

An Enquiry Concerning Social Organisation

by Berwyn Powell

Wake up. It's 2 minutes to midnight.

The last century or so has seen scientific discoveries and technological innovations made at a breakneck pace. We have gone from a world without radio in 1900 to one where atomic clocks and satellites have made it possible for people to pinpoint their position on the Earth's surface to within centimetres without even having to push a button. These advances have in turn led to a population explosion and (at least in the west) quality of life has been steadily increasing.

With great power, however, also comes great responsibility. The late 19th and early 21st centuries have also seen an exponential increase in human inflicted environmental damage and the advent of state-sponsored mass surveillance programs. Technology may have advanced, but the fundamental structure of our society has remained largely unchanged for millennia. We have created for ourselves potent tools, but do we trust the intentions of those who wield them?

One thing is clear: if technology continues to advance at its current trajectory, but our existing biases and social norms remain unchanged, our species' days are numbered.

We have lived as we live for centuries; not necessarily because it is the best (and certainly not because it is the only) way to live, but because it is the way we have been taught to behave.

This short piece aims to question some of our preconceived notions of what society is, and should be; and will hopefully provide food for thought and perhaps even a start to further research.

It's 2 minutes to midnight. Perhaps it is time we questioned who we grant power over our lives? Perhaps, it is time we woke up?

Disclaimer: This piece is not the result of a carefully researched academic investigation, but merely my thoughts and observations over the last few years. I doubt that any of the ideas contained herein are original, but I feel that gives them no less merit. Others have undoubtedly said all of this before, but I do not reference them as I have reached the same conclusions independently and (I hope) those conclusions are obvious enough to be considered 'common knowledge'.

Sensory Perception

Humans, are subjective beings. We perceive the world around us through our senses which gather information about our surroundings; its shapes, sounds, colours, textures, smells etc. Our brains then process this information and use it to construct a mental-model of our environment. As we can not possess any data about our environment which does not come through the mediation of our senses, we must accept their perceptions as truth. For example, if my brain interpreted the colour of grass as blue, lacking any information to corroborate this against, for me grass would be blue.

Furthermore, everyone possesses senses which differ in their functioning and efficacy. Many people are deaf to certain sections of the audible spectrum (and can not hear sounds which are clear to others), whereas some are capable of seeing colours which are invisible to the majority of people (tetrachromacy). Whatever senses we are born with will then alter over the course of our lives as a result of the random forces acting upon them. Accident or age may impair some, while practise and regular use may make us more sensitive to others. As these changes are inevitably different for each individual, even if two people were somehow born with functionally identical senses, they would soon diverge to become unique.

Identical stimuli will also be interpreted by each of us in a varying fashion depending upon our previous experiences. Those associated with negative events in our past will cause us distress, whereas any positive memories will give us pleasure. Phobias are a good example of this, as to some a certain object or phenomena is a source of intense fear and discomfort, while to others they present no such problems. To a lesser extent preferences in flavour, colour, and music can all also be attributed to the way in which the decoding of sensations differs from individual to individual.

In addition to this, our thoughts are believed to be entirely the product of concepts or stimuli of which we have already experienced. By combining these components together we can create an almost endless variety of new ideas. In a similar fashion to cooking, we are not only capable of producing a large number of recipes from a small number of basic ingredients, but will also be able to anticipate their likely characteristics based upon those of their constituent parts. Once we have created such a recipe, we can then in future easily call it to mind without having to reassemble it from the ground upwards.

The downside to this, is that we will find it difficult to conceive of an idea constructed from components we were previously unaware of. To return to the example of food, if I had never tasted chilli I would find it almost impossible to imagine what a curry might taste like; the concept to me would be totally alien. As we can not perceive the world through the senses of another, we would have equal difficulty in visualising how it might appear from their point of view. Someone who had only lived in a desert could not be expected to have a conception of the ocean, nor those who dwell on islands one of a world without it.

Further complicating this issue is the human system of associating objects and concepts with words. These labels (cat, big, grey etc.) allow us to refer to something without having to describe it's characteristics in-depth (e.g. furry, four-legged animal that purrs and eats mice); saving us time and resources, much like the mental instructions mentioned earlier. As we share these labels with others (and are incapable of understanding how they may perceive them), however, we can not be sure that we all comprehend them in the same way.

If two people are told by their parents that a pear is green, they will both then subsequently refer to that colour as green, but they may not be perceiving the same hue. This is known to happen to a certain extent with colour blindness; as some people lack the necessary cells to perceive certain colours, instead observing only a very limited palette. If as a child they are taught that a particular shade of grey is called red, they will then naturally refer to it as such, despite not seeing it as those without colour blindness do.

