

Re: Wearing your conscience.

Source: <http://sci.tech-archive.net/Archive/sci.econ/2004-11/1481.html>

From: Peter Lawrence (peterl_at_netlink.com.au)

Date: 11/25/04

Date: Thu, 25 Nov 2004 00:37:51 GMT

Jim Blair wrote:

>

> *"Peter Lawrence" <peterl@netlink.com.au> wrote in message*

> *news:419E5F38.21AE@netlink.com.au..*

> > *Jim Blair wrote:*

> > >

> > > *"Peter Lawrence" <peterl@netlink.com.au> wrote in message*

> > > *news:419BB3CA.58A5@netlink.com.au.*

> > > > *Jim Blair wrote:*

> > > > >

> > > > > *Wearing your conscience.*

> >

> > .

> > .

> > .

> > > > *Now I could explain that several dollars a day paid in*

> > > > *local currency is better than subsistence farming, and*

> > > > *that living expenses can be much lower in poor countries,*

> > > > *or point out that since Globalization living standards*

> > > > *in most of the 3rd world are rising so fast that obesity*

> > > > *is replacing starvation as the main diet problem, and some*

> > > > *of them are now competing with the US for oil.*

> > > >

> > > > *I've been over this area before. These things are only improvements*

> *FOR*

> > > *THOSE*

> > > > *WHO PARTICIPATE IN THEM. The rest get worse off, since the cheap food*

> > > > *moves*

> > > > *out of their reach. In fact, the food only remains cheap for so long*

> *as*

> > > *there*

> > > > *are mouths it can easily be moved away from; once everyone moves up*

> *the*

> > > > *nominal cash income ladder, nobody is left to provide food so cheaply.*

> > >

> > > *Hi,*

> > >

> > > *You seem to be stuck in a "Zero Sum" mindset. Since "some" people are*

sci.econ: Re: Wearing your conscience.

> > > *clearly better*
> > > *off today in the 3rd World, then there must be others who are worse off.*
> >
> > *No, not at all. You get the same effect even with much weaker constraints,*
> > *e.g. these:–*
> >
> > – *There is all up increase/growth, but one trading country gets more than*
> > *100% of it because of market imperfections. Then there have to be losers*
> *in*
> > *the other country.*
>
> *Hi,*
>
> *I don't claim that there are never any losers because of either trade or new*
> *technology.*
> *Rather, there would be even more losers if neither trade or new technology*
> *existed.*

But that is precisely the point. The losers are quite entitled to disagree with your olympian perspective. And it's really the losers in the world you have to talk into it. Far better to seek adjustments that allow both progress AND no losers.

It also matters whether you are comparing the present and the past, or the present and an alternative present that would have come to be without the changes.

> >
> > – *There are market imperfections and poor institutions in the developing*
> > *country, and the pace of change is high, so that trickle down is not good*
> > *enough to keep everybody from being a loser.*
> >
> > *In fact these much weaker conditions often apply.*
>
> *jeb:*
> >
> > > *But just where are they?*
> > > *50 years ago famine was commonplace in much of the 3rd world: in India*
> > *and*
> > > *China and even*
> > > *in Russia.*
> > >
> > > *So where are the famines today? Except maybe in a few places where the*
> > > *cause is civil war?*
> >
> > *Who says there are FAMINES? That is like an epidemic;*
>
> *Well there used to be lots of famines. The lack of them today tells me that*
> *overall, people have more access to food today than in the past.*

Re: Wearing your conscience.

sci.econ: Re: Wearing your conscience.

No it doesn't. Amartya Sen showed that famines are at least as much the result of dislocations as of absolute shortages. The problem areas I have been pointing at are those of the avoidable dislocations, not of the desired improvements. That is, it is part of the progress we actually have, not of the progress that is aimed at.

