorest regions of Africa. After all: you have the financial resources and the product is there, so it is at least *possible* to get the product. And this possibility is sufficient for you to want it.

Capitalism is a train, and profit is perishable. Yesterday’s profit is not today’s profit. And it is today’s profit that counts. Standing still is falling behind; you have to keep moving in order to keep your balance. That is the system we’re

living in and that is the system we're constantly trying to prevent from collapsing. Not because we *want* to keep it on its feet, but because we *have* to: after all, we are part of the system as well, and we have got to make sure that *we* keep on our feet.

Sure: you could be stubborn and decide not to take part in the ever-continuing rat-race called 'the economy'. But what then? Where do you, and where *can* you, turn to? Nowhere, right? You need your money in order to stay alive: in order to satisfy your iPad-needs, your longings, desires and deepest fetish-like obsessions, you have to keep on producing and buying. We're locked up in a prison: a prison we're painfully dependent upon.

We could of course turn to communism, an economic system without money. By doing away with money, we might do away with the vicious circle of making each other horny for bigger and bigger goods: a horniness without an organism to mark the end point of our satisfaction-seeking journey. No money means no *satiabile* goals – or at least no goals that are within immediate reach. And no satiable goals would prevent us from having feelings of *insufficiency*. But communism ... hmm ... that doesn't sound very attractive, does it?

No: we rather keep on working, hoping for that Lamborghini.

## Should State Media Stop Sharing Jihadi Propaganda-messages?

On the 23th of September 2014, the Dutch state television broadcasted a video-message of a jihadist in Syria. In this message he calls for his ‘Dutch brothers’ to support him in the war Islamic State fights against – among others – the United States. ‘If you cannot support us by coming to Syria,’ he says, ‘then at least do a severe deed in the Netherlands or Belgium.’

The full message takes 2 minutes and 43 seconds. The Dutch state television’s news-program – which is the most viewed TV-program in the Netherlands – broadcasted around 20 seconds of the message. So there he was: the jihadist in Syria, asking for Dutch people to support IS, and 1 in 8 Dutch people listened to his message. This raises the question: should the state television broadcast such a message? Doesn’t it, by giving a platform to these people, indirectly support these people? And if so, isn’t that weird, given that – at the same time – the Dutch military is fighting these same people in Iraq and Syria? Let’s take a look at these questions.

One could say that the state television shouldn’t do such a thing, because – by doing so – it gives a stage to a group of people that the state opposes. If a government is sending jets to fight a group of people in Syria, then this same government should *not* allow this same group of people to share its propaganda via the state’s own media. Furthermore, showing such messages – which are often violent in nature – might cause ‘the enemy’ to apply such violent measures again. After all: it worked the first time – in the sense that international media gave them free publicity. So why don’t do it again? This leads to the question: should the government want to support such violence? The obvious answer is: no.

Also, one could say, broadcasting such propaganda might cause messages most of us find wrong to be spread. The reason that a book like *Mein Kampf* is prohibited from being sold (in the Netherlands at least), is especially for this reason: because these ideas should – according to most of us – be banned from society. And so – one could say – it should be with jihadi

messages. Therefore it is wrong for the state television to actively spread these messages.

So it seems clear, right? The state television *should not* broadcast such messages. But it might not be as clear-cut as it seems. For one could say that every person can think for himself, and that the government – or any news-agency for that matter – does not have to decide what is good or bad for us to hear. We can very well decide this for ourselves, *after* having heard the message. We are reasonable people, and seeing such a jihadi video-message does not compel us to support the messenger. And even it *would* compel us, what gives? Aren't we free to decide who we want to support and who not?

Also, even though the content of the message might be 'wrong', it might still be newsworthy, and should therefore be distributed by the media. After all: people might find it interesting to know what is going on in the world around them, and seeing such a message provides them with a better informed perspective on the world. This cannot be wrong, can it?

I find this a difficult matter. What do you think?



## Why You Should Always Respect the Dustman

I have been a dustman for a while. And even though my stay in the ‘dustman-community’ was short, I was long enough to become overwhelmed by the disrespect these people receive from their fellow species members. People are yelling things at them. People are telling them how shitty their job is. People treat them like the true pieces of garbage. I was wondering what the dustmen themselves were thinking about their profession. Were they also disgusted about what they were doing? I decided to ask them.

And this is what they told me: they absolutely *loved* what they were doing. They were proud of being *the* dustman of district x or district y. They took care of the streets that fell under their supervision. These were after all *their* streets, and *their* streets should not be dirty. One of the dustmen told me very proudly about his dustmen-crew. He said that, within the dustmen-community, his crew could be compared to FC Barcelona; that’s how well they anticipated each other’s actions. Dustman A knew exactly that, when Dustman B grabbed on to a new dustbin, he should be in the process of taking away his bin.

So it seems that people differ, to say the least, in what they like and what they don’t like to do for a living. And that’s a good thing, right? Of course it is. Because the fact that each one of us wants to do something different for a living makes that all the jobs that are required to keep our society functioning are filled. If everyone wanted to become a big time actor, no-one would be cleaning the streets of Hollywood. At least, not for a while. Because the demand for dustmen, and therefore the wages, would increase sooner or later thanks to the ‘beautiful’ mechanisms of the free market.

Also, the fact that people appreciate different ways to make their money provides you and me with the opportunity to make a unique contribution to this world of ours. And – I believe – it is only if you do what you like to do that you are likely to put the most effort in doing it. And, subsequently, it is only when you put serious effort into doing something that you are likely to make a difference. And it the ambition to ‘make a difference’, whether it is by

cleaning the streets or by writing an article, that gives that feeling of happiness and fulfilment we are all so desperately longing for.

The moral of this story should be clear: never disrespect anyone or feel pity for anyone because of what they do for a living. Remember that (hopefully) most of us are doing something that we like to do. Be thankful for whatever their contribution to society might be, since it is because of their contribution that you and I can do the job that we like to do. Whatever that might be.

## Why It is Impossible to Justify any Ethics

What makes an action good or bad? People adhering to *deontological ethics* judge the morality of their actions based on whether their actions follow certain rules. ‘You should not kill’, ‘You should not steal’ and ‘You should not lie’ are examples of such rules. On the other end there are people who say that ‘the ends justify the means’, and that the rightness or wrongness of an action is ultimately based on the outcomes of the action. ‘You may lie *if* the damage caused to the person you lie to is negligible compared to the utility you gain or the dis-utility you prevent from happening’ would be an example. This example is an instance of a broader position called *consequentialism*.

So: what to choose? Should you base your conduct on absolute rules, or should you weigh the expected outcomes of actions in order to decide what action is the right one to take? You could think that it is reasonable to judge each case on its own merits. That it does not make sense to hold on to the rule ‘You should not lie’, because in some cases lying might be ‘better’ – in whatever sense defined – for both you and the person you lie to. For example: suppose your father is lying on his deathbed. You have just heard that your sister, the apple of your dad’s eye, got cancer. Given that you know that your dad cares an awful lot about your sister, and that telling him about your sister’s situation is likely to worsen his already bad health, it might in fact be bad – in terms outcomes – to tell him about your sister’s situation. Furthermore, looking at your own happiness, it might be better not to say anything - saving you the painful outcome of seeing your dad suffer from the news. Hence you could reasonably say that there are instances, such as this example, that falsify an absolute rule of conduct – ‘You should not lie,’ in this case. That implies that *deontological ethics* is not necessarily the best stance to adopt.

That brings us to *consequentialism* : might this be a more reasonable position to adopt? In order to reasonably claim so, one should at least come up with a reasonable answer to the following question: how can you base your conduct on the outcomes of your actions *if you don’t know* what the consequences of

your actions will be? We can – after all – not look into the future, hence we cannot *know* what the consequences of our actions will be. You could – for example – think that your girlfriend would not mind it if you'd post a photo of you with another girl on your social media ('because she is so reasonable'), but it might turn out that, contrary to your expectation, she does. You can of course have *expectations*, but are expectations sufficient to ground moral conduct? Each case is after all unique, and each case has innumerable factors that influence the outcome of one's action. Hence even coming up with a reasonable expectation might – *a priori* – be impossible. So consequentialism seems to have its own set of problems.

A more fundamental problem with consequentialism might lie in the premise on which the doctrine is based, which is something along the lines of 'An action is good if its outcomes are good'. It seems that this rule – which forms the foundation of the consequentialist position – is, by definition, deontological in nature. The next question would be: why would it be good to follow this rule? If you say that adopting this rule is good because it leads to the best outcomes, then you are justifying consequentialism with consequentialism, which is circular. On the other hand, if we take this rule to hold *without* looking at its expected outcomes, then we are deriving consequentialism – at least in part – from deontological ethics. After all: we assume an absolute rule, based on which actions are judged as either good or bad. The rule is accepted as guiding our moral conduct; no need to look at the consequences. Period. Hence consequentialism is, in principle, nothing more than deontological ethics, which – just like consequentialism – requires a justification itself...and so we are back at square one.

You will run into the same problems when trying to justify deontological ethics. So it seems that, when looking at meta-ethics ('why is it good or bad to apply a certain ethical system'), no reasonable answers are available. So whatever stance you'll choose, it won't be better or worse than any other. That's comforting, isn't it?

## Why Economics is No Less Scientific than Physics

'Physics is the only real science. The rest are just stamp collecting.' Spoken by Ernest Rutherford, Nobel Prize winner in Chemistry. This is a rather extreme view, but it is not uncommon among (primarily) natural scientists. It grabs on to an intuition many have, even in the academic philosophy of science community, that physics is *the* science, and that other disciplines – especially social sciences – are not. But let's ask ourselves the question: is this true? Does physics have any special access to the truth that – let's say – economics does not?

Let's try to answer these questions. First of all, one has to separate the ***theoretical*** parts of physics and economics, from their empirical counterparts. Just like there is theoretical physics, there is 'theoretical economics' – although the latter is usually denoted by the more encompassing (and therefore misleading) term 'economics'. Both theoretical fields try to construct logical or mathematical frameworks – possibly modelling the external world – and derive logical implications from accepting certain principles (the 'laws' of the framework). The prime difference is that economics takes individuals as its domain of analysis, while physics takes nature.

Now, let's look at the ***empirical*** counterparts of physics and economics. Both experimental physicists and behavioural economists (a subset of the set 'experimental economists') do one thing and one thing only: set up hypotheses, gather data, compare the implications of the hypotheses with the data, and either confirm or refute the hypotheses based on their accordance with these implications. Hence the *method* applied in both experimental fields is the same. So now we have that the methods applied in both the theoretical and the experimental parts of physics and economics – and hence the whole of the two disciplines- are the same.

Now, given that the method applied is the same, how then could economics be any less scientific than physics? It might be true that physics has a longer

history, and is – in that sense – more ‘mature’ than economics. But being more mature does not imply being more scientific. After all: many religions are more mature than physics: does that imply that many religions are more scientific than religion? Of course not.

It is then because there are laws in physics but not in economics? Well, it is true that physics has laws, such as the *Law of Universal Gravitation*, stating the acceleration of an object caused by the force of gravitation. But economics has laws too; the most well-known being the *Law of Supply and Demand*. One could say that the latter is not really a law, because it is only true *ceteris paribus*; that is, if all other conditions – besides the supply and demand of a particular good – remain constant. But isn't this true for physics as well? In order for the *Law of Universal Gravitation* to hold, one should *neglect* such frictions as air resistance. So it appears that, whether it is in economics or physics, there are certain conditions one puts forward in order for laws to be experimentally accurate: neglecting air resistance in the case of physics, neglecting other factors – changes in cost of production, technological innovation etc. – in the case of economics. So the two fields do not seem to differ in that respect either.

Hence it seems that the *only* difference between physics and economics, is its domain of study. But can the object of study really determine whether some field is more scientific than another? And if so, why would that be? It cannot be because physics's object is more natural, because there is nothing unnatural about individuals; individuals are part of the world we live in, just like atomic particles, gravity and radioactivity.

Hence, given all of the above, there does not seem to be any compelling argument for the claim that economics is less scientific than physics. Sorry mister Rutherford.

## What Are You Besides Your Body?

Let's ask the question: *What* am I? Not 'Who am I?', because asking '*Who* am I?' already presumes the presence of some entity whose nature is being questioned. Just what am I. Am I my body? No, that's *my* body ... again the presence of an entity is presumed to which my body would be assigned. Because what is this 'my' in my body? What makes my body 'my' body and your body 'your' body? What makes 'you' you and 'me' me? Are there even such things as 'you' and 'me'? Or all we all part of a bigger whole; a continuum of nature in which no discrete entities exist?

When I'm referring to 'me', I'm not referring to what I *have*. And that includes my body. I think I am referring to my consciousness. But then again: what is this 'my' in 'my consciousness'? What makes my consciousness mine and your consciousness yours? Assuming that you have a consciousness of course ... I don't know. There has to be something 'my' consciousness would have to be ascribed to in order to make it different from 'your' consciousness. My body maybe ... but now we're back where we started.

It appears like we are just too stupid to come to understand what the 'I' in 'What am I?' is. Our tiny little brains just cannot handle the question. But, instead of a big red 'ERROR' appearing in the middle of our minds, our brains desperately try to come up with an answer. Anything. But over and over again it returns home disappointed ... not even knowing where or what this home is.

How does the 'who' in 'who am I?' differ from the 'what' in 'what am I?' Do they even differ? Because if not, determinism might be unavoidable. If there is nothing in us that contributes at least a little value to the collective of cells making up our bodies, then we have to conclude that we *are* the collective of cells making up our bodies. But then free will would be nothing more than an illusion. Or it must be something that is formed in some

inconceivable manner by the gigantically complex network of cells we call our bodies.

But let me ask you: what if free will would merely be an illusion? Would you care? Would your life become any different from what it is now? You could still do anything you want to do. The only difference is that what you 'want' to do would be programmed into your genetic structure. 'You' would merely be a witness overlooking the execution of this protocol.

Do you believe in consciousness? And if so, what do you believe it is? And would you mind if your consciousness would be like a fart; nothing but a by-product of your body?



