

Innumeracy, Territorialism, Organized Lying



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“Finding the Challenges” is an original column appearing every other Thursday at Everything-Voluntary.com, by Verbal Vol. Verbal is a software engineer, college professor, corporate information officer, life long student, farmer, libertarian, literarian, student of computer science and self-ordering phenomena, pre-TSA world traveler, domestic traveler. Archived columns can be found [here](#). FTC-only RSS feed available [here](#).

Every day is filled with vexed questions. Which ones are true problems and which are time-wasters?

Debating with Numbers

I ran into a substantial roadblock on an issue being debated at Socrates Cafe Louisville, a few weeks back. I thought we all had a common view of the numbers involved among human welfare, corporate welfare, and warfare. The proposition in contention was whether a good society would allow some of its members to starve, to be homeless, or to be without care. Since the propositioners were being kind of coy about **who** would make it so, I was quick to take up the libertarian principle that government should be excluded from consideration as an implementer. My principle idea was that when you ask government to help then you tacitly approve other things that government is doing, such as warfare, corporate welfare, and cronyism. Unwisely, however, I chose to illustrate my point with projected numbers. I wrote on the group’s Facebook page,

For each billion in “humane welfare,” we get 50 billion in corporate subsidies, 100 billion of picking winners and losers, 200 billion of war ... and the state does none of them particularly well (in quantitative terms this means net failure).

If we agree to the precepts of [the proposed] laudable goals, but then agree to implement these by government, then charity will be a net negative. Its good would have to offset war. Surely if we have the precepts to do good, then we must have the precept not to kill children and destroy countries.

Although the above numbers are projections, I still feel as though they represent reasonable relative size. One interlocutor just said that my numbers were “suspect.” Another argued that he couldn’t find such numbers. The second guy also argued that if they were true that taking my first number, then applying the stated ratio to recent US budget numbers would yield war numbers greater than 14 trillion. I agreed that his 14 trillion number was telling since war contributes far more to national debt, or long term cost, than it does to budget period spending. On-the-books welfare (versus hidden welfare such as corruption, cronyism, service to special interests) is usually paid out over 1 budget year into the next. But long term national debt is covered by bonds, and other bookkeeping dodges, which carry beyond the current budget period, and include interest owed. The debt periods for our current adventurism in the Middle East are about 14 years and counting. My second interlocutor never replied to this explanation, he just slipped into the *Ad Hominem* fallacy. The first objector, when I told I had used educated guesses on the numbers, decided that now the numbers were no longer subjectively “suspect” to him personally, but now universally wrong.

Neither objector would now return to the principle proposition I had made, i.e. with government, if you are in for a penny, you are in for a pound. Obviously their feigned objections to the numbers were ploys to kill the debate. It was, of course, my bad for making bad assumptions about the room, expecting some level of numeracy from a group that meets regularly to discuss philosophy. It was my bad for misapprehending the culturally induced innumeracy which the state inculcates in its servants. I need to be more Socratic. People need to be assisted in climbing out of those holes.

But numbers, particularly those crunched by the bean counters in DC, publicly and privately, are complex, being used to sow confusion. When my first questioner asked me for “sources,” my heart leapt up, fooled momentarily that there might actually be non-suspect sources, but then I came to my senses, wondering where in the miasma one might find unsuspecting numbers.

Rothbard #10 — vs. The Lockean Proviso

Returning to the question of “... whether a good society would allow some of its members to starve, to be homeless, or to be without care,” let us address the further question of how

does such a society answer. I heard a great episode of *The Tom Woods Show* a few days back, in which Tom interviewed Matt Zwolinsky, about a minimum income for all. At first I was attracted to the idea, why not? Let's just shelve the argument about equality, all while replacing the vast welfare state bureaucracy with a very simple bureaucracy that just mails out checks, no questions asked. When the water rises, all the boats rise, right? Both Tom and Matt saw that the second-order obstacle was implementation. Remember that John Locke was about *laissez-faire*, non-intervention, natural law. Do we really want another federal agency corraling everyone's information annually?

So, the bigger question to me was a follow-on idea in the above podcast, that of the Lockean Proviso. The major problem is asking government to take money, backed by a threat of force, and then redistribute it. Nowhere in the principles on property in classical liberalism, libertarianism, voluntarism is there found justification for placing government in the position of rightly taking property. Private property is a redundant phrase. Public property is an oxymoron.