And since

> *there are more people today, this greater access is the result of technology*
> *(Green Revolution for example) and trade.*

Basically incorrect. Most of the greater population is still in near subsistence living. Much of the world's trade in things like rice is still very local, e.g. the way you find in Thailand and Madagascar.

>
> *...the more usual*
> *situation is like endemic disease, in which the normal situation is*
> *weighed*
> *down but not stopped.*
>
> *If obesity is up, I think your "endemic starvation" is also down, in*
> *addition to the decline of famines.*

IF. That is wrong. Those who are getting obese are NOT poor, by standards still relevant to developing countries. There, they get child malnutrition through lack of food, leading to higher mortality though not direct starvation.

>
> *...Poverty amidst plenty.*
>
> *Yes, but mostly because the definition of "poverty" has changed. It once*
> *meant "not able to get enough food", and those in poverty were skinny. Now*
> *it means struggling to pay the bills, and we have fat "poor people" watching*
> *TV in their living rooms. Obesity increases as income declines.*

Absolute twaddle, unless you are looking at REALLY unusual countries like the USA. I myself am going through a literally lean period, and I lost weight.

> >
> > *People suffering from this routinely turn up in places like India and*
> *Africa.*
> > *I wrote a letter to the New Scientist on the area, after they printed*
> > *something describing yet another Indian "reform". The letter is at*
> > *<http://member.netlink.com.au/~peterl/publicns.html#NEWSCILET1> and it links*
> > *to*
> > *the original article mirrored at*
> > *<http://www.animana.org/tab1/11throw20millionoff.shtml> (the original is at*
> > *<http://www.newscientist.com/news/news.jsp?id=ns99992057>).*
> >
>

Re: Wearing your conscience.

sci.econ: Re: Wearing your conscience.

> jeb:
> > >
> > > *You say the "invisible poor" are not seen because they die off? Then*
> > *why*
> > > *does that not show up in shorter average lifespans?*
> >
> > > *In an extreme case, they die off (or are not replaced). But the point is,*
> > > *they are NOT in the statistical base. OF COURSE it doesn't show up in*
> > > *average*
> > > *lifespan statistics either.*
> >
> > > *More likely, though, they are the analogue of street people, not so much*
> > > *dead*
> > > *or dying as below the radar.*
>
> > *So many people are worse off, but they don't appear in the statistics. So*
> > *how do you know about them?*

Because totals don't add up, and because you can see them around yet when you try to find off the peg statistics, you find they didn't get counted.

For a simple example, see how Australian street people often don't vote and don't show up as offenders (we have compulsory voting). They have dropped off the radar.

There are lots of ways to estimate the size or existence of unknowns. They do it all the time in proofreading, to see roughly how many errors there are that have not yet been found.

Even without knowing they exist for sure, we can see our methodology is wrong if it ignores them – it makes the data unfalsifiable.

.
. .
. . .
> > > *Sure any given change is likely to produce both "winners" and "losers".*
> > *But*
> > > *we should be glad that our ancestors were willing to change, or we would*
> > > *all*
> > > *be a lot worse off.*
> >
> > > *Tut, tut, wrong definition of the problem. Should our ANCESTORS have been*
> > > *glad of it, at the time?*
>
> > *If they knew that we would be better off, sure.*

Wrong. We are talking about avoidable suffering in the short and medium term, for the sake of people a century and more off. Also, this omits the large group who didn't make it through the short term. Think Highland Clearances and coffin ships.

Re: Wearing your conscience.

sci.econ: Re: Wearing your conscience.

>

> *People often do things that reduce their pleasure but help their children.*

> *College for the kids rather than that Caribbean vacation.*

We aren't talking "pleasure", and we aren't talking children. We are talking making it through the winter and remote descendants, who couldn't even exist without the ancestors making it through the winter.

