

March Madness, Natural Law and Principle, Stepwise Refinement



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“Finding the Challenges” is an original column appearing every other Wednesday 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. Archived columns can be found here. FTC-only RSS feed available here.

In the past two weeks, I have been on a fabulous ride with the Big Blue Nation (University of Kentucky men’s basketball fandom), so I will reflect on some ideas that I developed during that temporary madness, aka. March Madness. Then I will return to sanity with further examination of the constellation of rules, principles, and natural law. Lastly, I will look at a technique used by us software engineers for problem solving — dichotomy, or stepwise refinement, while also discussing its evil twin (ha! a metaphorical use of dichotomy), the logic fallacy of the false dilemma.

March Madness and Group Think

“History is the autobiography of a madman,” wrote the playwright, Alexander Herzen. And certainly such is the case during March Madness, or college basketball tournament time in the USA. In only a few cases do men rehash these tournaments years later, bringing perhaps some levelheadedness to the retelling. Rather it is true that the ones that get revisited are the ones that get most separated from the facts.

Since I am a mildly enthusiastic Kentucky Wildcat basketball fan, I think back to the 1978 national championship team. One of the phenomena of March Madness, particularly at the Division I men’s tournament level, is that it is one of the *de rigeur* events for the sportswriter industry. Some sportswriters who cannot distinguish among basketballs, footballs, soccer balls, and rugby balls, nevertheless throng to this tournament. Then they hang out in hospitality suites and bars, seeking a shock refresher in the nuances of the games, schools, coaches, and players. In 1978 these scribbling idiots decided that the Wildcats were a grim, stoic killing machine, without joy. It was repeated so many times, plagiarized actually, that it became a given. All the wise guys decided the wildcats were thugs, while the other three teams in the Final Four were sets of hilariously happy

Tinkerbells.

Now I, on the other hand, had been following these Kats for 3 years since moving back to Kentucky from a sojourn in Colorado. It was a sublimely happy, cohesive, and very good group of basketball players. But they failed to dance the dance that the sportswriters felt was more newsworthy.

The reason I share this with you is so that we can gain some understanding of what a battered tool is history, and what false tools are proximity and immediacy. Most of the great events of history are remembered by the fools who were there assembled. There may be one or two astute observations, but the artifact is a conglomeration of stolen and ill-considered snatches. You may do well to think of these fables as the cover-ups for history, for lack of knowledge, and for the error of groupthink.

Natural Law and Principle

Recently Skyler posted on the EVC blog a piece on rules and principles, where he quoted an excellent opinion of Ben Lovejoy. Here I will do an expansion on and mild disagreement with the idea that principle is from within, while rules are external.

To simplify the mild disagreement, I will state that the consideration of principles and rules must be tempered by a recognition of natural law. We cannot establish either a rule or a principle which refutes natural law (this is part of my fast-growing study of Lysander Spooner.) I heartily agree that principles are an individualist idea, I'm just saying that they need to be based on an internalization of how they co-exist with natural law. Artificial rules are external and they often seek to suspend natural law (the existence of capital punishment is a stark example), but the rules of nature are at one with true principle. You could say that a correct principle is the individual application of a natural law.

Stepwise Refinement and False Dichotomy

Every class is dividable into two parts, X and not-X. This is not to say that classes are not dividable into more parts. But if we continually divide a problem into true or false, solved and unsolved, we can eventually make the false vanishingly small. Niklaus Wirth wrote *Program Development by Stepwise Refinement*, a seminal paper in Computer Science and Logic. He said that the solution to any problem of any complexity was to divide the problem space stepwise into "solved" and "unsolved" parts. You then isolate the unsolved part, decoupling it from the solved part, and begin to divide the remaining part. If you get to a point where the unsolved part is intractable, then you analyze the risk of leaving it as is, unsolved.

Many of us do not have the patience to pursue this algorithm, since very few problems have single solutions. We long for the decisive. And sometimes when we band together,

the remaining unsolved parts get addressed, by a maleficent division of labor, by increasingly absurd splinter groups. Take either the French Revolution and the consequent Reign of Terror or the Bolshevik rise as vivid case studies.

Often the use of deliberate stepwise refinement is short-circuited by the logic fallacy of the False Dilemma. “Who will build the roads?” is one of my favorites. This is a roadblock (pardon the pun) to stepwise refinement. Usually the false dilemma is based on an attempt to oversimplify a problem — you can either have more computers or you can have a group annual raise (or bonus). This kind of thinking seeks to blank out all sorts of considerations that can be brought to a problem.

All three of my efforts above converge on an idea. It is better not to consider popular delusion and the madness of crowds. Individualism is the first step. The exclusion of things likely to be toxic is the second step. And the inclusion of the facts of nature by adoption as principle is the third step. Now there must be other steps, to combat our uncertainty in a more or less certain world. We will seek them out in the coming columns. Thanks for reading.

By the way, I would like to share with you some more ideas about natural law in my recent inaugural article at [The Daily Anarchist](#).

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