The Lockean Proviso is a consequent idea based on Locke's concept of ownership. Everyone has self-ownership – step one. Everyone has ownership of that which is produced by the self – step two. Everyone has ownership of all resources, including land, that one has mixed with one's already owned resources (like self, and the self's time, space, and labor) – step three. But what about resources that are beyond the scope of self-ownership? How can one maintain ownership over that which they cannot consistently mix with pre-owned resources? Can a human own the Great Lakes?

Locke's answer to this problem was the Lockean Proviso – a human can own any resource as long as there are more, just as good, available. A Vanderbilt can own the best seashore with the best view (a subjective matter) in Newport RI as long as he doesn't own all the seashore in the world, or even the whole seashore around Newport. So mankind must practice stewardship to keep that seashore. If he abandons it, it goes back in the pool of non-private resources.

As I read Rothbard, however, as well as analysts of his work, there is disagreement. Rothbard holds that ownership is in perpetuity if society and the economic cloth are continuous. Property, such as land, can be sold or gifted but it does not slide back into a pool of ownerless resources.

Although I can see both views working voluntarily in accordance with natural laws, I have a jaundiced eye upon any case wherein artificial law or government would be needed to prop either up. People often argue that the only reason for the state is to protect property rights. My idea, though, is that if a resource needs a contrived state or body of artificial law to establish who owns it, then the ownership is just a fiction.

We can be fooled into a false sense of security by either the Lockean or Rothbardian

views. Guard well against adopting a view that the state has a legitimate, and legitimately small, role in anything.

The Lockean or Rothbardian view will function in a natural law setting, they cannot be made to function better by adding artificial constraints. Locke correctly assumes that you cannot split up necessities that are scarce, by law or by nature. Rothbard says they are already distributed by laws of nature that cannot be overridden. I say that cases of depleted resources are very rare. And, I say, that with the continued natural, technological growth of private distribution, that we are seeing scarcity as a shrinking figure in our rearview mirrors. This is not to say that we will ever have zero scarcity. Some things that are scarce now may become plentiful, and vice versa. Unique objects will always be unique. The world continues to be composed of air, water, earth, and fire. Humans cannot use these up within whatever longevity remains for our species.

Logic Fallacy #39 – Appeal to Innumeracy

There are only three models of information in the human perception realm — language (words, text, narrative), graphics (images and ways of ordering images), and of interest in this segment, numbers (how many, how much, and when). Although we can be fooled by models or representations in any of these types, numbers seem to present a particularly hazardous crossing for us. This is often exploited by deliberately conjuring numbers in ways meant to confuse and mislead.

Further, adding to the problem is what kind of structure we like to work with to govern ourselves. We measure success by counting beans. We feed ourselves by agreeing to eat 3 times a day. We maintain our strength by sleeping eight hours each night, and by guarding one to two days a week as “our” time.

Therefore, we can be easily manipulated by making us fear that the numbers are insufficient. How do we know when we have accumulated enough of anything or have allowed for enough of something. The thing we Americans fear the most, I would venture, is old age. After that, deadlines. Then, the fear that someone else will be first come, first served.

Hurry, while supplies last! This sale ends today, and I will have to leave at 5 o’clock. We must have energy independence. We were first to land on the Moon. Russia managed to finish off ISIS in only a couple of weeks.

I don’t know about you, but I am like Socrates — I know nothing. In a universe full of numbers, I understand so little. (How self-deprecating do I have to be here to convince others that I might be pretty good with numbers. Who knows?) If we understand so little then how easy is it to put us on our back foot about numbers?

I’ll leave you with this observation. Seeing the breathless way in which big media covers

the endless POTUS horserace, is there anything of substance that can't be glossed over by attention to beside-the-point numbers? If you read that A is at X% while B is at Y%, what does that tell you about what A or B will do about circumstance C?

We are misled to believe that the only important thing is that enough of us agree on one of these bad choices, if we can choose quickly.

How can we keep order in our minds? There are so many little things that detract and distract from the amount of attention that we can pay to important things. Why must we burden ourselves with so many other "how much," "how many," "how soon," "how long" questions. We must wean ourselves from gross resource wasters like election campaigns. Either we humans know how to get on with life, or we don't. If we don't, we won't.

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