

Optimism

Submitted by TCS on 6 July, 2003 - 17:51

Bill Whittle's latest essay [Trinity](http://www.ejectejecteject.com/archives/000056.html) (<http://www.ejectejecteject.com/archives/000056.html>) contains some wonderful remarks about optimism and its role in a creative capitalist society:

*Now I can see a few honest souls who don't really see how cut-throat capitalism helps the poor. Well, that's fair, because capitalism is a study in contrasts. In fact, this would be as good a time as any to admit that I've spent much of my life worrying myself sick about making enough money to pay the bills. You'll just have to take my word for this. I know what it's like to have your phone and electricity cut off. I know what it's like to avoid the telephone and the mailbox – in fact, I know what it's like to avoid a stern knock on the door.
It sucks.*

*But even during the many times I've been out of work, flat broke, worried sick and living off the kindness of my life-saving friends – you guys know who you are – even then, when I was practically throwing up from fear, even then – I have never, ever considered myself a poor person. I have always thought of myself as a rich person experiencing **severe** cash flow problems.*

Attitude.

That is a distinctly American attitude. Optimism. Hope. Ambition. You break these chains in your head first – everything else will follow.

All this applies directly to **TCS**. This may seem paradoxical at first. The rhythm of life that a TCS family aims for has the property that children experience a continual stream of what might be called getting-what-they-want. Their parents try to spare them from pain and frustration whenever that is humanly possible, in just the way that governments do *not* seek to spare citizens in a capitalist society. Right-wingers, especially, might well interpret Bill Whittle's story as a parable about the inevitability of suffering in the great scheme of things, and of the virtue of embracing it. If they made that mistake about entrepreneurs, they would certainly make it about children too.

But they would be fundamentally wrong about both. (And about the analogy between the two: Parents are not governments. They *are* there to help.) What is satisfying in the life of a rich person is not receiving money or spending money, it is the process of solving problems, including the problem of *what to want*. Their objectives and their means of achieving them co-evolve, and it is this process that satisfies them, not the outcome, for the outcome is invariably a new set of unsolved problems and unmet objectives. Likewise, the TCS aspiration is not that of children automatically and instantaneously achieving whatever objective occurs to them, but of their being part of a continuous process of changing and meeting objectives which is itself what-they-want. Not a life free of problems, but a life full of problems *that get solved*.

They get solved by thought – the child's and the parents' – and by time and attention and money and so on. The application of creativity and resources to solving problems, including the modification of one's own preferences as part of one's preferred solution, is not the price that one pays in return for the what-one-wants payoff. On the contrary, the exercise of creativity *is* the payoff, and material objects and other resources are simply the means of exercising it again in the face of the new and better problems (including new and better preferences) created by the solution of the previous problems.

None of the aspirations of TCS engenders more rage and hostility than that of children experiencing a life of getting-what-they-want. The same is true of the creative capitalist lifestyle portrayed by Bill Whittle in *Trinity*. In both cases, the idea – pessimism – that such a lifestyle is not possible is intimately related with the feeling that it is not desirable, that it is *not right*: that if we arrange for some people to have it, then this can only corrupt them and impoverish everyone else. In both cases the opposite is true. In both cases optimism, which is both the feeling that problems can be solved and the enjoyment of solving them, breaks the chains of the self-fulfilling prophesy of endless suffering.

to post comments

Comments

Economic Concepts

Submitted by Economist on 7 July, 2003 - 00:11

When you say talk about “the modification of one's own preferences as part of one's preferred solution”, you use the same term (“preferences“ or “preferred”) to mean two different things (choice and utility),

which makes the statement at best confusing, at worst non-sensical.

Consider the following way to clear the confusion. An individual has preferences. (Forget about whether they change or not with new information, as this is not relevant to clear the basic confusion.) An individual's preferences rank bundles of goods (or activities) in terms of the utility (or satisfaction) they bring him. There is a feasible set of bundles that I can get, given my budget constraint. (The budget constraint takes into consideration what I can sell my time for, what value I assign to leisure, and the fact that time is limited.) For example, I can get the bundle two-computers-and-three-filing-cabinets (Bundle 1),

I can also get the bundle one-computer-and-four-filing cabinets (Bundle 2),

etc.; but the bundle three-computers-and-two-filing-cabinets (Bundle 3) is among those outside my feasible set. Within my feasible set, I will choose the bundle that maximizes my utility, given my budget constraint – in my case, it is Bundle 2: two-computers-and-three-filing-cabinets. I would **prefer** Bundle 3 (it would give me more utility),

but I cannot afford it. Among the bundles I can afford, Bundle 2 is the one that brings me the most utility, the one I **prefer given my constraints**, and, therefore, the one I **choose**.