The implication of all this, is that no two people view the world identically. We all perceive it through our own unique perceptual fingerprint. As our own viewpoint is the only one we can experience, effectively (for us), that is reality. None of us can observe the world objectively, nor can we do so through the subjectivity of another. A disco would be a very different place for a blind person than for someone who was deaf, but neither of them would be experiencing it in the same way as those without such ailments.

Coercion and the Implications of Subjectivity

Whenever we make a decision (conscious or unconscious) we will naturally be influenced by how the world appears to us. If another person was to be faced with a seemingly identical situation they, perceiving the world differently, might well take a

varying course of action (any processes with different starting conditions are bound to have different end states). The conclusion they would reach is not necessarily any better or worse than our own, merely based upon different evidence. We would be incapable of acting on the situation in the way which is best suited to them, just as they would be unable to do the same for us.

The issue with this comes when one person is compelled to take a particular course of action by another. Historically, this has often been justified by the person dictating the behaviour of others being in some way better qualified to make their decisions for them; being in possession of greater intelligence, a divine mandate, or familial authority. People would defer to their judgement (whether willingly or unwillingly) because they were considered to have a deeper insight than that attainable by ordinary people.

If, however, no one can comprehend the entirety of any given situation, then any solutions to that situation which they propose must be in some way flawed for anyone except themselves. In this case, that justification for coercion can not be valid. No matter how strong an argument is, it can not be said to be superior to one whose value is unknown.

As noted earlier, certain objects cause us distress. If faced with a situation involving one of those objects we are likely to favour a course of action that avoids confronting them. If another person was then to compel us to take a different action, they could be indirectly causing us harm by forcing negative emotions upon us. As well as mental distress, physical injury can also result from one person overruling the decisions of another. If we were to force someone with a pollen allergy to walk through an arboretum in bloom, would we not be harming them?

As we are incapable of seeing the world from other people's viewpoints, this injury can often be unintentional. If we were unaware that the person in the previous example suffered from hay-fever (and were forcing them to get some exercise in the belief it would be beneficial to their health), we would still be causing them the same amount of harm despite having their best interests at heart. Other people are unlikely to react positively to any hurt we cause them, whether it is intentional or not; and what to us appears the safe and logical course of action, may not necessarily be so to anyone else.

As living organisms, it is in our own best interests to survive. If this were dependent purely upon our access to resources at any given moment, manipulating another member of our species could bring us some benefit. However, our interactions with others are not isolated events, nor do they have no influence on the behaviour of those who observe them. Our every action may not always produce an equal and opposite reaction, but it is logical that others are likely to reciprocate in kind to the way in which we treat them; injuring us in retaliation for harm inflicted, or helping us in recognition of past kindness. As we wish to avoid harm to ourselves, should we not also avoid placing ourselves in a situation where this is likely to happen?

A side effect of being a species of specialists is that, while we all excel at a few particular tasks, very few of us possess all of the skills necessary to keeping ourselves alive. By cooperating with each other, we not only ensure that we have access to the full gamut of these skills, but that there will be others who can perform our tasks if we are prevented from doing so by illness or injury. As we rely on these others for our survival, acting in a way which is likely to alienate them can only injure ourselves. People are unlikely to collaborate with someone who is known to be petty or aggressive, when they could instead be working with someone who is kind and generous. If we can not perceive the world from the point of view of another, what gives us the right to tell them what to do?

Violence

Despite the obvious benefits of cooperation, many people employ force to take what they want from others. Whether the aggressor is a mugger stealing someone else's money, or one country invading another, this is often based upon the belief that others of your kind are somehow competitors; whether in terms of mates, resources, or beliefs, and that by killing or injuring them that competition will be reduced.

The flaw with this logic is that, even if violence had no effect on the behaviour of others, it makes little sense mathematically. Any conflict is inherently risky, and before attacking another organism, any animal must determine whether the potential benefits outweigh the risks of death or injury. These benefits will always be greatest when there are a small number of individuals; the lower the number of rivals, the higher the percentage difference the removal of one will make. Currently, however, the global population is over seven billion people. Proportionally, the death of any one of whom will make such a small difference, that the risks of conflict must outweigh

any potential gains. When removing one of your rivals only makes a 0.00000001351% difference to the remaining total, how can it be worth risking your life to do so?