>

> *>...And those collateral people who did not become*

> *> ancestors? This is the whole*

> *> descendants-of-highland-clearances/Irish-*evictees* thing. You're past*

> *posting*

> *> your bets.*

>

> *Darwin had some ideas on that.*

This supposes it was entirely causal, as opposed to partly the luck of the draw. Darwin never said ALL survivors were the fittest, just that the system pushed things that way.

You're getting dangerously close to blaming the victim, at a philosophical level.

> > >

> > > *>...You*

> > > *just have to hope that there are other offsetting things that come*

> *through*

> > > *fast enough – that the drivers of change trickle down well enough. The*

> > > *pace*

> > > *of change is a large part of today's problems, since people don't have*

> *the*

> > > *chance to get real improvement but are always having to wear (pun!)*

> *the*

> > > *cost*

> > > *up front.*

> > >

> > > *If this were a widespread problem, why do people almost everywhere now*

> *live*

> > > *longer, have access to more information, and travel more, than ever*

> *before?*

> >

> > *They don't, for one thing – unless you only count those in the statistical*

> > *base.*

>

> *Your invisible people again?*

Yes. Don't mock, go out and test – and DON'T design in tests that don't pick them up, ones like "put up your hand if you can't hear me". You won't find many below the radar who have internet access – though I recall seeing one battler who had somehow used a public library's resources to reach this

Re: Wearing your conscience.

newsgroup.

- >
- > >...Africans as a whole are far worse off now than fifty or sixty years
- > > ago, for instance.
- >
- > I agree that Africa is the worst case. But is a typical African really
- > worse off today than the typical African was 60 years ago?

Yes, absolutely. Just look at West African countries, the Sudan, even South Africa once you realise we are specifically looking at the economics and not wider issues. That's not a cop out, on the one hand you should have both since they aren't contradictory, and on the other hand without basic means other values become harder to attain and implement.

- >
- > >....But again, you aren't making the right comparison. The
- > > true comparison is with what WOULD be if the pace of change were not
- > > thrusting us lower in the water, not with what WAS before it got under
- > > way.
- > > Your comparison is with an earlier stage in the exponential growth of the
- > > same depressed upward path – its base is also pushed lower.
- >
- > I say the comparison must be "present" VS "past". I mean everybody is
- > "worse off" when compared to MY idea of what the world would be like today
- > if MY ideas had been adopted in the past.

Then it's definitely worse, unless you pick your reference point to be even deeper in the transitions. Explorers routinely reported how much better off and happier primitives were than 18th and 19th century lower class Europeans. So you can make the present look better if you compare with slums, but it's worse if you compare with the pre-industrial. (Archaeologists have confirmed the anecdotal evidence, using skeleton sizes as a proxy for economic wellbeing.)

And if you turn round and say that that wasn't sustainable, you commit two mistakes. You forget that it's only unsustainable IF you go for large population growth etc. (which wasn't huge with those lifestyles), and you are switching to comparing with an alternative present after all – the present of a primitive lifestyle trying to keep going with too many people and not enough resources.

We have something of a natural experiment if we look at the two communities in Fiji.

- > >
- > > What I would prefer is the pace of change and improved trickle down that
- > > lets
- > > everybody be a winner, with an immediate gain in the multiplier and fall
- > > in
- > > the exponent. That is an overall improvement unless you really have a very

Re: Wearing your conscience.

sci.econ: Re: Wearing your conscience.

- > > *great tendency to defer gratification, and it is an improvement for*
- > *everybody*
- > > *who is now a casualty.*
- > >
- > *I would like that too. But the realistic options are to adjust to trade*
- > *and new technology, or to try to stop them.*

Who says it's unrealistic? Are you taking only what is as what is realistic?
By that measure progress itself is unrealistic. And, in fact, it IS
"adjustment". PML.

--

GST+NPT=JOBS

I.e., a Goods and Services Tax (or almost any other broad based production tax), with a Negative Payroll Tax, promotes employment.

See <http://member.netlink.com.au/~peter1/publicns.html#AFRLET2> and the other items on that page for some reasons why.