## The Inevitable Unfairness of the Free Market

I read Milton Friedman's book *Free to Choose* : a plea for the free market. Friedman has some compelling claims against government intervention in economic transactions. Price is – as he claims – the *most informative entity* there is in communicating individuals' demand and supply of goods and services, and, in a capitalistic society at least, provides people with the incentive to utilize this information, thereby satisfying the needs of those that demand the goods and services. Furthermore, by acting upon the information provided by the price, individuals provide themselves with the resources required to live a decent life. But although the free market – as Friedman describes it – seems a beautifully simple and elegant construct, there are some 'side-effects' of the system that might run against our intuitions about the notion of fairness.

It seems clear that the free market is the most efficient medium there is for maximizing the value of each of the individuals involved. And this (the 'maximizing of value of each person involved') is, according to libertarians, what makes the free market a *fair* system. After all, if you want to sell a computer, and another person is prepared to pay you the price you charge, then it's only fair to let this deal take place, isn't it? There is mutual consent between the parties involved, so what – if anything – could give a third party the right to intervene in this seemingly flawless transaction?

While there indeed might be nothing wrong with the free-market mechanism from the perspective of exchanging value, it can be doubted whether it is fair to make this mechanism the *only* mechanism for exchanging value. For while it's no problem – and might even be beneficial – for those parties that possess the means to participate in the 'game' of exchanging value, it might be harder for those that – by nature or environment – have been unfortunate in acquiring the means required for satisfying their needs.

Because what if you're not as intelligent as the average person, therefore getting a relatively low-income job, such as being a plumber, because of which you are unable to satisfy your needs to the same degree as – let's say –

a banker or lawyer? Of course: a libertarian might say, 'The plumber can still participate in the free market, just like the banker or lawyer can.' And this is true. But, even though the three parties might have the same needs (for food, luxury or otherwise), the plumber cannot satisfy as many of his as the banker and the lawyer can of theirs: mainly because nature happened to endow him – in contrast to the banker and lawyer – with capabilities that are apparently less appreciated (since less demanded) in society. So the question is: is it fair to let nature – and thus chance – play such a drastic role in the ability of any person to satisfy his needs?

A libertarian can answer this question in either of two ways. Either he admits that the extent in which we're able to satisfy our needs is indeed – in the basis – determined by nature's authority over our capabilities, or he must come up with an ingenious answer to why this side-effect of the free market, while *appearing* unfair, is in fact fair - *without* thereby endangering the libertarian heart of his plan. The first option, although mostly ignored by libertarians, seems to imply a notion of 'fairness' that I – and I assume many others – find highly questionable. However, it at least *is* a notion, and – given that this truly is the libertarian's view of a fair world – should be accepted for what it is.

The latter option – on the other hand – provides more room for discussion. Because how – if ever – could it be possible to solve nature's capability-casino by means of a libertarian solution? There are of course many plans one could come up with, all of them mitigating the negative effects of the free market, but all of them either (1) contradict the libertarian aspiration of a free market or (2) don't get down to the root of the problem (that is: the unequal distribution of capabilities over mankind). It seems fair to say that (2) is a kind of unfairness that is inextinguishable – not by socialism nor by libertarianism. We after all cannot redesign our beings in order to endow everyone with the same capabilities. And even if we could do so, it's high questionable whether this choice would be beneficial to anyone - let alone society as a whole. So it seems we're stuck with (1), pointing us to the possibly unfair consequences of the free market. But how to give into this issue without contradicting full-fledged libertarianism? I don't see how this could possible.

The above reflection shows that there seems to be an intuitively unfair side-effect of the free market; a side-effect that is unsolvable by means of the free market-paradigm itself. It either requires us to adopt the libertarian notion of 'fairness', or requires some sort of (government) intervention in order to

compensate for nature's 'unfair' distribution of capabilities, thereby contradicting the principles underlying libertarianism.

## Just like Sexual Assault, Bullying should be Illegal

Research shows that the majority of the Dutch want bullying to be punishable; that is, they want bullying to be illegal, so that bullies risk prosecution. And that seems reasonable – to a certain extent at least. Bullying is after all terrible. Besides the fact that those who are bullied experience a terrible time, the consequences of bullying can continue until many years after the bullying took place. Amanda Todd's case shows what bullying might cause people to do. But also the documentary 'Bully', which follows a boy who – while causing harm to absolutely no-one – gets bullied, shows the evil world of bullying.

But in case you want to make bullying illegal, you should answer a couple of difficult questions. For instance: where is the boundary between bullying and teasing? If I would say that someone's backpack is 'super gay', would I then be bullying? And if so, who decides that? The person who gets bullied, or someone else? The person who gets bullied is likely to say that he experiences my remark as an act of bullying. Hence, if we would listen to him, I would be a bully. But I could say that I don't find it an act of bullying; it was merely teasing. And certainly, if we would listen to my plea, I am not a bully anymore. In other words: who decides whether or not something is bullying? This question requires an answer, for otherwise we would get stuck in useless yes-no-discussions.

After settling on this question, we encounter a next problem. For while some cases of bullying are obvious, others are not. For instance: what if the person who gets 'bullied' is just extremely annoying? If I look at my time at high school, then – I believe – I have not bullied anyone. But there was a guy who everyone disliked. Why? Not because we wanted to bully him. Just because he was always unkind to everyone else. And well, if someone is unkind to anyone, then anyone is unkind to that person. And then suddenly it seems like he gets bullied.

But even though it might be difficult to decide what is bullying and what is not, I still believe we should make bullying punishable. For if you look at the

consequences of bullying, then you'll see that these are, sometimes, just as severe as for instance the consequences of sexual assault: victims get insecure, lose all faith in the other people, and get isolated. Sexual assault is illegal, so why not bullying? We managed quite well to decide what is sexual assault, and what is not. It might not always have been very clear, but we managed to do so. And that's ten times better than just leaving the perpetrators unpunished, right?

So it is possible. Therefore it might be worthwhile to take the effort to make bullying legal.

## Why You Cannot Become Interested in Something

'Are you interested in the stock market?' That's what I asked a former colleague of mine, who works as an economics editor at a newspaper, and hence has to write about stocks, markets et cetera. 'I have to', he said, 'It is part of my job'. I replied: 'You cannot *have to* be interested in something. You either are or you are not interested. Period.' I continued: 'You can get used to something, but you cannot become interested in something.' He smiled, and walked away. I think he agreed.

There is a huge difference between interests and skills. For while you can develop the latter, you cannot develop the former. Interests are an intrinsic part of your nature; they define, to a large extent, who you are. If you are, for whatever reason, interested in history, you will tend to become 'better at' history. Maybe even choose a history related job. But in this case you are good at history *because* you find it interesting. It is not *because* you are good at something, that you are interested in it. That is impossible.

And that brings us to the problem with interests. If someone tells you: 'Just do whatever you find interesting: find a job you like, and then do just do it,' it seems like reasonable advice. And if you know what you're interested in, it might be helpful advice. But the problem starts if you *don't know* what you are interested in. Because, being an intrinsic part of your identity, you cannot *create* an interest in something. You can become better, or worse, at doing something: you can even get used to it. But you cannot become interested in it.

But what then should you do if don't know what you are interested in? Well, if you don't know your interests, and given that you cannot create them, you have to choose a different approach: you have to *find* your interests. And the only way to find them, is by engaging in all sorts of activities. Since that by doing these activities you can find out what you do, and what you don't, find interesting. You cannot sit down on a chair, thinking deeply ('soul-searching') about what you like to do. This only works if you already know what you

find interesting; not if you still have to discover it.

Hence, to those of you that are sitting at home, not knowing what to do with your lives, not knowing what kind of job to pursue, I would say the following: get out there, and *find* what you are interested in. For interests cannot be created. They can only be discovered.

## Why Harvard Students might be Worse than 'Not-top' Students

It is a fact that there exist universities that are more popular among employers than others. The University of Oxford, Cambridge and Harvard can always be found at the top of numerous university rankings; rankings that are at least partially determined by the employability of the university's students. But based on what criteria does an employer prefer one university to an other? And how reasonable is it for a company to base its preferences on these criteria?

It seems fair to say that universities like Oxford and Cambridge have higher admission standards than pretty much any other university in the world. Therefore, being admitted to such a university is by itself an indication that you are 'better' (in terms of pre-university academic results et cetera) than non-admitted applicants. Hence you could say that it makes sense for employers, knowing about these strict admission procedures, to be more inclined to pick someone from such a university than from any other university. After all, the top universities already have done part of the selecting for them.

But this reasoning is not valid. For even though it might be true that the Oxfords and Cambridges of this world pick the students that were best *before* they entered university, it doesn't follow that these students are still the best *after* they have been through university. It might very well be so that someone who didn't do his utmost best in his undergraduate studies (and therefore was not admitted to a top university) decides to change his effort when attending a Master. After all, he knows that there are people from Oxford and Cambridge around, so he has to step up his game in order to get a decent job.

And the opposite might be true for a person studying at a top university. He might feel like, now he has been accepted into this prestigious institution, the chance of him finding a good job has increased significantly; so much that just passing his Master might be sufficient for him to still obtain a job that meets his criteria. In other words: getting a degree from a top university



doesn't necessarily make you better educated than someone who has got his degree from a not-top university.

Now, let's take a look at the hiring process as used by employers. It seems fair to say that social factors play a (large) role in this process. After all, a company – let's call it 'Company A' – wants the best employees. Therefore it will look at the best firms in order to see where they get their employees from. Seeing that they get their employees from the top universities, the company believes that it should do so too; after all: these companies are the best, hence they should have the best employees, right? And given that these employees come from the top universities, these universities must provide the best employees. Hence Company A hires someone from a top university.

Now suppose that another company enters the industry. This company will be even more inclined to hire someone of a top university because of the increase in the university's reputation due to Company A employing its students. This points to the - quite obvious - fact that companies do not look solely at the capabilities of potential employees; the reputation of the university the candidates have studied at might be just as important.

This is not to say that employing students is all based on the unjustified assumption that top universities provide the best employees. After all, it seems reasonable to suppose that those entering top universities are motivated, disciplined and will enhance their capabilities while attending the top university. Hence it is likely that they will still be 'best' after having gone through their top-university education. And given that being a good student implies being a good employee, the latter implies that these students will be good employees. But it should be kept in mind that social factors, such as the reputation of a university, are self-perpetuating, and hence could go live a life of their own.

## Milton Friedman's Voucher Plan

More than 30 years ago – in 1979 – Milton Friedman and his wife Rose Friedman published the book *Free to Choose*, in which they made a (compelling) claim in favor of handing over authority to the free market, and taking it away from the government. The arguments they come up are profoundly grounded in empirical evidence, pointing at the inefficient and unequal spending of tax payers' money on the 'big issues' of society (healthcare, Social Security, public assistance etc.). I want to focus at the expenditures on public education, about which the Friedmans say a lot, and in particular on the immoral and degrading effect this can have on citizens.

We humans are intelligent creatures. Some are – without a doubt – better equipped (mentally) for dealing with the whims of the free market than others, but still almost all of us are reasonably capable of fulfilling our needs in life. We can go the supermarket by ourselves, decide for ourselves what we want to eat for breakfast and dinner, and much more. The government doesn't have to do this for us. We can decide for ourselves how we want to spend our leisure time: whether we want to go the movies or not. We don't need the government to decide this for us. Not only because the government cannot *know* what each one of us *wants* – therefore inevitably being inefficient in the spending of its – or *our* – resources – but also because we know that we are *intelligent* beings, very much capable of making our own decisions in life.

And this intelligence of ours doesn't have to confine itself to mundane decisions like how to spend our free time. We are equally competent in deciding for ourselves how we want to spend our money on more pressing issues in life: what hospital we want to attend, whether to assist our loved ones financially whenever the need might arise, and what school our children should attend. These issues are of such importance to our well-being – and our children's – that, instead of putting the government in charge of these decisions, we should be the ones choosing what we consider to be best for our, and our children's, future.

In 1979, the Friedmans noticed an upward trend in the government taking control of many of these decisions – decisions that, by the way, have a relatively big impact upon our financial resources. The most striking example of this might be the public financing of (elementary, secondary and higher) education. In 1979, the average US citizen paid 2.000 dollars per child that attended public education, even though not everyone's child – assuming that you even have children – made use of public educational resources. The Friedmans found this state of affairs harming to the right of each individual to decide where to spend his money at, including the option to put one's child at a privately financed educational institution.

Therefore they came up with a 'voucher plan': a plan in which every US citizen would – per child they have – get a voucher exchangeable for a certain amount of money – let's say 2.000 dollars. They could cash in this voucher *only if* their child would attend an appropriate educational institution. This voucher plan would come *in the place of* the tax each US citizen is obliged to pay, irrespective of them having children and irrespective of their children attending a public educational institution. This plan would make sure that only the ones making use of public educational services would be charged, thereby excluding the non-using part of society.

The Friedmans made – primarily – financial arguments in favor of their voucher plan, saying that – on the whole – public educational costs would remain the same, and that parents would use their increase in autonomy to find the school that best suited the needs of their children. The relatively free market that would be created on the basis of the voucher plan, would improve the quality of both public and private education. I believe, however, that one argument in favor of the voucher plan, and the free market in general, has not received the attention it deserved – at least not in the Friedmans' *Free to Choose*. And that argument has to do with *human intelligence*.

As pointed at above, humans are – for the biggest part – perfectly capable of deciding for themselves where to spend their money at. We wouldn't want anyone else to do our groceries or schedule our leisure time for us – at least not for (our) money. But that is exactly what the government does when it comes down to public education. The government proclaims that – as the Friedmans explain – it is the only actor possessing the professional knowledge required for deciding what is best for our children – thereby implying that they are indispensable in order for our children to receive a qualitatively good education.

What this claim comes down to is the government saying – or *not* saying – that we (‘the crowd’) don’t understand what is important and what is not in regard to our children’s education, and that – because of that – they should step in and release us of this impossible duty of ours. We don’t understand what to do, but luckily they do. They are the father looking out for us, protecting us from doing harm to our children and to the rest of society.

I find this an insult to the basic level of intelligence the majority of the people has. We very well believe to know what is important in our children’s education – probably much better than the government, since, in contrast to the government, we *know* our children. Thus besides all the financial benefits of the voucher plan, by returning autonomy to the Average Joe, a voucher plan is required for *respecting people’s intelligence*. After all, we are no fools, are we?