Furthermore, the implications of conflict are not merely a balance of probabilities. Humans invariably modify their interactions with others based upon their behaviour; and (as mentioned earlier) if people treat violently with their peers they will be unlikely to receive help from those who hear of their actions. Few take kindly to people who harm their loved ones. Even if they do not directly seek revenge, they will be unlikely to support whatever cause that injury was used to promote. If violence must be used to further a belief or philosophy, then those who preach it can not be secure in the belief that they are right. Those who live by the sword, frequently die by it as well; something that does not lead to a long and happy life.

Not all strife, however, is pre-meditated. As human beings we are ruled by more than just our brains and many of our decisions are not (at least initially) conscious, but merely hard-wired responses to certain stimulus. We have evolved so that in particular circumstances our bodies are able to react without having to wait for conscious approval; thus minimizing the risk of injury where a delayed reaction could have serious consequences (such as picking up a burning hot object). In situations of acute stress our flight or fight response will also cause the release of a mixture of hormones to boost our pain tolerance, reaction speed, and aggression. While extremely useful for fighting off predators, contemporary modes of living mean this adaptation can often be triggered when our lives are not actually threatened.

Much of the world's population now live at a density that is far higher than that experienced by our hunter-gatherer ancestors. The increase in social interactions this brings about causes many who live in towns and cities to become habituated to unnatural levels of stress and anxiety; as they must continually be aware of, and reacting to, the deeds of others. In situations where they think they are relaxed, therefore, these peoples' bodies may actually be in a state of heightened arousal. Any increase in stress under these circumstances, could result in them reacting violently to another person before they are fully aware of what they are doing; merely because their already stressed bodies would be pushed beyond an evolutionary threshold.

As globalisation brings more cultures together, we are increasingly brought into contact with people whose customs and traditions are sometimes frighteningly different from our own. As we do not understand these people we may come to fear

them as a potentially dangerous and threatening unknown. Hate often flows from fear, and those who we despise the most are also often those with whom we can not relate. If we wish to live a life free from fear and violence, therefore, need we just attempt to understand our peers?

Law and Government

In order to protect themselves from violence, most societies control the behaviour of their members through laws. These common codes of conduct aim to ensure that no one can take unfair advantage of their peers. To achieve this, those who do not follow laws voluntarily are threatened with punishment to dissuade them from harming those who do. By the very nature of this system, what applies to a group of people must also apply to all of their members individually; but this is not necessarily to our collective advantage.

Laws, are not the only rules which have an impact upon our lives. As a species we attempt to govern everything from aircraft design, through to the duties of a host, using rules of one form or another. These (in the same way as those of a game) define what the appropriate response should be to particular circumstances or events (if a happens, then you should do b). Just like the rules of a game, however, they can only have a limited scope and will be unable to describe how to deal with previously unforeseen variables. As the complexity of events it tries to model increases, so too will the frequency of situations where the rule ceases to function as originally intended.

All but the simplest of games will inevitably produce situations that are not covered by the rulebook. In contrast to these, any laws governing human behaviour have an almost infinite number of potential variables with which they must contend. Not only is every person unique, but the differences between them will be constantly changing according to their current environment, state of health, or relationship to others etc. Because it is impossible for anyone to take all of this into account, laws by necessity must treat people as one of a few generic templates.

Being more than merely a set of simple attributes, everyone governed by laws must in some way modify their behaviour in order to comply with them. This not only wastes their time and energy (as they must follow a sub-optimal course of action), but can also cause them harm exactly as if a single person were forcing them to do something. Just as a group of people going to a fireworks display would not expect

someone with epilepsy to accompany them, so too are most policies only appropriate to certain individuals. Whatever course of action is decided upon by a government, however, must be followed by each one of their subjects, regardless of its impact upon their personal well-being. If everyone's circumstances are unique, how can a small group of people know what is best for millions of others they have not even met?

Notwithstanding these issues, most people are willing to follow laws in the belief that by so doing they are protected from their less scrupulous peers. From an early age we are told that laws are essential to maintaining peace and order; this being what most of us desire, we are unwilling to question our rulers for fear of upsetting the status-quo. As selfish and irrational as the dictates of our leaders often are, following them would be preferable to living in a world where people were constantly killing and exploiting one another. Unfortunately (despite the presence of laws and those who enforce them) that is exactly the type of world in which we live.

We know, from numerous archaeological and historical records, that as long as people have been making laws, others have also been breaking them. Even with today's life sentences and surveillance states, people are being murdered, mugged, and raped on an everyday basis. The majority of those who commit these acts will be apprehended by the authorities and their actions punished; but this does not help their original victims.

