

PART 8: INTERLUDES

You may skip the interludes if you are not interested in the topics. Here are some examples of how ideas pushed too far become dangerous. Again, ask how to gain the benefit of the idea without falling into the badness. How do you draw lines and why?

Interlude 1: Reductionism and Holism

It is not clear to what extent Smith stressed the following idea and how important the idea was to him. The idea became basic to social analysts and political planners after Smith, in particular to the followers of Jeremy Bentham in the early 1800s in economics and to biology after Darwin.

We should not think of society as more than the individuals that make it up. Society is not greater than the sum of its parts. The whole is not greater than the sum of its parts. Think of society as coming from the interaction of individuals. To understand what is happening, look at individuals acting strategically in their best interests, and then look at interactions of such individuals. Society is the result. In science, this view is “reductionism” and in social science it is “methodological individualism”.

Individuals need not foresee the outcome of their strategies and interactions for society to arise out of individual strategies and interactions alone. It is not necessary that individual rational foresight produce society. Society can arrive at a result not foreseen by individuals. Later, analysts need to see how the result did arise out of interactions of strategic individuals. Biologists use this approach to explain animal social lives. Beaver, ant, bee, termites, and wolf societies do not need to be made up out of rational members who foresee their social lives and work toward their social lives in order for families, hives, colonies, and packs to arise.

It is good to begin analyses from this approach to see how far you can get. Then, you can add ideas about society as greater than the sum of its parts and about how the whole determines its parts (society determines individuals) as you need them, knowing better what you do.

Both Liberals and Conservatives take both sides of this issue. They wish to say that (a) society arose out of individual action and interaction, and (b1) society is a whole greater than its parts and (b2) society determines individuals. Liberals and Conservatives are so opportunistic and so inconsistent that I do not sort out the patterns of their abuse but I do bring up examples when relevant.

Interlude 2: If Selfishness Works at All Levels, Why be Rational at all?

Combined, these results lead to an odd outcome, to a contradiction. On the one hand, we need to let individuals think and act freely. Only individuals know what is best for them and only individuals know how to rationally efficiently seek it. We need to apply Reason to social ends and institutions and to the whole of society. On the other hand, we should not use Reason to plan the final outcome or to guide

toward what we think is a beneficial outcome unless the initial conditions are so screwed up that free action cannot yield the best outcome. We may use our Reason to evaluate the final outcome but we should not use Reason to plan a best outcome or guide us to it.

What then are the roles of thinking through and of planning? What is the role of Reason in this world if this world that does not rely on individual intellect except as a limited means to another end? What is the role of non-Reason such as emotion, desire, demand, tradition, and religion? What is Reason all about if society is the result of individual actions and interactions OR if society is an integrated whole that is greater than the sum of the parts and determines the parts? What is Reason all about if society controls the minds of individuals?

This result might seem silly but it has serious results. It is behind the “me” thinking of Conservatives and Liberals. President Reagan convinced Americans they did not have to think, worry about social outcomes, worry about social morality, or be good thoughtful citizens; all they had to do was be greedy, seek profit, seek self-interest, buy a lot of crap, connive for a good job, and everything would turn out fine. People really did act this way and really did use this line of thought to enable their selfishness. We have never really gotten out of it. The spirit is captured in the movie “Wall Street” where Gordon Gecko (Michael Douglas) says “Greed is good”.

Western thought has long stressed the separation of Reason and Non-Reason, in particular Emotion. Adam Smith did not invent this distinction. Ironically because Smith and other Liberals believed in the power of Reason, Smith’s model bolstered the distinction and helped pave the way later for Non-Reason to dominate. Westerners began to see emotion and creativity as more important than Reason.

Darwinist thinking intensified concern over the role of Reason when Darwin showed that the biological world could come to be without any foresight or rational planning. In addition, the idea that organisms can act rationally in pursuit of self-interest and their action can lead to a greater outcome played a role in the idea of adaptation and the analysis of outcomes of evolution. Ants don’t have to intend to create a colony when their individual actions lead to a colony. Trees don’t intend to create a forest. No genes or organism intended to create minds when the spinal cord evolved.

The idea that societies can come to patterns through individual action but the patterns are greater than individual action played a role in later analysis in history, sociology, and anthropology. This idea gained strength when combined with the idea that patterns could self-reinforce in a system. This idea became especially strong when analysts believed that society could “get into the heads” of individual people to determine their actions to begin with, and so make social patterns especially stable and strong. Social analysts replaced individual rationality with social roles, social ideas, social symbols, etc.

I do not use this conundrum much more in this essay but it is important to see that it arose and to get a taste of its results. You should think out for yourself relations between individual rationality and what comes out of interacting rational individuals. You should think out for yourself the role on non-Reason in these scenarios.

Interlude 3: "Choice" as Deep American Category

In other work, I write about how Americans see freedom, free individual action, and choice. The topic is too long to bring in here even though it is relevant. Please read the other essays.