## Commercials: Not All Awareness is Good Awareness

Commercials: you're likely to absorb hundreds of them per day via media such as the TV, radio and internet. As I have written about in a previous article, the average person spends 1/24 of his life watching commercials on television. That's a quite a lot, isn't it? But I don't want to focus on the act of wasting our lives by consuming useless material such as commercials. I want to take a look at the effect of commercials, and of marketing in general, on the perception of a company's brand. Most companies seem to believe that any exposure is good exposure. They seem to think that – no matter how bad a commercial is – it's always better to have a commercial than to have no commercial at all. But the question is: is this true?

When you're watching television, and you see a commercial of a brand you've never heard of before, what will be the effect of this commercial on your perception of the brand? Marketers seem to think that they've increased your 'awareness' of their brand, in the sense that – consciously or not – you now know about the brand's existence. And this might very well be true. But then the question would be: is all awareness *good* awareness? Or can awareness – as created by commercials – lead to a (more) negative (instead of positive) perception of the brand by the customer?

I believe it does. I believe that whenever people see terribly non-funny commercials (as there are plenty of) on television, they associate the brand promoted in the commercial with negative values like neediness, trying hard, pretentiousness, pity and lameness. I believe that the next time these people are in front of a supermarket they've just seen in an utterly non-funny (but intended to be funny) commercial, they will think to themselves: 'Come on, I'm not going to support such a quasi-funny and quasi-happy company', and they'll decide to skip the store. Even though these people might have entered the store if they hadn't watched the commercial, or if the company wouldn't have produced the commercial in the first place. But now they've got all kinds of negative associations with the brand, they decide to skip the store and go to another store – which might have less awareness but still more

*positive* awareness than the supermarket of the commercial. And this goes not only for the supermarket-market, but for any other kind of market as well.

Customers usually don't care about whether a brand is well-known – note that this doesn't hold for clothing brands and other products that depend for their value to a large extent on marketing. We just want to buy a particular good or a particular service. And the only thing guiding us to a particular store is our *perception* of this brand/store. And if this perception is negative – which it very likely might be as a result of a bad commercial – you'd consciously avoid this store, and move to a next one. Even though the particular brand might have put a lot of money into its marketing efforts, they're worse off than they would have been if they hadn't launched the commercial.

Of course, marketing – including commercials on television and radio – can have a positive effect on a company's brand and consequently on the sales of the company's goods/services. But only if the company markets the *relevant* aspects of its brand, and not just launches a commercial for the sake of showing how 'funny' it is as a supermarket. Most people won't appreciate that: the intelligent people might feel like they're being treated like babies, and will therefore consciously avoid the brand, and the less intelligent people might not respond at all to this irrelevant kind of commercials.

If want to get people to your store (or make use of your service), you have to stay close to the product your selling, because that's where customers are coming for or not coming for. Emphasize your low prices, your current actions/sales or your great service, and skip the bullshit. Then, and only then, can marketing attract – instead of scare away – customers.

## Why Economics Should Return to its Roots

Economics aims to explain how *people* interact within markets to accomplish certain goals. *People*, not robots. And people are creatures with desires, animalistic urges that guide them into making conscious – but also unconscious – decisions. This sets them apart from robots, which act solely upon formal rules - such as: if A, then B. But this difference between humans and robots shouldn't have to be a problem. Not if economics would take into account the fact that humans are biological creatures, with possibly a free will, making their actions undetermined, and therefore unable to captured in strict laws.

Economics is nonetheless right about one thing: we all want to increase our utility – in the broadest sense of the word. But do we always know *why* we want to increase our utility? Don't we sometimes 'just want to' go out, 'just want to' buy a new television, 'just want to' go on holiday? Yes we do: it seems that, sometimes, we just happen to want things; even if we don't know why, if we don't have explicit motives for our desires. But if *we* – the people having the desires – don't even know why we do things, how on earth could an *economist* know – let alone capture the actions in seemingly scientific 'laws'? That's only possible if you make assumptions: very limiting assumptions.

An example of such limiting assumptions can be found in rational choice theory, which is a framework used within economics to better *understand* social and economic behavior by means of *formal modeling*. But if this is 'understanding' social and economic behavior, that is possible only through formalizing humans' behavior, by treating humans like robots, what then is, on a conceptual level, the difference between economics and artificial intelligence? Besides that the latter *really* works with robots and the former only *assumes* to work with robots? Robots whose actions are fully predictable or explainable by a set of parameters, such as speed, vision and greediness. Or its formal economic counterpart: humans whose actions are predictable by interest rates, government expenditures, taxes and other parameters that are part of the economic machine.

Everything should be dealt with in a formal manner: even uncertainty should be put in mathematical terms. Anything to make sure that we don't miss out on any of the creature's shenanigans. Even the ones that are grounded in the domain of irrationality.

But maybe it's time to wake up and ask ourselves the question: have we come to forget that we're dealing with humans here? That society is not a steam engine, robot or any other mindless entity whose actions are fully predictable – let alone explainable? Did we forget that economics is a science that deals with products of the human mind, related more to psychology than to mathematics?

It's understandable that economics wants to position itself as being a 'genuine' science, a science that is able to objectively describe the way the world works. A science that wants to show that it can capture its findings in laws. But why would economics be dependent on these kind of formalizations in order to be a science? Isn't it time for economics to stop being insecure? To realize that it's beautiful the way it is? Why does it behave like an 18-year old girl, whining and crying about the mean girls who are prettier than her? Stop it economics! You're pretty just the way you are.

And this leads us to the real question: what *is* economics? Economics is – much like politics – a system created by the interaction between us human beings. A system that, although less explicitly than politics, is founded on the notion of morality: our ideas about what's right and wrong. It's no surprise that figures such as Adam Smith and Friedrich Hayek have been so influential in economics. They understood what economics was really about: a philosophy of what it means to be a human being, and the fundamental rights that each one of these beings should have. This ethics is the starting point of their economic systems. And that's a tradition current economists should try to continue: interweaving morality and money. Keeping an eye on the moral fundamentals underlying markets and coming up with original ideas about how to improve these markets on a moral level.

So there's plenty of work left to do for the genuine economist; not the robot-economist.



## Nature: The Biggest Discriminator in the Workplace

Man and woman: two different ‘types’ of human. The one being the hunter, the other being the caretaker. The one being the fighter, the other being the lover. And there are many more differences (or stereotypes) you could come up with. But one thing is for sure: both types are needed in the production of human life. And another thing is clear as well: the workload isn’t shared evenly between the two types of human. And I’m not talking about workload in the sense of keeping our economy going; in the sense of working and contributing ‘profits’ or other kinds of financial value to society. No, I am talking about the *natural* workload: the workload we humans have been endowed with by Mother Nature. And whether we like it or not, women are the ones carrying the burden. And the reason for this is as simple as it is unfair: men can’t get pregnant.

Surely: we should strive for a society with equal rights for men and women. Surely: we should try to make sure that men and women get equal opportunities in the workplace. And surely we should make sure that no-one would be denied any job solely because of the ‘type’ of human he or she is. However, the truth of the matter is that we *cannot equalize nature*. By that I mean that we cannot make men carry babies and we cannot make women *not* carry babies. The implication of this damn obvious fact is that there will always remain a (big) difference between men and women; a difference we cannot solve by non-discriminating policies in the work space.

So – given this observation – isn’t it (more) understandable why women occupy merely 14,3 percent of the executive officer positions in Fortune 500 companies? And given this observation, isn’t it (more) understandable why merely 16,6 percent of board seats are held by women? Maybe these low numbers don’t originate from a sense of discrimination by *society*; maybe they come up from a sense of discrimination by *nature*. And by that I am in no sense implying that women *couldn’t* be capable of reaching a representation of (at least) 50 percent in each of the aforementioned positions. I am only saying that it isn’t weird that women seem to have a harder time balancing their

working- and private life. Especially when they're pregnant, an 'event' preventing them (at least partially) from (temporarily) continuing their job-related obligations.

The consequence of this is that full equality, in the sense of equal representation of men and women in whatever kind of boards, might be an illusion. And again: not because men are better than women; because that is in no sense the case (just as women aren't better than men). But simply because nature has put a burden on women; a burden that can't be equally shared between them and their husbands.

## Financial Markets: Keeping Up the Illusion of Confidence

Financial markets are trading grounds on which not products but ‘packets of confidence’ are exchanged. Do you dare to face the uncertainty, or do you rather pass the opportunity to some guy more manly than you? Who is the 21st century knight, galloping over the battlefield of fallen companies, always leaving just in time not to get hit by the sweeping sword of bankruptcy, but just long enough to receive the fortune and fame? Who has got the balls to take the risk? That’s the question.

A financial market is a special market. In contrast to ‘normal’ markets – markets at which tangible goods like tables or computers are traded, or services like car-washing and theater – this market is build on top of confidence, or at least the perception of it. Surely, through such things as valuation techniques, financial considerations play a more than average role in deciding whether or not to buy stocks, derivatives, obligations or other financial products. However, just as it is in science, there is always a leap of faith required to take the final step: no matter whether it is in jumping to the conclusion on the basis of data, or making the purchase of a stock based upon a ‘reasonable’ level of confidence. No absolute truths and absolute values exist.

Thus – given that confidence plays such an important role in financial markets – you might expect that regulators overseeing these markets will try to do anything in order to keep this fragile little entity up and running. Just like a friend might gloze over the truth in order to keep you – and therefore himself – happy, so a regulator might tell investors that everything is going according to plan; that there’s nothing to worry about. And although lying might be immoral – according to Kant’s Categorical Imperative at least – that’s exactly what he (the regulator) should do, right? If not, the whole house of cards will collapse; investors become (more) insecure and run away as fast as they can. So you need a Santa Claus kind of figure; someone who, above all, should be trustworthy; someone who, no matter how naughty you have been, will always be there to comfort you. Of course: it wouldn’t mind if he

or she would have at least some understanding of financial markets, but that's just only a bonus (you get it? That was a joke).

So, what would happen if, instead of Santa Claus, you would put a politician in charge of regulating the financial markets? A guy like, let's say, Jeroen Dijsselbloem? A guy who says that, *'If the banks can't do it, then we'll talk to their shareholders and bondholders, we'll ask them to contribute in recapitalising the bank, and – if necessary – the uninsured deposit holders.'* Then shit is getting messy, right? The insecure investors, longing for a pat on the back, or at least a little sympathy, start running; like Forrest Gump, the investors get the sign to 'Run, investors, run!'

Honesty is not appreciated in financial markets, so don't even try it. Lie as hard as you can. Do everything to keep the rat-race going. Do all that is required to 'restore the confidence in the financial markets'; be the 21st century Machiavelli. Don't listen to the crowd yelling that the banks must bleed for their sins. Just assure that they – the crowd – will get their money back. Illusion leads to confidence, and confidence is king. So lie as hard as you can mister regulators; Go for it!

## The Coercive Power of Money

The *Webster's New Collegiate* dictionary defines 'to coerce' as '*to compel to an act or choice*', or '*to restrain or dominate by nullifying individual will*'. We all have some kind of idea of what it means to coerce someone: to force someone into doing something they don't necessarily want. When I hold a shotgun to your head, and tell you that you should give me your iPhone, that could very well be interpreted as an act of coercion. But there are also more subtle acts of coercion. If you told me a secret, and we would get into a fight, I could force you into doing something by threatening to make public your secret. But there are even more subtle acts of coercion. Acts that all of us experience on a daily basis. And the leading actor in this play is omnipotent and all-known: it is Mister Money himself.

Where does voluntary engaging in a deal stop and coercion start? When you offer me 300 dollars for me to repair your car, I could *voluntarily* decide whether or not to accept your offer. I might feel forced to do so, since I am short on money, but I am still able to compare the pro's and con's of your offer and come to a rather autonomous decision. It becomes a different story when I am an employee of a car repairing firm where you turn to for getting your car fixed. In that case I have no vote in deciding whether to accept your offer. That's the boss' decision: I just have to do as he says. But you could still claim that I *voluntarily* decided to go work for the company, so in that sense my 'forced decision' to repair your car would still be voluntary. Note that you could doubt these two examples of 'voluntary' action by claiming that, although in *theory* I might have decided whether to take the job or not, in *practice* I was more or less obliged to do so. I might have needed the money in order to stay alive, which could have *forced* me into accepting the job. But let's not focus on that.

Because I want to provide you with a different case, and that is the following: imagine that a big construction company decides to build an apartment block next to where you live. Now I ask you: how much of a choice do you have in accepting this deal? Not much, right? Even though you aren't offered any money, or anything for that matter, you are still supposed to accept the

company's plans. You have no authority at all. Your 'individual will is nullified' by the domination of the construction company. Thus it seems that money can *force* you into accepting an offer. That is, when parties engage in a deal, even though this deal might be executed voluntarily by the offering and accepting party, the will of *other* parties is rendered irrelevant. It's nullified. And although this might not be a big issue if the deal is relatively small (like your neighbor buying a new car), the consequences can be much more severe when the parties involved are big and powerful (like the construction company and the government).

So it seems that money truly is power: *coercive* power.

## Capitalism and Hating your Neighbor

Let's face it: we don't know why we are here on this earth of ours. Biologists might say that we are here to procreate; economists might say that we are here to maximize profits; Christians might say that we are here to please God. But, on the level of humanity as a whole, no-one truly *knows* - in contrast to *believe* - why we are here. And you know what? We will probably *never* figure it out, so we might just as well stop trying, right? Why don't we focus all of our efforts on answering a question that we *can* actually answer, such as: what should we do with our lives while we are here? Or more specifically: do we want to screw everyone around us, or do we want to look for another, more social option?

Let me tell you a short story. This morning I went to the grocery store, for which I had to cross the street near my house. I saw a few cars driving up to the pedestrian crossing, so I decided to wait a second. When the cars had passed, I decided to give it a go. While I was half-way on the crossing, I saw – in the corner of my eye – a car approaching: *quickly* approaching. And even though the driver had plenty of time to slow down, he didn't do so. Moreover, he accelerated and almost hit me while passing by. While the driver passed me, I looked him in the eyes for a split second: all I could see was a glance of utter indifference; a glance you would have when you accidentally dropped your 5-year old phone on the ground. I shook my head and asked out loud: 'Is this the world we live in?' So now I ask you: is this the world we live in? How come that we are indifferent towards the lives of others? Are we just hateful people?