The past is unalterable. As soon as something has been done, it can not then be undone. For someone to be prosecuted for something, they must already have done it. As the victims of a misdeed do not cease to be victims when the perpetrator has been brought to justice, the only people protected by laws are those who are yet to become a target of crime. If seatbelts only discouraged other drivers from crashing into us (and at the same time limited us to driving exclusively on monitored toll-roads), would anyone wear them?

As well as being inefficient, laws also apply differently to the law giver and the governed. In most societies, taking the life of another is seen as the most abhorrent act it is possible for a person to commit; and the punishments for doing so are amongst the most severe permitted by law. Despite this, all countries employ large numbers of their citizens for the very purpose of killing those of another. Furthermore, the members of these so called 'Armed Forces' are often awarded

certain privileges and preferential treatment not available to their law-abiding peers. If laws are supposed to encourage moral behaviour, why then are those who make them the least moral of all?

Money

Aside from people, the other things that laws are designed to protect are their possessions. Just like any other animal, humans require certain things (such as food and shelter) to stay alive. As most of us are only good at producing one or two of these, we need to be able to exchange our skills or produce with those of others in order to survive. Most countries achieve this through the use of a currency, which allows everyone who accepts it to trade with each other regardless of whether they desire what the other party produces. Furthermore, as money does not go off (and uses little space), exchanges can become a two-stage process with the money from selling something kept and used at a later date; effectively allowing people to indirectly exchange the fruits of their labours for a reward of their choosing.

Unfortunately, as financial transactions have become the dominant way in which we acquire anything that we need, we have begun to see the value of things not based upon their usefulness to ourselves or others, but instead purely on their financial worth. As we must work harder to afford something that is expensive than something which is cheaper, we begin to assume that its higher price tag is somehow justified by it having greater benefits for our health or happiness.

What requires the most money to obtain, however, is not necessarily that which is best for us. A car costing many thousands of pounds will contribute far less to a person's well-being than the hundreds of meals the same amount of money could provide. Similarly, many things which can not be bought or sold (such as air and sunlight for example) are either essential to our survival, or of great emotional and physical importance. Having no price (unless they are assigned one arbitrarily), these will never be favoured if thinking purely financially and will often be ignored when large groups or organisations make decisions.

Because each member of a group benefits from the combined efforts of the whole, it is generally expected that they will all somehow contribute to it's collective well-being; those who work most towards the common good, therefore, should also be those who are most valued by society. Money's corruption of our cultural value systems, however, means that many aspire towards careers which are of little benefit to the

community as a whole. As money can be bought and sold like any other commodity, activities such as reselling and speculation (which are limited more by available funds, rather than time) allow those who already have wealth to increase it more rapidly than if they were in some way helping others. Having a higher financial worth, bankers and real estate agents have therefore become more 'valuable' to society than doctors or scientists. By basing our collective measure of worth upon money, we thus encourage parasitism when we should instead be promoting altruism.

Apathy is not the only side-effect of a money economy, as capitalism also encourages competition. This is usually seen as a positive thing, as it promotes market growth and ensures that consumers get the best possible deal. While everyone requires money to purchase what they need, however, they will all also be competitors for the world's finite resources. People's attitudes towards their rivals are very different from those they have towards their friends, and it has been shown that we are far more likely to de-humanize those whose goals we see as opposed to our own. If your neighbour (through working for a rival company) could potentially cause you to lose your job, you are unlikely to treat them as an ally and comrade. If our peers are also our enemies, is it any wonder that wars and violence are so widespread?

Furthermore, things produced by people are not all that can be bought and sold. Most of the world's surface is now "owned" by someone. As laws state that you can not do anything on someone's property without their permission, buying a piece of land and then charging others for the privilege of living on it can be a very profitable enterprise. Plants, animals, and sometimes even other people can all also be bought, sold, and exchanged like any other commodity. These then become the sole possessions of their new owners who can do with them more or less as they please; but this raises an interesting question: what can the justification be for owning something not created by yourself, or given to you by another? The world existed long before humans evolved, why then should certain individuals have a right to use it to the exclusion of all others?

Environment

The planet, is an almost entirely closed system. While gas does escape from the atmosphere, and the occasional meteorite brings some additional minerals to earth, the total volume of such changes is minuscule when compared to that of the world as a whole. Like any other such system, therefore, any chemicals released into the environment will remain circulating within it until they react with another compound.

Unfortunately, this is frequently part of a living organism, and prolonged exposure to certain elements can have fatal consequences. At the time of writing, in London alone an estimated nine and a half thousand people die prematurely every year as a direct result of air pollution.