In other words, one chooses what one prefers (what gives one more utility) given one's constraints. There are three important concepts: preferences/utility, constraints, and choice. Using the same term for preferences/utility and choice assumes away the constraints, and muddles up everything.

Of course, you may **define** preferences in such a way that you can say that I have changed my preferences from Bundle 3 to Bundle 2 after I realized I could not afford the former, and chose the latter instead. But this implicit

definition of “preferences“ raises two immediate problems: (1) in this sense, one changes his preferences all the time and about everything, because one would always want more; and (2) you would still need a term to describe what your “preferences” would be if you had no constraint. By distinguishing preferences as ranking of utilities, and choice as maximizing utility under constraints, the economic way of looking at this avoids the confusion.

On this, you may consult any textbook of economic theory (Friedman's *Price Theory* is good). There is a 300-year analytical tradition in economics about preferences and choice that may be useful in your analyses.

Entrepreneurship is a different matter, but it does not change anything to what I have said above. The entrepreneur or the optimist may be able to change his constraints, but he still has to choose in order to maximize his utility given his (new) constraints.

to post comments

Life is not Economics

Submitted by a TCS reader (not verified) on 7 July, 2003 - 14:09

Economics can be applied to resolve a certain class of problems, the class of problems where what we want to achieve and the sorts of means we ought to employ to achieve it are non-controversial and the only disagreements are over matters of detail.

However, Economics is useless for making decisions as to *what we ought to value* and it cannot be used to predict the outcome of such controversies. For example, before the early nineteenth century, the British government supported the slave trade. Afterward, they decided that the slave trade must be destroyed and worked toward that end. Before the late nineteenth century, slave ships were under the protection of the British Navy, afterward they were hunted. There is no single set of values that can reconcile these two policies and that is because the British changed their minds about the morality of the slave trade.

[Alan Forrester Elegance Against Ignorance \(http://eleganceagainstignorance.blogspot.com/\)](http://eleganceagainstignorance.blogspot.com/)

to post comments

Getting what we want

Submitted by Terra on 24 July, 2003 - 22:21

Why do people get enraged by other people getting what they want? This is a sick old world, that's for sure...

to post comments

one pessimist's opinion

Submitted by Kletta on 24 May, 2006 - 13:41

Maybe people do get enraged by other people getting what they want *in itself*. But I think they can also be enraged by that and something else: like that they get what they want *instead of* helping others get what they want, such as staying alive. Or that they don't care to get enough information about how others live, and assume that everyone can get what they want as easily as they can...

I think that Alan Forrester's post doesn't contradict Economist's. Although it all depends on what you think you ought to value. If you think it is morally wrong to want what you know you cannot get, then (in Economist's words), your choice *ought*, morally, to be your preference. But this is an unusual view with very far-reaching implications, so if someone holds this view, I would like to ask them for more info. And if this view is a part of TCS, I think it could be useful to make it more explicit, so people can see it when they first start learning about TCS.

[to post comments](#)

response to Kletta

Submitted by mammal_mama on 7 January, 2007 - 20:08

But if I want some thing or some lifestyle that's way beyond my current means -- and I want it badly enough -- I'll start rearranging my life and expending tremendous time and energy 'till I figure out a way to get it.

As a mom, though, I truly prefer a simpler lifestyle which frees me to be home with my children. I'm getting what I really want, 'cause I'd be miserable leaving them while I worked three jobs even if it meant I COULD have caviar every day.

And sharing my life with my dear husband, the father of my children, is immensely preferable to ditching him for someone earning ten times as much money.

We haven't given up on making some major financial breakthrough -- but staying together, and being present and available to raise our kids ourselves, are essential to our happiness, way more essential than daily caviar.

Oh, and my experience of attachment parenting has so far showed me that when we listen to our children's communications and care about their happiness, it's as natural as breathing for them to care about the happiness of others, and to work to alleviate suffering in the world. I'm starting to see TCS as the natural unfolding of attachment parenting.