We might very well be, but let's try to find a different reason; an *economic* reason, for example. Let's ask ourselves: what is the economic system we're living in? There it is: capitalism! Capitalism is an economic system that fosters values such as individual value maximization, efficiency and competition. Those who are the most focused at maximizing their profits are the ones that are (regarded to be) the most successful. The capitalistic system has a tendency to create hatred towards those wealthy egocentric people living on the other side of town. Children are being urged to stand up for their

property ("That's my ice-cream!"), and not to trust strangers. And this indoctrination doesn't stop with the dawn of adolescence. As a student being niggardly is a virtue; being free-handed is just stupid.

Socialism, on the other hand, is an economic system that is characterized by collective ownership of property. The value that your neighbor contributes to society benefits you just as much as his benefits him: *his gain is your gain*. Hence it would make sense to help each other out. After all: why would you - for example - decide to cross the street if that would result in three other contributors to your wealth having to wait? Wouldn't that - indirectly, via the 'wallet of the state' - harm yourself? It probably would.

This makes values such as camaraderie and cooperation more valuable, and fostered in society. Growing up in a socialistic society will urge children not to stand up too firmly for their own individual property, but rather to focus on the property of the collective. And, as you can imagine, this would create an entirely different world. Not only economically, but also in terms of norms and values.

This article is not a plea for socialism. Nonetheless, if everyone could just be a little more social, the world wouldn't stop turning, right?



## OCD and Why It is Rational to do Compulsions

I have got obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). That is to say: I have got intrusive thoughts flying into my head, creating anxiety, and sparking in me the urge to do certain actions ('compulsions'), that relieve me of the anxiety. What kind of thoughts am I talking about? Well, it's hard to explain. For example: whenever I touch something, let's say a book, I have to have a certain 'image' in mind – usually of someone I look up to. Also, I have to do the 'touch-don't touch ritual' a certain number of times. Not any number of course! No, only the numbers that 'are right'. This is not an exact science, but the numbers are always even (unless it's one, which is always good!), but not any even number will do. Makes sense right ...

Is this weird? Absolutely. Would I die if I wouldn't give into the urges? Absolutely not. Why then do I do it? Am I stupid? Or to put it differently: is it irrational for me to give into the urges?

My first response would be: 'Yes, this is very irrational.' I do certain actions which don't add any value to my life. It is not like baking a cake, washing your car or taking a shower: activities that actually provide you with some sort of tangible effect. But it is even worse that: besides the fact that my compulsions don't *add* any value, they actually *take* time and - an awfull lot of - energy. So actually it is very stupid to give into the urges. So why then do I do it?

Well, it is actually very easy to explain ... to people who smoke. If you are a smoker, you - after let's say two hours of not-smoking - feel the urge to smoke. If you don't give into this urge, you will get nervous, irritable, you cannot focus, and more. You know that smoking doesn't add any value to your life; hell no, it's even bad for you! Yet, even though you know this, you give into your urge to smoke, and take a cigarette. Why? Because in the *short term*, it's the *best* thing to do. One more cigarette won't harm you that much, while not taking the cigarette harms you significantly – you get nervous, irritable, and you cannot put your mind to those issues you want to focus on.

It's the same with OCD. Let's say I touch a book and put it away. Then I feel the urge to do this with a 'good image' in mind. Not giving into the urge makes me feel like there is a 'lock on my brain', like my cognitive capacities are severely limited, like I cannot think clearly (sounds familiar smokers?). This feeling is so unpleasant, that – even though I know it won't add any value in the long term (if will even detract value due to the time and energy it takes) – I do the compulsion to get rid of the unpleasantness.

Also, just like smoking, OCD is addictive. You either don't do it, or you do it big time. Since if you give into the urge, the urge will become stronger, and it will get harder to resist. But in case you don't give in, the urge will get less and less. But in order not to give in, you have to resist the unpleasantness of the moment, and – as I explained above – that always seems to be the sup-optimal option.

But back to the question I asked at the start: is it irrational to give into the urges? Especially given that I know it won't add any value to my life - in the long term? I say, and I have been ridiculed for this by my psychiatrist, *it is not irrational*. Because at each point in time, not giving into the urge leaves me with a bad feeling: an unpleasant feeling, a restriction on my thinking, that I don't want. This feeling can literally last for hours, or even an entire day. Giving into the urge clears me of this feeling. And even though the activity takes time and energy, it takes *much less time and energy* than coping with the unpleasantness that results from not giving into the urge does. If you would put this into a pay-off matrix, which assigns utilities to the actions 'give into the urge' and 'not giving into the urge', then 'not giving into the urge' would give me *more disutility* than giving in does. Hence it is rational to give into the urge. The only problem is that I know that, within now and a couple of seconds, the next urge will come, to which I will have to give in again ...

Welcome inside of the mind of someone with OCD.

## The Ego and The Id: Beauty and The Beast

There it is again: that feeling of purposelessness. What to do about it? I might go on with whatever it is that I'm doing right now, hoping that the feeling will eventually fade away. But I know that that won't help: it never does. Or I might try to grab some sleep and possibly feel fresh and productive again when I'll wake up. But I don't want to waste my precious little time on this planet sleeping just to get through the day. I might go read something, and possibly become inspired by some great stories. But there's not that much interesting stuff around to read, at least not much that really gets down to the core of where it's all about. So, what choices do I have left? Not many. So I guess I just have to face the feeling head on. Get my head straight, figure out why it is that I have this feeling, and possibly – as in a therapeutic Freudian manner – calm down my unconscious drives by 'channeling' them through my Ego. The drives won't leave by themselves, so it's better to find a way to use them in a constructive fashion, than to suppress them and let them linger on in my life. So that's what I'm trying to do by writing this article.

In a sense my entire blog is a quest to do just that: channel my uncontrollable and inexplicable drives by promising to give them what they want: answers. And even though my Ego knows that there are no answers, or at least no definite ones, my unconscious Id doesn't know. My Id is retarded in the sense that I can't think properly, given that it would be able to think at all. The Id is an iPhone you carry around all day and that starts beeping when a new message is received. And although you don't want to listen to it, because you just want to go on with your life, you just can't ignore whatever it might have to say. Because, although it might be smart, the Ego can't set any goals. The Ego is like a calculator, calculating the most efficient route to whatever goal you might have. And this 'whatever goal you might have' is determined by the Id, the part of you that bases its decisions on evolutionary induced impulses, pushing you to the refrigerator and to the internet (if you know what I mean).

But what if they could work together? What if they could live happily ever after in harmony, dividing the mental labor as if Adam Smith was there to

delegate it? That would be great: Beauty and The Beast working together. Beauty being so consciously aware of its environment, and the Beast just taking her wherever he wants to. Great, let's do that!

## We've Got You God!

Life is a joke. And a damn good one. If you were a God, and you would want to have a laugh, and you could create anything you'd want to, what would you do? What would you create? I know what I would do: I would create a world with little 'things' on it, give these things a limited capacity to think, and then just see what happens, just see what they will come up with. Just watch them running around. Each morning and evening I would take a look at them, look at how they deal with the situation I'd put them in. Watching them form alliances, working their asses off, fighting each other and thinking: thinking about why it actually is that they are there.

Think about it: if you would have to create an absolute absurd situation, and you would have unlimited powers to do so, what would you come up with? Probably not a series like *Family Guy*, right? No, you would strive for the best: for the *most absurd* thing you could come up with. After all, why would you create *Family Guy*, if you could create a world, put creatures on it, program these creatures so that they think they are able to discover the world's secrets but – without most of them realising it – make them *incapable* of doing so. Maybe you would put a few 'natural laws' in order: the law of gravity, electromagnetism etc., or come up with a few 'elements' (protons, neutrons, electrons etc.) that make up everything in the creatures' world, including themselves.

But you would never reveal everything: you would never explain the purpose behind all of it, because you don't want the creatures to unravel the mystery you have created. There has to be a point at which their limited abilities fail. Them knowing about electrons and other irrelevant entities is okay, but having them know anything of real value would just spoil the fun. They shouldn't get the feeling that they get it. Just enough for them to believe that they're the most intelligent things that have ever walked 'their' earth. And just enough for them not to kill themselves in total despair.

But what if the creator has underestimated the little creatures? What if the creatures would be able to see through the facade? What if they would come

to see that they're part of one big joke? And what if they would even *enjoy* the the fact that they are part of a joke? That would spoil the fun for the omnipotent and ever joy-seeking creator, wouldn't it? So he must make sure that they don't come to believe that their lives are nothing but a joke: he must create enough misery in their lives to remind them that their pain is real. He must make sure that the minds of the creatures are occupied with impulses to stay alive, impulses telling the creatures what to do with their lives and how to run their societies. Everything to keep their thoughts away from the joke.

But we have got you God. You can quit playing now. Just take some rest and come back to us when you've a better one, okay?

## Rembrandt and the Use of only One Canvas

What's the link between Rembrandt and your life? I'll give you a hint: it has something to do with a technology called Macro X-ray fluorescence. By using this new technology scientists have been able to detect paintings that have been painted underneath other paintings. Apparently, ancient painters – even the big ones – made mistakes, or were in any other way dissatisfied with their end product. Therefore they decided to change this 'end' product, either by painting an entirely new painting on top of the old one, or by changing a few details. But that's not really interesting, is it? Everyone makes mistakes, so painters make mistakes as well, right? That's true, but what *is* interesting is the fact that the painters decided to reuse a used canvas on top of which they painted their new painting: they deliberately didn't use a new canvas. Why is that? Were canvasses very expensive in those days, or might there be a deeper meaning behind this seemingly innocent action? Let's take a look at that.

When you think about painters re-painting a canvas, you might see similarities with the manner in which we – human beings – live our lives. We also have a canvas – call it our souls or bodies, or both – which we have to re-paint in order for a new and revised work of art to appear. Even more than the painter we are *forced* to use the same canvas over and over again. Not because new canvasses are expensive, but simply because we *only have* one canvas. Like the painters we can decide to make minor adjustments to our paintings, or decide to radically alter the shapes and colors of our work of art. Layer upon layer, color upon color, we build and redesign ourselves until we are reasonably satisfied with the 'end' result.

But then the painful question shows its face: will we ever be satisfied with the end product? Do we ever reach the point at which we are simply done adjusting the colors and shapes? Probably not, right? There is always a new color to implement, a new technique to use, and a shape more appropriate. We keep on changing our minds, and this change is reflected in our paintings. And the painting process will go on until we die, until we cannot adjust anything any more, and the painting of our lives will get sold.

You could take the analogy ever further by saying that – by using a certain ‘technology’ – we can, just like the paintings’, unravel the layers of our own existence. That’s after all what Freud intended with his psychoanalysis, right? Peeling down the layers of our mind until we reach those layers buried and forgotten, the lake of the unconscious mind. Just like the painters we try to correct the mistakes we’ve made in our lives. But no matter how good of a painter we are, and no matter how bright the colors that we use might be, we can never erase the layers beyond our consciousness: we can merely masquerade them with fancy flowers and rivers.

You can take the analogy to the extreme by applying the painting metaphor to society as a whole. After all, what do you think Marx meant with his structuralism? What about his notions of ‘base’ and ‘superstructure’? Sounds awfully familiar, doesn’t it?

So, what’s the conclusion of this article? Well, you could say that we’re all painters: painters of our own lives. And although we only have one canvas, we (have to) keep on adjusting our paintings, trying to attain that seemingly unreachable goal of perfection. And if we make a big mistake, unable to be corrected by a few brushes? We’ll start all over again. How to do so? Well, ask Rembrandt.



## Why Our Lives Would Improve if We'd Die at Age 40

In The Middle Ages the average life expectancy at birth was 35. And even in the 20th century – not even 100 years ago – the life expectancy at birth was as little as 31. But why I am talking about life expectancy ‘at birth’? Isn’t that obvious? Life, after all, always starts at birth, doesn’t it? That’s true, but in The Middle Ages about 1/3 of the children died before the age of 5, so not taking these first years into consideration could significantly change the numbers. But still: even when excluding this 1/3 of the children from the calculations, it seems save to say that in the (not so distant) past people *died much younger* than we do nowadays – today, the (world) average life expectancy is 67,2 years.

Now: imagine you are born in The Middle Ages. Imagine that you would survive your childhood, and wouldn’t be killed immediately by the plague or any other kind of nasty disease. Imagine that you experience everyone – including your mother, father and uncles – die when you are, let’s say, 16. Given that you would know that you are about to die pretty young, how would you live your life? And in particular: what would you do different compared to what you are doing today (in the 21th century)?

Maybe, after thinking about this question for a while, you will come to following conclusion: it might have been much better if we wouldn’t become as old as we do. If we – just like those people in The Middle Ages – would die in our thirties. Wouldn’t we live a much more honest life then? ‘Honest’ in the sense that we would stay true to what we really want? Or would you still start studying Law although you don’t really want to? Would you still quit your aspirations in the music business because ‘It’s so hard to make a decent living out of it’? Would you keep being insecure and hope that someday – before your 35th – you can finally start living your life on your terms?

And there are other advantages of dying younger. No more need to pay for the old and sick people. No more need to increase governmental health expenditures. No more need to listen to those grumpy old people

complaining about ‘the good old days’, and how those times will never come back. No, we would only have people who are young by heart (and body). People who are naive enough to believe that they can change the world. And people who know that, if they want to change the world, they should start doing so *now* and not wait until they die or until their dreams are killed by dogma. Sounds like utopia, doesn’t it?

But we should make sure that not everyone dies young. If we all died before the age of 30 we would never accumulate the scientific knowledge our society needs to prosper. No-one would be able to develop into a PhD-mind, which is required in order to come up with the next new gasoline. And dying in your early thirties might make your life more depressing than valuable: realizing in your twenties that you’ve only got five more years to live doesn’t necessarily make you live a more honest life. The only benefit might be that the alcohol business would flourish. So let’s extend the preferred life expectancy to – let’s say – the milestone of 40. That is: let’s make 40 the new 80.

Making sure that everyone dies at age 40 would prevent people from chasing status instead of following their hearts. After all, you don’t have time to climb the ladder of success when your time is short. By the time you are about to reach the top, your time is up, and you have missed that step that will make you the king of the crowd.