What kills people, frequently kills other plants and animals as well, and much of the world's species are currently in massive decline. All life is part of a complex web of interdependencies, with the loss of one species causing a cascade of knock-on effects in other organisms. While the loss of a key species such as krill or grasses would have obvious consequences, just as a butterfly beating its wings in one continent can cause a hurricane in another, changes to the fortunes of one life form will effect all others they interact with; such as the loss of an apex predator causing uncontrolled growth in the animals they predate upon.

Humans, like any other animal, have evolved under a particular set of environmental conditions and thus anything which significantly alters the balance of climate and environment away from those conditions will negatively impact our chances of survival. It may seem obvious, but as species we rely upon die out as a result of our actions (such as pollinators being killed by insecticides) we are bound to suffer from their loss. We often flatter ourselves that we have somehow gained mastery over the natural world, but the reality is that we can not live without it.

Unfortunately, the vast majority of environmental damage is not visible in our everyday lives. Much of the worst effected ecosystems are those in the (uninhabited) oceans, and many of the most harmful pollutants are those invisible to the naked eye. Furthermore, the processes that lead to the production of these substances are often extremely profitable, or else not obviously damaging to the environment (such as excess energy use leading to the consumption of more fossil fuels). Being out of sight and mind, we often dismiss the effects of our consumer lifestyles as something to worry about only when they directly effect us; even if we know the eventual outcome of inaction will be catastrophic. What we can not see, however, can definitely still hurt us.

To reiterate, if we destroy our foodstuffs we will starve. If we poison our water supplies we will die. And if we burn off our air, we will asphyxiate. As far as we are aware, life has not evolved anywhere else in the universe. Why should it be doomed to be a failed experiment just because mankind seems hell-bent on self-annihilation?

Many excuse not altering the way in which they live as they will not see the damages that result in their lifetimes; but how can anybody be so callous as to damn the entire future population of their species to a lifetime of suffering just because they do not wish to sacrifice a few comforts?

Authority

For millennia we have deferred to the judgement of those we consider wiser and more knowledgeable than ourselves. When we are unable to find the solution to a problem we know little about, we will generally seek the advice of someone who is more learned in that field. If the recommendations they provide conflict with our own feelings we must then decide whether to continue with our original course of action, or to trust in their deeper level of experience. For example, when submitting to the authority of a doctor we will uncomplainingly endure increased levels of pain as we believe their assurances that this will make us better. Not all advice, however, is necessarily good advice; and for many, seeking the opinions of experts has morphed into a blind obedience to their leaders. For them it matters not whether they agree with what they are being asked to do, only that those asking it of them are 'qualified' to do so.

As the atrocities perpetrated by every tyrant and dictator demonstrate, any form of hierarchical organisation promotes the abdication of individual responsibility. When they can be directly held accountable for their actions, most people will act in a way which reflects what they consider constitutes acceptable behaviour. This, of course, requires more effort than mindlessly following instructions as the full ramifications of what they are doing need to be considered. In contrast to this, when enacting the wishes of another it is all too easy to simply do what we are told; as the repercussions for any misdemeanours can be partially laid at the feet of another (I was only following orders), and those giving us instructions can be assumed to have already considered any possible implications of their request.

Unfortunately, this means that when those dictating the behaviour of others deliberately intend to cause harm they will be obeyed by many without a seconds thought. As the number of people who defer to the authority of an individual increases, so too will the potential for damage from their orders. A single lunatic can cause little harm compared to one with thousands of devout followers ready to enact their every whim. If Hitler, Mao, or Stalin had had no followers, they would never have become more than a historical footnote. We describe many as monsters but the

power behind them is supplied by thousands of ordinary people either too stupid or too afraid to say no; the blame for every wrong committed can not be pinned on these people, as we are often the ones carrying them out.

As long as we continue to follow authority, society can only ever be as virtuous as those who are in power. Even if our leaders do not utilize their positions of influence to further their own agenda, any mistakes they make will be magnified out of all proportion. A tool can only ever be as effective as the hand that wields it, and the collective labour of our entire species is far too dangerous to be entrusted to the minds of a few. If, instead of meekly doing as we are told, we were all to make our own decisions we would have a much greater potential for making positive changes, and a much reduced risk of negative ones.

Conclusion

There is an old proverb which says that someone who asks a question is a fool for five minutes, but those who do not ask are fools for the rest of their lives. There is another saying which states that "If it 'aint broke, don't fix it" which obviously implies that if something is broken, the sensible thing to do would be to fix it. For a very long time society has been broken for everyone barr a tiny minority. If we do not try and fix it, what does that say about ourselves?

No Gods. No Masters.

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