Monkeys with Keyboards, Seven Habits, Fallacy #7

Send him mail.

"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.

The purpose of this column, in its bi-weekly offerings, is to define problems for voluntaryists. The first step in problem solving is to understand the problem. When we define a problem constructively we then decide what opportunities there may be for a good resolution — finding the challenges. Then we rummage around in our personal, voluntary tool boxes to determine whether a fix is doable.

As per usual, we will discuss three different challenges. This time we will make a comparison between the American way of legislation and the hypothetical theory about the output of an infinite number of monkeys with an infinite number of keyboards connected to an infinite number of word processors. Then we will proceed to examine a popular meme, the seven habits — this time covering one particularly useful habit (with perhaps future installments on some or all of the remaining six). And we will be following through with our continuing series on logic fallacy in hopes of defining problems more accurately

Monkeys with Keyboards

Nancy Pelosi famously said, I paraphrase, we will have to pass the bill in order to see what is in it. On one hand, this was a somewhat mundane way of saying let's not discuss it now because it is not in its final form, so ask me no questions and I'll tell you no lies. Legislation has been known to undergo horrendous convolutions between the cup and the lip. I can attest to this as I toiled in the vineyards of the Kentucky and Illinois State Legislatures more than once as an unregistered lobbyist (legally if not fairly) for various governmental agencies (more on this in future writings). But on the other, more likely, hand Ms. Pelosi was probably giving tacit acknowledgement to the reality that 100% of legislators do not know what will be coming out of the sausage-making machine. They vote on this stuff for political reasons, then repent (an euphemism for playing CYA) at their leisure.

The central idea here is: *100% of legislators do not know what will be coming out of the sausage-making machine*. This is called scattering the responsibility, while destroying the accountability.

There is an old saying that if you have an infinite number of monkeys with an infinite number of keyboards that sooner or later they will produce the complete works of Shakespeare. The math of this likelihood, however, tells us that the time needed to do this is several times the age of the Universe. But the saying is true, and the monkeys, if immortal, will sooner or later type every alphanumeric combination in the realm of possibility. And, in my opinion, they will type more useful legislation and regulations than our human rulers do.

The question is how many lifetimes do we have to wait? And having waited that long, what will we have — a pile of flotsam and jetsam in which is buried good (???) that may never be found? Ms. Pelosi created the false impression that legislators actually read their bills once they have passed. No! They send this dreck along to a literal bureaucracy full of monkeys so they can misread it, misinterpret it, and incorrectly restate it in another infinite keyboard fest from which federal regulations emanate.

What is the best voluntary tool here? — a shovel wielded with a rich sense of skepticism is good. The injustice system will never know which legislation you will trip over, and you have no way of predicting with which measure they will attack you. But the better attitude/tool is to go about your life as though the whole mess wasn't festering on the banks of the Potomac.

Seven Habits

A few weeks back, my seven-year-old granddaughter participated in a talent show where her quartet sang, to the tune of Adele's "Rolling in the Deep", a song based on Stephen Covey's book, **Seven Habits of Highly Effective People**. (There is a viral YouTube video by the song version's creator.) I had not paid much attention previously to this self-help rubric. Then my grand-daughter played a role game with me where she was a teacher, I was a student, and we googled the seven habits and listed them on a whiteboard.

I was particularly struck by the habit wherein one seeks first to understand and then to be understood. It dawned on me that this is one of my greatest failings. Indoctrinated as we are in the skill of instantaneous regurgitation, we seek to demonstrate how fast and how facile we are with life's collective lessons.

I wrote above that the first step in problem solving is to define the problem, but in today's busy world we do not make time for this. Instead we look for a mental form letter to pigeonhole and quick-fix the problem without wasting any time on it. One learns, painfully, that all problems are not the same. In fact identical problems do not exist.

So, I am taking this Covey habit to heart — seek first to understand the problem. How is it like another problem, how is it different? I suspect that problems are like snowflakes. After understanding the who, what, when, where, how, and why, we can then project an understandable solution or path toward solution.

No True Scotsman

No True Scotsman … We voluntaryist should flinch a bit when we hear this lead-in because it heralds the derailment of what could have been a good deliberation. How many times have you heard that no good [insert label] would think this way — no voluntaryist, no unschooler, no libertarian, no market anarchist, no parent, no etc.

As I signaled in the introduction, we are looking for voluntaryist tools, but we should also be looking for false tools to throw away. Easy candidates are logic fallacies, and here is one that we should dump with alacrity, the No True Scotsman fallacy. Did I say this was easy to identify and toss junk on the junk heap? The problem is that it is more easy to fall back on this one.

I encountered a particularly interesting version of this fallacy recently at my group, Another 2000+ Libertarian Quotes on Facebook. — the dangling fallacy declaration, I'll call it. Just accuse a participant of committing a certain logic fallacy but do not show how she has committed such a gaffe.

The heart of a No True Scotsman fallacy is in the failing to produce any "so what" evidence. While it may be true that no true Scotsman would kowtow before the Queen of England, that leaves a multitude of "so whats" unsaid.

The biggest problem for me, were someone to critique me with a "no true voluntaryist" barb, would be that there is no true voluntaryist. There are millions of voluntaryists, maybe billions, each and every one an individual. And each and every one arrives at his principles and philosophy by a unique route.

The better course, when confronted with this fallacy, is to ignore the outburst. Otherwise you may be acknowledging that the other person knows more about your individual voluntary existence than you do.

The message today seems to be that one improves her voluntaryist stock by being more introspective, seeking your own counsel. Reject the Pelosi siren, or the Boehner siren, for that matter. What is passing for official solutions is just an accumulation of untreated sewage on the banks of the Potomac or the Kentucky (or whatever body of water your local politicians overlook). Nobody but you can retrieve your free and voluntary existence from that morass. Your critical thinking, understanding before you proceed, is related to your life

story in every way. Accepting pre-packaged "understandings" is a way to surrender your life story. And, remember, that the only true you is you. You have all the freedom, all the responsibilities, and all of the accountability that you need to make an individual's life for yourself

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