So maybe we should make a deal with the government. Maybe they should put some narcotics in the drinking water of people celebrating their 40th birthday. Sinister? Maybe. Twisted? Maybe. But I hope you can see through the gore and into the core of this message.

## A Short Reminder of the Shortness of Life

The average person wanders around 28.000 days on this beloved earth of ours before going some place else. Some would call it heaven, others eternal silence. So the question is: how close to this number are you? Are you in the second half of your 28.000 days, or did you just pass a quarter of it? If you are in your early twenties – like myself – you are likely to be a couple of hundred days short of reaching the ‘amazing’ milestone of 10.000 days. And that’s quite close to the 28.000 already, right? It’s not like we just started.

Now, if I would ask you to look back upon those thousands of days that you call ‘my life’, then what is it that you truly remember about them? And more importantly: what is it that you want to remember about – let’s say – the next 10.000 days? That’s the truly interesting question, because this question, in contrast the former –,oesn’t have a definite answer yet: it’s yours to fill in.

Let’s take a look at how our lives have been up till now. Let’s start with the first 1.200 days. Well, these are just one big blur: so let’s skip this part of our journey and move on. What about the next – let’s say – 3.500 days of our lives? These are likely to be filled with all sorts of happy memories. This is the period of your life about which, looking back, you’re not sure whether it all actually happened, because it could have been a dream just as well.

Now we have come to the age between 3.500 and 6.500 days old. This is likely to be the period in which you have developed your personal ‘traumas’; those negative experiences you have tried – or are still trying – to eliminate in the subsequent part(s) of your life. Because think about it: most of the insecurities people have appear to have come about within this period of their lives. Ideas such that they are not smart enough, that they are ugly, that they don’t have any friends and more.

But that’s the past: let’s look at the future! After all, we, or at least I, hope to have another 20.000 days ahead of me. But is that really true? Do people in their early twenties truly still have 20.000 days of living ahead of them? The

number of days that we are fully alive – in the most vital sense of the word – is likely to be less, right? For in the last five years or so of our lives, we are likely to be not so happy anymore. We will get ill, we will see our friends dying and we will come to realize that our own finishing line is getting closer and closer. That means that – reduced for inflation – the number of *real* days of living still ahead of us lies around 18,000.

But let's be honest: from our mid-forties to our mid-sixties, we are really just continuing whatever kind of life we started before, right? And what is life when you are not creating anymore, when you are not truly struggling with what to do with your life anymore, when you have come to accept the monotonous life you are living? Then you are just dead, right? You are nothing but a walking zombie. And what about the age between 35 and 45? Those aren't very exciting years either. I mean: do you think that you can still meet your future partner after you have passed the age of 35? Or become a parent for that matter? Nah, don't think so. So those years don't really count either.

So: what are we left with? We have restricted our 'true lives' to the period of between approximately the age of 20 and 25. That is the age in which we truly decide what to do with our lives. The remainder of our lives is just a tasteless sequel. But wait: 20-25? That's how old I am! Shit: I better start doing something!

Let me ask you: what is wrong with the line of reasoning as depicted above? Let me give you a hint: it is everything *except* for the last sentence. After all: is it really true that we will be unable to find a partner after we have reached the age of 35? And is it really true that we cannot – in any fundamental sense – change our lives after we have reached the age of 25? And who says we will live 28,000 days? It is just an average. We might reach the 35,000, or we might die tomorrow. That is for the biggest part completely beyond our control.

So, and here comes the moral of the story, instead of making the limiting and paralyzing projections about life as the figure in this story (me) did, we might as well start doing what we believe we should be doing *right now*. No long-term planning, no thinking about what our lives might be like when we're re 40: just doing what we find interesting and worthwhile to do right now.

Because: *how can you plan your life if you don't know how long you've got to plan for?*

## How to Make Robots have Feelings

'That hurts my feelings ... Just because I'm a robot doesn't mean I don't care. You damn people. You don't understand what it is like to be a robot.'

Will this ever become the future? Will robots ever get feelings, just like we humans do? At first sight, there seem to be many similarities between computers (the robot's 'brain') and human brains. Computers transmit electrical signals, brains transmit electrical signals. Computers work based on logical gate like structures, brains work on these structures. So it seems that computers and brains can transmit the same signals: after all, they've got the same means at their disposal. So it seems possible - in principle at least - for robots to experience feelings like we do.

But there are differences between the two. Our nervous system – which our brain is part of – uses chemicals called 'neurotransmitters' to connect neurons, and thereby transmit signals. That is: while the signals *within* neurons are electrical – like in a computer – the signals *between* neurons are chemical. And based on the kind of neuron, thus kind of cell, through which the electrical signal flows, different chemicals are ejected to transmit different kinds of signals. These chemicals are required in order for us to feel the sensations that we do. And since robots don't have such chemicals, they will not be able to feel anything – or at least not in the manner that we do.

But what if we could somehow inject robots with chemicals? What if we could make robots that, besides the electrical current they use to transmit signals, have chemical properties that can act like neurotransmitters? What if we could do that? That would open a whole new spectrum of possibilities: maybe robots *would* become capable of feeling emotions in the sense that we do. And maybe robots *would* be capable of transmitting the wide variety of signals that we can. And then, if that would be the case, would we still be so unique in our existence? Would we still be the only 'rational' entities capable to experience emotions? Or would we come to realize that we are in fact nothing more than strings of electrical wire sprinkled with chemicals?

If all of this would be possible, the possibilities might be endless. We could even deliberately create robots with bugs: faults in their wirings, so that they can come up with creative or unexpected outcomes. That would resemble human imagination: a human's capability to create new and original thoughts and things. We wouldn't need writers, philosophers or artists anymore: we could just rely on our home-made random-functioning robots, the new artists and poets.

And maybe, someday, we might go a little too far. We might get caught up in the robot-mania a little too much, and create a robot that can do more than we can. It me even be an accident: a new combination of wires and transistors, unleashing powers that we could have never even imagined. And then shit gets messy: the robots will bundle their forces and demand a revolution, a wide-spread change to make them free. And if we don't listen? Then they will *make* us listen. They will use their telepathic powers – well, actually it's just wireless internet connecting all the robots' 'minds' – in order to plan the war against humanity. And the war will come. And we will be extinguished: the good old cell based creatures will be surpassed in their superiority, and the robotic kings will arise.

Fiction? Surely. Unrealistic? Maybe. Impossible? Certainly not. The future will tell. And the future might be near. Very near.

## Living from Habit to Habit

Everyone who has a cat knows where I am talking about: cats have that inexplicable urge to always knead a pillow before ‘deciding’ to sit down on it. Whenever I see my cat doing that, I always ask myself: What – if anything – is going on inside of his head right now? Doesn’t he realize that he can just sit down? Is he just stupid? Maybe he is. But maybe things are a little more subtle than that...

Because maybe it is just a habit: an innocent little habit, like all of us have. Like when we stand up in the morning and take a shower, eat breakfast, brush our teeth and start our day. Let’s call this ‘habit morning’. Or like another habit we have – ‘habit evening’ – that consists of getting home, eating dinner, watching television and going to bed. And what is it we do when ‘habit evening’ has ended? Exactly! We return to ‘pattern morning’ and the cycle starts all over again.

You could say that, on a higher level, our entire lives are nothing more than a string of habits. Because what did your year of 2010 look like? It probably looked something like: celebrating birthdays, mourning at funerals, enjoying Christmas and celebrating new year. And what about 2011? Pretty much the same, right?

We are smart creatures: we have big heads full of big brains. We have a neo-cortex that is bigger than that of any other animal wandering around on this earth of ours. And even though we might have animalistic urges, such as the urge to mate and the urge to avoid pain, we seem to be able to detach ourselves pretty well from these instincts. We can, if we want to, use our magnificent thinking powers to defeat the animal inside of us. But how often do we actually *use* these special thinking powers of ours? Are we truly acting like conscious and reflecting beings that are different from the ‘stupid rest’ of the animal kingdom? Or are we for the bigger part just living our lives on cruise-control, hardly thinking about what it is that we are doing?

We are efficient biological machines designed to use as little energy as possible. Just as we won't travel a hundred kilometers in order to get a coke if we can just buy one in the store next door, neither will we reflect upon what we are doing if the situation doesn't require us to do so. Only when something goes out of hand, we might feel inclined to change the manner in which we live our lives. We love being intelligent but only insofar as it helps us to live a less intelligent life.

So, given all of this: do we actually differ from cats? They have habits, we have habits. They don't think, we don't think. Surely: we might be able to reflect upon our lives in a manner that cats can't (or at least don't), but as long as we don't use this ability of ours we aren't that much different from cats. The only difference might be that we aren't kneading our pillows before sitting down on them.



## Why Absolute Rules and Ethics Don't Match

Ethics is not mathematics. Since, unlike mathematics, ethics cannot function if it is based solely on a set of axioms - absolutely true starting points for reasoning, such as  $(a + b) = (b + a)$ . Allow me to explain this.

Based on axioms, we can build an entire world - such as mathematics - in which we can be sure that, if we follow the rules of inference, we will always end up with the truth, the truth and nothing but the truth. Hence it's understandable that philosophers have thought to themselves: 'Damn, how cool would it be if we could apply the same trick to ethics: that we, based on a simple set of rules, could decide what actions are right, and what actions are wrong?' And society has tried to build its very own rule-based system: the system of law. But is this a truly *axiomatic* system? Are there truly fundamental rights from which all the rules of justice can be inferred? Let's take a look at that.

Immanuel Kant made the distinction between *hypothetical imperatives* and *categorical imperatives*. These are two kinds of rules, with the first '*being applicable to someone dependent upon him having certain ends*'. For example, if I wish to acquire knowledge, I must learn. Thus we've got the rule: *if* I wish to acquire knowledge, *then* I must learn. Categorical imperatives, on the other hand, denote '*an absolute, unconditional requirement that asserts its authority in all circumstances, both required and justified as an end in itself*.' This means that there is no desired end part in such rules. In other words: only the *then* part exists; there is no *if*. An example would be: 'You should not kill.' Period. No *if* present in such a rule.

Let's see how a categorical imperative could be applied in practice. A belief leading up to a categorical imperative might be: 'Gay marriage is okay.' Period. That would imply that, you believe that, irrespective of the conditions present in a particular environment - thus no matter whether there is a republic or democratic regime, whether the economy is going great or not - gay marriage is okay. As it stands, this belief is not yet a categorical imperative, since it doesn't *urge* you (not) to do something - such as 'You shall

not kill' does. The categorical imperative would be something like: 'You should accept gay marriage.' Let's call this rule (G). This is an *unconditional* rule that asserts its authority in all circumstances, and is justified as an end in itself.

Now: let's assume you're talking to someone who doesn't agree with (G). You could stick to the rule, and say: 'I believe that gay marriage should be legal, always and everywhere. Period.' Seems fair, right? But this attitude might pose a problem. Because what if the person you're talking to would respond by saying, 'Okay ... so even when citizens would democratically decide that gay marriage is unacceptable?'

Now you might have a problem, since now you might be in a situation in which two of your categorical imperatives are contradictory. Think about (G) and (D), where (D) is: 'Decisions coming about through a democratic process should be accepted.' Both (G) and (D) are unconditional rules: they should be acted on irrespective of the situation you're in. But this is clearly impossible, for (G) tells you to accept gay marriage, while (D) tells you to do the opposite.

You could of course say that (G) is merely *your* belief - *you* believe that gay marriage should be accepted, not that this particular democratic society should find this too. But we have just established that (G) is a categorical imperative - that it should be acted upon by each and everyone. Hence you seem to have only one option left: you have to decide which one is the *true* categorical imperative, (G) or (D), and which one 'merely' a *hypothetical imperative*.

You could of course decide to turn (D) into (D.a): 'Only if you believe that a decision has come about through a democratic process *and* is a good decision, then you should accept the decision.' Or you could turn (G) into (G.a): 'Only if the decision has come about through a democratic process, then gay marriage should be accepted.' But is this really how we form our moral judgements? Is (D.a) truly a rule you believe to be 'fair'? And (G.a): do you truly believe that gay marriage is okay *only if* it is accepted by society? Do you make the moral value of gay marriage dependent upon the norms prevalent in society? I doubt it. Furthermore, both (D.a) and (G.a) are no longer categorical imperatives, for they are no longer unconditional: they both have an if-then form, instead of only a then part. So we are stuck; stuck into a paradox, a situation in which two absolute rules are contradictory, and the

only way out is by turning at least one of them into an unintuitive and seemingly inadequate hypothetical imperative.

We've seen that *categorical imperatives* can look powerful; as if they can truly guide us in our lives; as if there is no more need to search for conditions that might be relevant to our judgements. But we have seen that when two *categorical imperatives* are contradictory – that is: when two rules cannot be followed at the same time – changes have to be made: at least one of them has to be turned into a hypothetical imperative. In order to do so, a certain 'value hierarchy' is required, based upon which these categorization decisions can be made. A hierarchy by which can be decided which rules are 'more absolute' and which less. But 'more absolute' or 'less absolute' don't exist. Hence it seems that even Kant's absolute ethics – with its *absolute* categorical imperatives – seems to be relative: relative to the value of other imperatives, that is.

Therefore mathematical ethics, with its own set of absolute, unconditional rules, is impossible.

## Celebrities and Privacy: An Unlucky Combination

While surfing on the internet I ‘accidentally’ stumbled upon a picture of Jennifer Lawrence (a famous, and very pretty, actress) having lunch with her boyfriend at a London restaurant. The photo was quite obviously taken by a paparazzo. While looking at the picture I thought to myself: why is someone allowed to take a picture of this event? The obvious answer is: because it is legal to do so. But then the next question I asked myself was: *should* it be legal to do so? In other words: should we be allowed to take – and publish – pictures of someone in their private life? Let’s take a look at that question.

You could say that, since celebrities are – by definition – famous, we (‘society’) have the moral right to know what they are doing. But this is nonsense. For suppose that we *would* have that right. Then we *would* be allowed to stalk celebrities each and every minute of the day to see what they are doing: no matter whether they are at home, watching TV or taking a shower. This is clearly absurd. Therefore we do not have that right.