Susan

[to post comments](#)

questions

Submitted by Kletta on 4 March, 2007 - 21:49

"But if I want some thing or some lifestyle that's way beyond my current means -- and I want it badly enough -- I'll start rearranging my life and expending tremendous time and energy 'till I figure out a way to get it."

I think it's not always possible to figure out a way to get it -- at least not for the tens of thousands of people who die of poverty-related causes each day, or the many more who don't have enough to eat.

"As a mom, though, I truly prefer a simpler lifestyle which frees me to be home with my children. I'm getting what I really want, 'cause I'd be miserable leaving them while I worked three jobs even if it meant I COULD have caviar every day."

Wouldn't you like it *even* better if you didn't have to work at all *and* could have caviar every day?

Do you define the word *preference* as "what you prefer given your constraints"? If so, what word, if any, do you use for "what you would choose if you had no constraints"?

Thanks in advance!

[to post comments](#)

work and caviar and preferences

Submitted by canyonstar on 12 March, 2007 - 15:39

my understanding of happiness in life includes a need for meaningful work, so i don't think it would be even better to not work and have caviar every day. to have to work at something that is not meaningful, that is a problem worth solving, caviar or no; but to not work at anything sounds like a meaningless life to me and not something that a person should want... and if they got it, they would soon find out that they do want to do something meaningful.

i don't know of anyone who has no constraints; we are at the mercy of gravity and the things that other people do that affect us and the limitations of our own skin and form. thinking of these constraints- attitude- in a way that considers the possibility of using them as an advantage rather than a disadvantage might help; i'm thinking of the way a person can use an attacker's force coming at them to help defend their self, as learned in self-defense courses.

if people accepted perceived constraints as Truth, they would never press pass them and discover new and better knowledge. many constraints are there, like memes, because someone else said so, or because that is as far as anyone knows at the moment. doesn't mean that that is all there is, that one might not be able to push past or circumvent a constraint and burst into a whole new realm of possibility.

a pessimist ime&o will not try to push past such a barrier. they might be content to allow others to define thier constraints, and believe them, and stay cozy within them albiet disgruntled and dissatisfied.

an optimist will keep looking, keep trying, keep changing one little thing.

imo it is the optimist who will be the one to come up with a way to help the ones who don't have enough to eat, to help those in poverty to see one little thing they can change to help themselves out of poverty.

[to post comments](#)

Constraints

Submitted by mammal_mama on 20 March, 2007 - 01:33

I agree with Canyonstar that we always have some sort of constraint to deal with. And I agree that we all need meaningful work for wellbeing.

But, if I'm right, I think Kletta was asking if I wouldn't prefer to be able to have caviar every day and still be a stay-at-home-mom: meaning I'd still be working at what I want to do (mothering my children) -- but without the current tight budget we usually deal with as a one-income family.

My answer is: sure, that'd be great. But I don't want it enough to actually do very much about it. Sometimes dh or I find a way to bring in a little extra money, and it's nice -- but we're not willing to make the extra commitment of time that would enable us to RELIABLY bring in extra money.

I see your point, Kletta, about the overwhelming constraints of people living in dire poverty ... I also think of the people living under oppressive regimes. I seriously doubt that many people in those situations are able to browse the internet and even give a thought to parenting philosophies such as TCS.

I don't want to be unaware of, or insensitive to, the plights of others. I certainly don't assume everyone else's circumstances are the same as my own. For instance, one low-income mom may be able to feed her family much better than another with the same income, simply because of her greater knowledge of cooking, nutrition, and budgeting.

Also, if two have the same amount of money to spend on groceries -- but one has a car and the other doesn't (and has never even had the opportunity to learn to drive), the one who doesn't drive may have to resort to the nearest store.

If the nearest store's a convenience store with higher prices and a smaller range of available foods, that's going to make a difference in how well each can feed her family.

I think it's good to be sensitive to ways I can improve the lives of those around me -- but bad if I feel so guilty over the inequities in the world that I can't bear to do anything extravagant for my children.

Susan

[to post comments](#)

More articles

- [Are schools inherently coercive?](#)
- [Video Games: A Unique Educational Environment](#)
- [Choosing Creativity](#)
- [Practical TCS](#)
- [There But For An Internet Post Go I...](#)
- [Natural Consequences](#)
- [Don't Wait Until You're Perfect](#)
- [Does Your Child Love Visiting The Dentist?](#)