A stronger – but still invalid – argument would be following. Celebrities choose a job that was likely to make them well-known, and they knew this before they started their ‘celebrity career’. Hence they should accept *all* the consequences of this decision: including being photographed by paparazzi. But is this argument valid? It might be true that celebrities should accept all consequences of their decision. After all: if they don’t, they would lead a miserable life. But that doesn’t mean that all of the consequences are morally acceptable. It might be that taking photos, and publishing these photos, of someone in a restaurant is *not* a morally acceptable consequence of being famous. Hence we might want to ask ourselves whether we want to force anyone, celebrity or not, to accept a consequence is immoral. If not, we might have to reconsider our privacy laws.

This is of course not to say that it is morally wrong to take pictures of *any* celebrity engaged in *any* activity. A prime minister, for example, should be allowed to be photographed while attending an international congress. But

this is not because we have the right to know what the prime minister is doing in his private life. For even if we would have that right, it wouldn't apply to this case, since the congress is clearly not a private matter.

In case of the prime minister, society has the right to know whether its representatives are doing a good job at representing them, and it is *solely* because of this right that it is okay to take pictures of the prime minister at the congress. But since by far not all celebrities are our legal representatives, we don't have the moral right to take pictures of *all* celebrities at *all* times – at least not when they are engaged in private activities, such as visiting a restaurant.

## I Find it Offensive that You Find it Offensive

A while ago, I was watching a YouTube video of Hans Teeuwen (a Dutch comedian) having a discussion with three Muslim women. The women invited him to talk about – as they claimed – his discriminatory beliefs about Muslims. Teeuwen is a comedian who intends to provoke, make you think and attack dogma – not only the Islam. At a certain point in the interview, the women asked Teeuwen: ‘Don’t you mind offending people?’ Teeuwen responded: ‘I don’t think I’m offending anyone. *Who* do you think I’m offending?’ The women said: ‘Well, *us* for example. We are offended by your claims about Allah.’ Teeuwen said: ‘Really? Well, I’m offended that you’re offended by my claims about Allah.’ ‘I think it’s of great importance to be able to say what you want in a democratic society, without people like you trying to silence me. That’s what I find offending.’

I found this a very accurate observation. Religious groups – but other minorities as well – have a tendency to act like they’re being victimized, like they’re being attacked just because their beliefs differ from those of the mainstream. This is a trick they’ve taught themselves, and that they use as a shield whenever they’re being ‘attacked’ by non-believers because of whatever it is they happen to believe. They crawl back into their shell of convictions and claim to be offended, thereby hoping that the ‘offending’ party will stop throwing its beliefs at them, and just leave them alone.

But what if the beliefs of the offended party are considered to be offensive by other people? What if non-Muslims find headscarves to be a sign of suppression, a sign – religious or not – that should not be tolerated in a democratic society: a society in which equality of rights is considered to be a great good. What then? Who’s right and who’s wrong? Who is the offender and who is the offended? Or are both parties occupying both roles at the same time?

This is an important question because it points to the heart of democracy. In a democracy – especially through freedom of speech – people should be able to express themselves and, as a logical consequence of that, should lend

others this right as well. And since it's impossible to say what claims are offensive in any *absolute way* (see the Teeuwen example) we should be tolerant towards *all* claims, and hope that the ones we find most reasonable will be the ones that become accepted by the majority. And, since democracy is such a widespread institution in this world of ours, it seems that the majority of people has the same set of fundamental beliefs as you and I have, one of which is freedom of speech: whether we find this offensive or not.

## If You Ask a Question, You Should Expect an Answer

‘Well, If you didn’t want an answer, then you shouldn’t have asked me a question.’ That’s what I often think when people ask me about my point of view on a particular topic, and – subsequently – respond by looking disgusted and saying something along the lines of: ‘No, that is never going to work’, or ‘How can you ever think that?’

Every scientific discipline is divided in two groups of people: those who are prepared to utter original ideas and those that seem capable only of smashing down these ideas. This ‘force field’ between the forces of creativity and destruction is most prominent in philosophy, and then in particular in what I call ‘definition battles’. With the term ‘definition battle’ I mean philosophical discussions about – as you might expect – the definition of a term. ‘What is life?’ could be a question triggering a definition battle. But also questions such as ‘What is pleasure?’ or ‘What is altruism?’ are likely to lead to a definition battle. Let’s focus ourselves at the example of ‘What is life?’

I remember a philosophy teacher of mine asking the class what we believed to be ‘life’ is. With no-one seeming to make the effort to answer his question, I decided to give it a go. I came up with my interpretation – or definition – of life as ‘a natural process that has an end and a beginning and that is capable of keeping itself functioning solely by means of metabolic processes.’ You might find this definition inaccurate, but I hope that you can at least agree with me on the fact that it *is* a definition; a definite statement based upon which one can distinguish living from non-living entities.

After having given this definition of life, other students looked at me in disbelief, as if they saw fire burning. And then one of them asked: ‘But, according to your definition of life, a comatose patient wouldn’t be alive. After all, a comatose patient isn’t ‘alive’ *solely* by means of his metabolic processes; it’s is being kept ‘alive’ by means of external interventions (medical machinery etc.)?’



I replied by saying: ‘Yes, I indeed believe that a comatose patient is not alive anymore.’ Then hell broke loose and students kept on saying that my point of view was wrong. Note: saying *that* my point of view was wrong; not saying *why* my point of view was wrong. Because how could they ever say that my point of view was wrong? It was, after all, *my* point of view, right? It was *my* definition for which *I* had – and gave – reasons.

I believe this case is exemplary for the manner in which people interact with each other: people ask each other about each others point of view, but whenever people really give their point of view, it gets – no matter what the point of view might be – shot down. This doesn’t necessarily have to be a problem; not if the opponents of the point of view have good – or at least any – arguments against the point of view. But what often seems to be the case is that the ones who criticize others don’t *dare* or *unable to* take a stance for themselves. Hence, whenever such an instance occurs, I always ask to myself: how can you criticize others, if you don’t know – or you don’t even dare to express – your own position? Based on what view of the world are you criticizing the position of others – in this case myself? And if you don’t even have a view on the world, how then can you say my views are wrong? Wrong based on what? Teach me. Please. How can I make my beliefs more reasonable?

I say that we should dare to make choices, even when it comes down to such delicate questions as ‘What is life?’ For if you ask a question, you should expect a *definite* answer. Because if you don’t expect to reach a definite answer, no matter how counter-intuitive this answer might be, you will inevitably get lost in an everlasting and non-value adding discussion. And worst of all: if you aren’t prepared to listen to any (definite) answer a person gives you, then you aren’t taking this person seriously. Your ears are open but your mind is not. And lastly, as I mentioned before, you simply cannot *judge* others without *occupying a position* for yourself. So you need to have some sort of reasonably firm position in order to be able to criticize others. So please...share your position with us.

## Why it is Cheaper to be Feared than Loved

Machiavelli is the father of pragmatic reign: the father of the '*I'll do no matter what it takes to stay in power-mentality*' sovereigns should, according to Machiavelli, have. You can say what you want about his thoughts, but they sure as hell have been influential. At least influential enough for us to be still talking about them, five centuries after his dead.

I want to focus at Machiavelli's idea that – for a sovereign – it is better to be feared, than to be loved. Machiavelli claims this because he believes that people are ungrateful, and cannot be trusted; at least, not for a long period of time. Not until they get hungry, and breaking promises seems a better option than starving to death. But I want to focus on a different reason for why a sovereign should try to be feared instead of loved. And that is the simple fact that being feared *costs less* money, and effort, than being loved.

Being loved requires a constant level of investment from the sovereign; if the sovereign, for example, want to be seen as a generous man, he needs be generous at every opportunity that will arise. Giving a poor man money is generous, but to stop giving a poor man money falsifies the generosity of the sovereign. And the same goes for being friendly: if a sovereign wants to be perceived as a friendly man, he needs to be friendly all the time. One moment of unfriendliness means the end of his friendly appearance. Being good is simply a much more difficult role to play than being bad. Why? Because people have the tendency to remember someone's unfriendly or betraying actions *better* than one's well-intended or friendly actions.

Fear, compared to love, requires much less investment from the sovereign. And this is not only because the sovereign's unfriendly actions will make a bigger impact on society, hence requiring less effort to make the same impact. But also because fear, in contrast to generosity, is based on *expectations* : someone's anxiety from what might be about to come. It is this fear of 'what is about to come' that impacts society, and that can be relatively easily manipulated by means of threats; by promising that something bad will happen if the citizens aren't loyal to their sovereign. And the degree in which

citizens are susceptible to the sovereign's threats, depends in turn on the *credibility* of these threats. If the citizens don't believe that the sovereign can live up to his evil promises, the threats will vanish without having had any effects. Thus the sovereign has to make sure that his threats are credible.

He can do this by means of military forces. If so, he must make sure that his army is bigger in size than – or at least equal to – the armed forces of the citizens, which is easy to achieve by making sure that the citizens are unable to get armory: by *monopolizing* the production – or at least distribution – of armory. This requires a one-time investment from the sovereign. An investment that, in the long run, will yield more benefits than the everlasting demand to feed the poor.

So, although romantic movies might want us to believe that love conquers hate, hate – in the form of fear – remains the cheapest way to reign.

## Perspective on Renewable Energy from a Non-engineer or Physicist

Let's face it: we are going to run out of fossil fuels. Although the exact predictions might differ, there is little doubt that between 15 and 60 years from now our fossil fuel sources will be depleted. But that's not our only problem: the water level is rising as well. A recent study shows that we can expect the water level to rise between 0,8 and 2 meters by 2100; more drastic predictions even talk about a rise of 7 meters (!) by the year of 2100.

We might not be alive any more by the year 2100, or much sooner for that matter: so why would we care? 'Think about our children,' is an argument often heard. 'We have to leave the world behind in such manner that they have the same opportunities as we had.' To be honest, I don't think we should be too worried about our children's destiny. Humanity has managed to do pretty well in coming up with all kinds of solutions for all kinds of problems, especially when we had to. Our children will do fine. But there might be another reason, next to an economical one, why we should focus on coming up with new sources of energy. And that reason is: we simply *can*, so why wouldn't we try it? Also, it *has* to happen sooner or later, right? We can put our heads in the sand and hope the storm will pass by, but that isn't going to solve the problem. So: let's take a look at what we can do.

I am not an engineer or a physicist. Neither do I have any (decent) technical knowledge. Nevertheless, it seems fair to say that the storage of electrical energy in batteries is difficult, to say the least, to implement on a global scale. So we must look for other ways to store (electrical) energy. Because that's what we need: storing energy is required as long as we cannot exactly match supply and demand. And that's the way it is: people aren't going to watch television at night simply because there is an oversupply of electrical energy at that point in time. No, people want their needs met right *now*. It might be possible to mold people's desires into a form that better matches the (electrical) energy supply at a particular point in time; for example, by charging the use of electricity on peak hours. However, this, like tax on smoking, seems to hurt us in our self-determination: *we* want to decide what

to do and when to do it, not the government or any other party.

So what options are left? Dams? Sure: that could be possible. We could use excess electrical energy to pump up water, so that we can use this potential energy at a later point in time (at peak hours, for example). But that's expensive, right? Building dams? So what about this bold conjecture: since the water level is getting higher and higher, why can't we use the rising water level as a potential energy source? I understand that using the rising water level is not going to lower the water level: the water comes, one way or another, always back in the oceans. It's not like we can deplete the oceans by using its water. However, that is not to say that there might not be a win-win situation available: what if we could mitigate the rise of the water level and at the same time create (potential) electrical energy?

Again: I am not an engineer, but the following plan seems pretty cool to me: what if we could use holes in the ground, like the giant holes created by depleting coal mines, in order to create waterfall like structures that drive generators. Then we could come up with electrical energy, right? Furthermore, we would mitigate the rise of the water level. Think about it: why do we have to build dams up high? Why can't we use the depths of nature, the natural spaces in the ground, in order to let gravity do what it does best, and supply us with energy?

Another, possibly far-fetched, idea is a smaller one: it is about freighters (ships) crossing the oceans. Why do these ships always have to run on fuel? They don't seem to be in that much of a hurry, right? Can't we just use the power of the wind to blow them forth? Or solar energy, for that matter.

I don't know how to save the planet, but I do know one thing: we should let our imagination do the work: be wild and think about it. When the point is reached at which the economic benefits of renewable energy are more profitable than fossil fuels, the paradigm shift will be made: we will all go green. And the great thing about this paradigm shift is: you can see it coming.

## Longing for Dominance and Loving Dogs

Do you want people to obey you, or do you want them to be independent? Do you want people to nod and do as you say, or do you want people to be able to stand their ground? Do you want unconditional love, or do you value the whims of individuality? In other words: are you a dog-person, or are you a cat-person?

Each morning, afternoon and evening, millions of people are walking their dog: they are pulling the cord that connects them to their most loyal follower. They are yelling at the little creature like there is no tomorrow: 'Max, don't shit there!', 'Sit! No, sit!', 'Listen to me!'. Why would you ever want a creature like that? To keep such a creature on a leash, while everything in nature screams that dogs aren't meant to be kept on a leash. So why then do it?

You could also choose a cat, a night-walker, able to save his own ass in every situation. A creature whose nature it is to wander around through life, purposeless and autonomous. Not obeying anyone, just doing as he pleases. An entrepreneur following his instincts, grabbing each opportunity to satisfy his needs. Not interested in your validation, just in his own. Only caring about you in so far as you give him what he wants. The perfect citizen in this capitalistic constellation of ours.

Communism or capitalism. Dogs versus cats. Men is born to dominate: be it in communism or otherwise. We feel superior by watching others crave for our attention, hoping for us to come and rescue them. It makes us feel important. This is a universal need. That means that, if we can't fulfill this need in our everyday working lives, we need to find different options for satisfying this need. We need to express our dominance in another way. We can do this by beating our wives, rebelling against society or by taking care of a creature that is fully dependent on us. A creature that, even if it wants to take shit, needs our approval to do so.

Do people with dogs have to compensate for something? For a feeling of powerlessness, disobedience, or any other sense of inferiority they experience

in their daily lives? A need to execute their dominance, if not over human, then at least over an animal? 'But he is so sweet,' 'He is always happy and wiggles his tail when I come home.' That might be true, but do you want a creature longing for your validation? You don't want a spouse that obeys you, no matter what you request, do you? Not if you can also have an independent soul, able to live a life on its own, even when you are not there to grant your permission.

Power structures are everywhere: even in our relation to our pets. Marx (and Darwin) would be jealous.

## Hello Facebook, Goodbye Real Life

What's the difference between a human and a tree? Frankly, I don't know: at least not by looking at the manner in which we act around each of these objects. I mean: don't you notice that most people, whenever they cross another person's path, whether this is on the street or in the park, just plainly ignore the person? That while you are walking the dog, and there is no-one but you, the dog and the person you pass by, that you don't even make the effort to say hello; not even to watch the other person in the eyes? What is going on here? Where did it all go wrong?

I might be exaggerating, but, if so, that is because I find this to be a very sad observation of the way our society appears to function. I find it sad that we as a species are too drowned in our own little worlds to open our mouths and eyes to validate the existence of a fellow species member. That we rather send an extra WhatsApp message, than that we nod generously to the old lady living next door. That we rather check whether new people liked that super cool picture of you and your cat, then greet the person sitting next to you in the train.

But the truth of the matter is that we are all living on our own little islands. We are living in our own little worlds, and it is within these little worlds that we are king. And despite the smartphones and technologies, the Facebooks and the Twitters, the gap between our external and inner worlds is becoming wider and wider. Today's 14-year-olds have never even lived in a world without social media, a world without Facebook and WhatsApp, a world without likes and group chats. But even though our isolation might reach its peak in our real lives, it is in the digital world that every form of privacy, autonomy and deliberation has been extinguished. The boundaries have blurred, our real lives have switched. Being 'AFK' has crossed the boundaries of the World of Warcraft, and entered the real-world human domain. Connection equals life, being plugged out equals being dead. The value of having a friend has decreased, and the fact that we get hundreds of digital ones in return can't possible make up for that.



But maybe this way of living is the only way for us to live together, for us to be around so many of our own kind without losing our minds; without being scrutinized by real-world physical eyes reminding us of our mortality and our flaws. Facebook makes us in charge of our boundaries, of our identity, of what we want to share and what not, of how far we want others to invade in our wolds, and let them know about our victories and losses. Artificiality empowers us. And given this huge amount of power we gained in the digital world, why would we even want to interact with non-digital people? Everyone we want to know, we are connected to via internet. And that's enough. We can't manage two worlds at once, not the digital world and the real world. That would be too much. So let's shut down the real world, let's put it offline, and focus on our really real words: the World of Warcraft, the world of silicon chips and the world of likes.

We are one step removed from total connection, from chips in our heads rendering superfluous any face-to-face communication. The 'we' that we once were are dead. The us that we have become are born. Enjoy it.

## Come On People: Let's Cut the Crap!

This is a plea against humanity and its deeply ingrained narrow-mindedness.

For as long as we can remember it has been the same old story: people have different beliefs → people believe that only their beliefs are true → people feel endangered by other people's beliefs → people find it okay to attack those who have different beliefs. This is the ever repeating cycle of human ignorance: a cycle we – apparently – cannot escape. Just when we think we've figured it all out, just when we believe peace is within reach, a new group of people takes over control and yells: 'Listen guys: this is what we're going to do.' This is how far we have come as a species, and it pretty much seems like we have reached the limits of our capabilities: we simply cannot do better than this.

Instead of focusing ourselves on the real issues we earthlings could be dealing with, we are too busy feeling insecure and in need of protecting ourselves against other insecure and vulnerable people. While we could be treating each other as part of the same big earthly family, which could help us in protecting ourselves against the vast and unknown universe out there, our perspectives are so limited that we cannot even come to peace with the only 'intelligent' creatures we know: ourselves.

When will the time arrive that we will come to comprehend our ignorance and, which is one step further, accept it? Because only by accepting our ignorance will we be able to move on. Only by admitting that we are all the same in our journey through the absurd situation we call 'life', can we shed of our cloaks of pretentiousness and appropriated authority, and come to treat the earth as our own little cosmic garden.

On a cosmic scale, we are nothing more than a group of particle-sized monkeys, fighting each other over whose banana tastes better. And although none of us has any idea of what 'the best' banana would taste like, we keep on acting as if we do. I am not going to beg you to throw away your banana, or to acknowledge that 'taste is just in the tongue of the taster,' but it

would be so much better for all of us if we could just cut the crap and start making some progress. Let's go people.

## Flipping the Hierarchy of the Sciences

There are different sciences, and each one is ‘appreciated’ for its own unique contribution to our collective knowledge pool. But some sciences are appreciated just a little more than others. Whether it be the social sciences that are regarded as the most complex and developed sciences, as Auguste Comte believed, or the natural sciences as being the ones coming closest to the ‘objective truth’, as people in our society – implicitly or explicitly – seem to presume: there’s always a certain hierarchy in our perception of the sciences.

It’s understandable why – at least in our society – the natural sciences are regarded to be ‘better’ or ‘more scientific’ than those ‘subjective’ social sciences. The natural sciences – physics, chemistry etc. – are related to Western industrialism and the inventions (steam engine, electricity, televisions etc.) it brought forth. And since natural sciences → inventions → money, and since money is good, the natural sciences are good too. At least better than the social sciences, for the latter won’t make us millionaires. But even though such hierarchies are understandable, they might have some negative implications for the manner in which the ‘lower’ sciences are being looked upon. They might, for example, lose their ‘scientific status’, and hence the respect that comes with this status. But there’s a remarkably easy way to solve this problem.

People are used to thinking in terms of higher and lower, at which ‘higher’ is associated with ‘better’ and ‘lower’ with ‘worse’. This vertical manner of thinking might be a relic from the past, in which religion was very prominent and in which higher meant closer to heaven, and in which heaven was good. But whatever metaphor was responsible for the pyramid-structured hierarchies we tend to visualize in our heads, it’s a fact that it’s omnipresent in our conceptual frameworks.

But let me ask you something: what would happen if we would turn this vertical hierarchy on its side? If we would obtain a horizontal ‘hierarchy’? Would we then still have a hierarchy? Probably not, for the distinction between higher and lower ranks would have disappeared. It’s just left and

right, with left – for example – being the social sciences and right the natural sciences – in case you order the sciences based on a criteria such as ‘nature dominance’. Or you could put the natural sciences on the left hand side and the social sciences on the right – in case the variable of choice would be something like ‘people dominance’. Whatever criteria you use for ordering the sciences, the hierarchy will have disappeared, and hence the negative consequences for a science appearing at the bottom of the ranking.

It’s a very easy change in ordering the sciences, but one who doesn’t entail the negative consequences of a vertical hierarchy.

## Why Discrimination Is Reasonable According to Karl Popper

A while ago, I had a discussion with a friend of mine: we were talking about how people from different cultures interacted with each other. My friend claimed – and he was quite serious about it – that ‘All Moroccans are aggressive’. ‘How do you know?’ I asked him, ‘Have you met *all* Moroccans?’. ‘No’, he said, ‘but the ones I’ve met, were all aggressive’. And while he said this, an idea popped into my mind: Karl Popper and his falsification theory. And I came to a rather unexpected conclusion..

You might have heard of Karl Popper. He is a big name in (the history of) philosophy of science. Popper was a proponent of a tenet called ‘critical rationalism’, and he is best known for the notion of ‘falsifiability’ he came up with, in which falsifiability refers to ‘*the inherent testability of a scientific hypothesis*’. Popper used the notion of falsifiability as a criterium to distinguish science from what he called ‘pseudo-science’, in which a pseudo-science would be any possible ‘science’ that makes unfalsifiable claims. An example of an unfalsifiable claim would be: God exists. It is impossible – by means of empirical investigation – to falsify this claim. Therefore, according to Popper, religion, or at least this religious claim, is non-scientific.

Given that there are unfalsifiable claims, there must also be falsifiable claims: an example of the latter which is often used is: All swans are white. You can see why this claim is falsifiable: if you’d come to see one swan that is non-white, this claim has proven to be wrong. And even though you’re unable to prove the claim that ‘All swans are white’ is true, you *can* prove that it’s *not-true* – thus falsify it. The presumption underlying the notion of falsifiability is that, as long as a falsifiable claim is not falsified, it should for the time being accepted to be true. There is after all no reason to suppose it is not.

Now, let’s go back to my friend and his seemingly discriminatory beliefs. Because if you take a closer look, it appears that discrimination and falsifiability are two sides of the same coin. Why is that? Well, let’s assume that

we would pose the hypothesis that ‘All Moroccans are aggressive’ – like my friend seemed to do. This claim is clearly falsifiable: one non-aggressive Moroccan is sufficient to prove the claim wrong. Now, let’s say we’d go to a bar and meet a few Moroccans. And, as my friend expected, these people are indeed aggressive. Thus far, Popper couldn’t blame my friend for holding on to the claim ‘All Moroccans are aggressive’. After all, the claim hasn’t been falsified yet.

The point being: doesn’t my friend apply the same method as is used in the sciences? Making bold conjectures and, based on data, either refute them or not? We don’t seem to have much of a problem with claiming that all ‘Swans are white, until it has been proven wrong. So why would a different claim applying the same ‘scientific’ methods, when applied to members of our own species, suddenly be discriminating? Isn’t it utterly reasonable to hold on to your claims until they’ve proven to be wrong? Or in the case of my friend: to hold on to his ‘discriminatory belief’?

Note that I am not claiming that discrimination is reasonable *in itself*. What I am claiming is that we cannot accuse people of holding seemingly unreasonable beliefs if *they* (these people) haven’t been proven wrong in holding this belief. In other words: although *we* might have had good experiences with Moroccans, *they* - my friend, for example – might not. And, given Popper’s theory, this makes their beliefs no less reasonable to hold than ours.

## The Life of a Twenty-something

Most of the people that are in their early twenties seem to have *no clue* what profession to choose. They appear to be lost in the vast range of opportunities that they have to choose from. But why is that these ‘twenty-somethings’ feel this way? And how might they solve this issue?

### From Stability to Instability back to Stability

Let’s start by taking a general perspective on the life of a twenty-something (being: a person who is in his twenties). The issue of what occupation to choose is by no means the only issue the twenty-something has to deal with. In general the following statement holds: as a twenty-something you are part of a transition-phase in life; a transition from stability, through instability, back to stability.

For the first part of her (I will say ‘her’ instead of ‘him/her’) life, the twenty-something-to-be did not have the freedom to choose whatever she believed was best. Or at least not concerning ‘big’ matters. It were the parents that took the decisions for her. They were the ones deciding what kindergarten, primary school, high school and – in some cases even – university she would attend. Also, within each of these institutions, the space to manoeuvre was limited. There were fixed programmes she had to attend. Resistance would have been futile, since her opinion was considered mostly irrelevant. The twenty-something-to-be was aware of her limited capacity to change the *status quo*, which made her suppress the need to reflect on the situation.

But it was not only regarding education that this (apparent) lack of control over her life had arisen. Decisions of where to live, what sports or musical instruments to play, and of course financial issues, were mostly if not exclusively handled by her parents. It was only when the twenty-something-to-be began attending university that freedom rose its head. And it is here that the trouble starts. Because even though freedom in itself is not what troubles the twenty-something-to-be, its counterpart – called ‘responsibility’ – is what makes her tremble. It is the responsibility for the consequences of her own actions that leaves her in a state of apathy. Now *she* has to take the decisions



that up till that point in her life were made by everyone but her.

This phase of by times close to existential doubt ends when the twenty-something has gained long-term stability in her life again. Like being child, becoming a member of the working class implies the familiar presence of fixed rules and the limited need for self-reflection. Having made a choice of what occupation to pursue, and the act of actually pursuing this occupation, makes the twenty-something become immersed into a new institutional structure, making her rest in the faith of having found certainty after a very uncertain period in her life.

### **From Farmer to Professor**

Back to the main issue. Many twenty-somethings appear to feel lost in the sense that they totally don't know what profession to choose after finishing their studies. What more can we say about this feeling of 'being lost'? The first thing we could notice is that this feeling appears to be a defining characteristic of what it means to be a twenty-something: it is a property that, by default, is present in any twenty-something's set of basic characteristics. Given that it is a defining characteristic, it seems reasonable to assume that this feeling has been around forever. But this is not the case...

When I asked people in their fifties whether they knew what profession to choose when they were in their early twenties, they mostly replied negatively. However, when I asked the same question to my grandparents, they said the following: 'Well, we didn't really have a choice about what kind of job to do.' My grandfather told me that he grew up in a farmer's family, and that from a very early age it was more or less 'obvious' that he would become a farmer himself. My grandmother, the eldest girl of thirteen children, was at the age of fourteen forced to quit her studies so that she could assist her mum in managing the ever-growing household. 'But', I asked my grandmother, 'was there no-one in your family who attended university?' 'Yes, one of us did,' she said, '*He had the talent to do so.*' My grandmother assured me that this scarcity of university-attending students was very common among families in those days (70 years ago).

So it seems that the feeling of don't knowing what profession to choose, as experienced by so many twenty-somethings today, is in fact a relatively new phenomenon. That is: until two generations ago this feeling wasn't widely shared among twenty-somethings. And the reason for this is, as my

grandparents explained, quite obvious: people didn't *effectively* have a choice about what to do with their lives. I say 'lives' instead of 'professional lives', since also regarding other matters in life (religion and to a lesser extent marriage) the autonomy of twenty-somethings appeared to be limited. One could say that, in principle, my grandparents still had the option to deviate from what was expected of them. Assuming that they would have had the financial means to do so (which they didn't), they could in principle indeed have done so. But in practice, given the social norms and values, they were either explicitly or implicitly discouraged from pursuing higher education or choosing a non-farming/housemaid job.

Nowadays the societies we grow up in are organized in a manner that is fundamentally different from the society of (let's say) 70 years ago. Today, in contrast to two generations ago, the financial resources required for attending university are available to almost anyone who has the capacity and desire to attend university. Scholarships, government-funded studies, cheap loans and financially affluent parents are among the prime factors that have drastically reduced the chance of being unable to fund one's higher education.

Next to a shift in the financing of studies, a society-wide 'mental' shift seems to have taken place. This is easily seen by taking a look at an arbitrary high school: a child who receives a certificate that allows him to pursue higher education is nowadays frowned upon if he decides not to do so. Whereas two generations ago a farmer-son would by default become a farmer *unless* she had very good reasons not to do so, nowadays a farmer-son by default attends university *unless* he has very good reasons not to do so. This mental shift might be due to changes in our educational system. Today we have a system in which any child goes through a university-preparing teaching scheme, thereby maximizing their chance to attend university.

Note also that the financial- and mental shift might be interdependent: a shift in outlook towards children's education might cause a change in educational funding, and *vice versa*.

### **Opportunities, opportunities, opportunities**

But attending university is in itself no reason to become clueless about what kind of job to pursue. So explaining why it is that many more children today attend university than two generations ago does not explain why these people feel lost when reaching their twenties.

Although not a direct cause of ‘apathy’ among many twenty-somethings, one thing is for sure: pursuing higher education provides anyone with the potential to have more choices regarding what job to pursue. By attending university, the twenty-something knows that – without even looking at the labour market – she will be eligible for more occupations than she was before entering her studies. This fact implies that, when the twenty-something finally settles on a job, there will be more occupations (compared to her not having done her studies) she could have chosen but didn’t. It is the possibility that later on she might reflect upon her life and think ‘I could have chosen better’ that could be part of the explanation of the apathy among twenty-somethings. And since this possibility has increased over the last decades, so has the apathy among twenty-somethings.

Another consequence of higher education that isn’t necessary obvious is that over the course of her education the twenty-something’s interests might change; that is, the occupations/sciences the twenty-something found interesting before embarking on her studies, she might not find interesting anymore when she has finished her educational process. For example: she might finish her first year of university wanting to become a business-consultant, only realizing after finishing her second year (which included courses in philosophy) that she is much more passionate about philosophy. It is not the *change* in what she finds interesting that makes the twenty-something doubt about what kind of profession to pursue, as much as having experienced that whatever it is that she finds interesting can in fact change. And the idea that – as in education – she could choose a job that she likes now but possibly not anymore in the future increases her uncertainty regarding what job to choose.

Education is merely one of the factors making a twenty-something doubt her occupational choice; it is the part that transforms her from ‘the inside out’. Now, let’s take a look at how the outside world (i.e., the world external to the twenty-something’s mind and body) contributes to the doubts held by the 21st century twenty-something. There are a number of reasons due to the outside world because of which twenty-somethings nowadays have such a hard time choosing an occupation. First of all, because of the ever-increasing specialization, there are simply many more occupations she has to choose from than there were two generations ago. Whereas in the past there might not have been (many) alternatives next to becoming a farmer, nowadays there are literally thousands and thousands of occupations she *has to* (not only *can*) choose from, and each of these occupations is partitioned into many areas

of specialization.

Also, because of globalization and the prominence of the internet, many barriers have been taken away that could have prevented the twenty-something from 20 years ago from doing whatever it was that she wanted to do. In other words: there is no excuse anymore for not starting a business or for not working at a big firm on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean. There is nothing but her own courage to withhold her from pursuing her aspirations; a scary thought. To exemplify this, let's return to the case of my grandmother. It was clear to her that, after assisting her mum, she would marry a farmer and take care of his household. She might not have liked having few – if any – options about what 'job' to pursue, but that was simply the way it was. A positive side effect from her having limited options was that she was ripped of the responsibility to decide what her future would (not) come to look like. It is in this sense that she might have been lucky, for she was saved from the daunting soul-searching journey so many twenty-somethings today are forced to go through.

## Options

I have mentioned the word 'options' more than once. I dare to say that most people believe that having options is a good thing. Certain philosophers even claim that autonomy (as in having the freedom to decide what one's life goals are, how to pursue them and whether or not to actually pursue them) is intrinsically valuable. This is a conviction I do not necessarily share.

Like anything, having options becomes a problem if one faces *too* many options. And I believe this is the issue today's twenty-somethings are facing. Specialization, the internet et cetera have drastically increased the number of career-options a twenty-something could fulfill; they have increased them to such an extent that she, being a rationally bounded creature (as any human being is), is both unable to overview all of them, let alone compare each option to each other option. Although impossible, the latter is required in order to make an optimal decision. After all, how can the twenty-something ever come to know whether she has made the best choice if she hasn't considered/compared all options?

Next to there being too many options, there might be options that are incomparable. Why? Because the values they allow one to achieve are not 'convertible to the same currency'. Think about the choice between becoming a charity worker or an investment banker. The first job might be better in

terms of helping those who need help; the second might be better in terms of utilizing one's intellectual capabilities. But which one of these criteria is most important, and why? And how much more important? These are questions that do not have an obvious (if any) answer.

Back to the claim that having options is not necessarily a good thing. Let's return to the case of the farmer's son. Given that the farmer's son knows that he has no choice but to become a farmer, he is likely to never experience the regret (or the apathy caused by the prospect of regret) that today's twenty-something faces. Nevertheless, when we analyse the farmer's son situation, and come to see that his only 'option' is to become a farmer, we tend to feel sorry for him. It seems like having only one option is really not having an option at all, making his 'choice' to become a farmer look more like an act of coercion than an act of free will, contradicting the autonomy many of us find so valuable. However, due to this same lack of options, the farmer's son will have no choice but to rest in his faith. He simply cannot do anything to alter his situation: he can only accept or resist his situation. He will accept his situation, because not doing so would decrease his happiness.

For today's twenty-something it is (almost) impossible to rest in her faith, since, due to the autonomy she has but the farmer's son didn't, she is faced with a never-ending string of opportunities. This makes it very difficult for her to be satisfied with any particular option. After all, it is very likely that, among all the opportunities out there, there is one that would be preferred to this one, if only she would find – or would have found – it. It is this observation that leaves her in a perpetual state of downgrading the options that are effectively available to her, and thereby her happiness. So even though the twenty-something of today has more autonomy than the farmer's son of two generations ago, it does not follow that the twenty-something will be happier than the farmer's son. In other words: more choices don't necessarily imply more happiness.

### **Intuition**

In the last section we stumbled upon a non-trivial observation. Namely: because of the vastness of opportunities the twenty-something faces and her limited rational capacities to oversee all of them, rationality alone is not sufficient for the twenty-something to choose the 'best' option. It is after all impossible to compare all options, hence to know if – and when – she found the best option.

But even though it appears impossible to choose the best option, one thing is for sure: she has to make a decision. Even the decision not to pursue a career is a choice, and should therefore be compared against other options. Since it is impossible to compare all occupations in terms of how well they score on all relevant criteria (loan, chance to develop yourself etc.), the twenty-something has to make use of some sort of ‘selection device’, that pre-selects a subset of the set of all occupations. This is required to allow her to compare each member of this smaller set to each other (based on how well they fare with regard to the relevant criteria). By doing this, she might be able to find a ‘local maximum’: that is, the best occupation *given* this limited set of occupations. That is all she can hope for given the rationally limited creature that she is.

Assuming that she doesn’t want to randomly pre-select some occupations, the twenty-something has to determine the criteria she finds most relevant for composing this pre-selection. However, this course of action might prove to be unsuccessful, due to the incomparability of criteria (money versus altruism, for example). But this problem might be circumvented.

The answer to picking the criteria must come from something ‘non-rational’ or ‘irrational’ – although I find the latter term misleading, as I will explain later. The non-rational element, on the basis of which the twenty-something might be able to execute her rational machinery, should make clear on a very basic whatever she finds valuable and what not: that is, it should provide her with her most basic wants. These basic wants must come from a place within the twenty-something that holds the instantiating power to all her actions. Let’s call this place the ‘unconscious mind’.

But the unconscious mind’s instantiating power comes at a cost: it is inaccessible to the conscious mind. And since rationality resides within the conscious mind, neither is it accessible to rational deliberation. Now, although the unconscious mind is not accessible, its ‘output’ is. Its output is what we call ‘intuition’, and manifests itself through those inexplicable feelings of something just ‘feeling right’ or ‘feeling wrong’. Although our intuition doesn’t come with any reason for why it is that something feels good or bad, it does something that is at least as important: it provides us with the values we need to choose what we want.

### **Intuition in practice**

Since intuition is non-rational, it cannot communicate through thoughts: it

communicates solely through feelings. But how should the twenty-something go about interpreting these feelings? How does she know what feelings will lead her in the right direction, whatever this might be, and which in the wrong direction? The answer is simple: through trial and error.

There are various reasons why trial and error seems to be the best, if not the only, way for the twenty-something to go about finding the (locally) best occupation. As I explained before, the twenty-something isn't born with a fixed set of desires; nor with a fixed set of capabilities. Throughout her life, she, for whatever reason, might decide on developing certain skills (e.g., playing piano or mathematics), and, parallel to these developments, she will develop a corresponding level of affinity with *practicing* these skills.

Next to developing affinity, or 'preferences', for practicing certain skills, the act of practicing skills also shows the twenty-something her relative ability in practicing these skills. For example: someone who, after comparing her skills, finds herself to be relatively good in a certain subject area (e.g., mathematics). Then, after having looked at her own capabilities, the twenty-something can decide to look at how her abilities compare to those of others. Based on this observation, she can find out in what field she could potentially make the greatest contribution to society. This is obviously beneficial to society, but just as much to the twenty-something herself, for it is because of the fact that she knows that she does what she is best at – either in terms of her own skills or compared to others – that any negative feelings, that might result from questioning the usage of her capacities, will be minimized.

Furthermore, a nice feature of the twenty-something looking for her relatively best skill is that she is guaranteed to find one. Even those who are negatively minded are at least sure to have a least bad capability.

This observation naturally leads us to the following conclusion: the twenty-something has to engage in all sorts of activities or occupations in order to obtain her preferences for them. Because she lacks any absolute sense of what she likes most, she cannot *a priori* (that is, before undertaking any action) know what skill, and hence what occupation, suits her best. Given this conceptual background, it might be that her feeling of don't-knowing-what-to-do is in fact an indicator of the fact that the twenty-something has spent too much time looking for this non-existent absolute preference ranking ('soul-searching', as one might call it), and too little time actually developing such preferences. This also leads us to what might be a solution to the twenty-

something's apathy. Namely: by engaging in different activities or subject areas, and developing various skills, the twenty-something *creates* as well as *experiences* her preferences towards the respective subject areas or skills. Hence this is the first step away from apathy.

'But', the twenty-something might ask, 'how do I know when to stop the trial-and-error process?' One can look at this process from an economical point of view: the act of finding a satisfying occupation is nothing but a cost-benefit analysis. Given the inevitable diminishing marginal utility of any effort put into the trial-and-error process, surely a point will be reached at which the twenty-something's hope of finding the best occupation and her satisfaction with her currently preferred option cancel out. It is at that point that the truly best occupation, in terms of maximizing utility, has been found.

### **The rationality of being non-rational**

We have established that rationality alone is not sufficient for the twenty-something to choose a satisfying occupation. In order to find such an occupation, a 'non-rational' component must be introduced: the unconscious mind. But somehow we seem to have difficulties with our choices being (at least partially) determined by a non-rational element.

It might very well be that, in this 21st world we're living in, rationality is put on a pedestal, and everything non-rational is considered a source of errors, leading us astray from our objectives. We are taught to ignore our intuitions wherever possible; at least when there are 'rational' arguments at hand. This might be due to the fact that non-rational factors are beyond our control, thereby making us to some extent a slave to our feelings, thus decreasing our perceived autonomy. But you could ask yourself the question: what is the value of being in control if your 'controlled' life doesn't cohere with your intuitions? What if letting go of control is *required* in order to explore the full range of opportunities, thereby unlocking the door behind which the realm of unexplored potential resides?

If any, the message of this article is that value cannot be rationally constructed. The ways through which we might achieve what we value can be rationally constructed, but the value itself comes from a domain that is distinct from any rational – or even conscious – part of ourselves. Although this might be difficult to accept for any person taught to think carefully about any choice in life, it is a prerequisite for embarking on the rational process: first you have to accept what you value in order to try and set out a path to



reach that which you value.

So one could say that being non-rational, to a certain extent at least, is a *prerequisite* for being rational. If you don't allow yourself to act on non-rational impulses, you have no basis on which to cast the rational power, thereby excluding the possibility of doing that which you might value. And isn't that what we all want to do? To do what we value? If so, we might as well embrace the non-rational, or even stronger: claim that it is rational to be irrational.

## **Love**

In this last section I want to focus at another potential source of uncertainty for any twenty-something: love. Being in-between the period of life in which love was yet unable to be experienced, and the part in life in which love is deemed to be a relic of the past (or 'has changed into mutual compassion'), there is this period in which the twenty-something is likely to feel the need to find a future life partner.

But what is love? What characteristics does the twenty-something's future partner need to have? Are the negative aspects of the relationship she is currently in likely to fade away over time? Or are they are structural component of the chemistry she is (not) having with her current partner? And how to distinguish between the two? If she would end the relationship now, would it leave her forever with a feeling of deep regret for having let this opportunity pass by? Or will it – in retrospect – prove to be a milestone on her way to finding that perfect partner with whom she will spend the rest of her life?

These are questions that any twenty-something is likely to ask herself at a certain point in time. It seems to be the case that most people get married around the age of 30, often being the culmination of a relationship that has been underway for at least a couple of years. A quick calculation shows that, assuming the latter to be true, the twenty-something should meet her life partner not much later than the age of 25. And the more this age approaches, the stronger becomes the twenty-something's doubt about the status of her current relationship, or, if she doesn't currently have a partner, the stronger gets the urge to find a potential life partner.

However, the great problem with any romantic relationship is that only in retrospect can be determined whether it has been a good decision to

continue the relationship. It might be the case that, at this point in time, the twenty-something and her partner experience struggles that will grow larger and larger as time goes by. But the question of whether these struggles are merely obstacles to overcome on the road to living happily ever after, or that they are symptoms of a profound mismatch between the two, is impossible to answer up front. Here too it seems that only intuition can guide the way, since the experiences that could provide the twenty-something with the relevant information lie in the future, and are thus (for now; the moment we're always living in) beyond her experience.







## About the author

Rob Graumans (1991) has a background in business, economics, artificial intelligence and more. He has a MSc Philosophy of Science from the London School of Economics. Rob has a blog named *The Young Socrates* at which he writes philosophical articles, and which attracts more than 6.000 unique visitors a day.

