

What Are the World's Three Biggest Problems?

Written by Bryan Caplan.

News distorts policy priorities. The primary mechanism: News showcases exciting stories with colorful characters while ignoring boring stories with big numbers. One story about Trump's relationship with Ivanka gets more coverage than most trillion-dollar pots of money. A major secondary mechanism, though, is that stories which dramatically unfold get a lot more coverage than big static facts. An elephant in the room may warrant some coverage, but if he just sits in the corner, media interest soon peters out. It would be amazing if these disparities in coverage failed to shape the problems the public worries about – and, in turn, the problems attention-seeking politicians vow to solve.

Are you a serious thinker? Then self-consciously change the subject to the Big Picture. What can be done to mitigate the media's policy misdirection? I suggest we start the New Year with what I call the Priority Resolution. Are you a serious thinker? Then step back from the media cycle and name the world's Three Biggest Problems. Instead of trying to score points over the latest exciting story with colorful characters, let us self-consciously change the subject to the Big Picture.

While this obviously won't lead to a consensus anytime soon, the Priority Resolution makes us argue about which issues really matter. Think your issue is more important than my issue? Then convince me. The Copenhagen Consensus is the best such effort I know of, but why shouldn't a thousand Big Pictures compete?

Since I try to be the change I wish to see in the world, I'll start. What are the Three Biggest Problems?

Death

At the top of my list, by a wide margin, is Death itself. Almost every child is horrified to discover that man is mortal. But most adults not only accept the inevitability of death but even bizarrely rationalize death as a blessing in disguise. Why bizarre? Imagine humans were already immortal. If an inventor figured out how to make us mortal, who would see this "innovation" as anything other than a catastrophe?

Absolute Poverty

After Death itself, the next most serious problem probably remains Absolute Poverty. While human happiness depends less on material well-being than you'd think, hunger, homelessness, and short lifespans are awful. Furthermore, if you buy my long-run Pacifist Syllogism, ending Absolute Poverty is a twofer: Since rich countries fear war, making the

whole world rich greatly reduces the risk of any version of World War III.

Political Authority

What's third? Here, I'll be a doctrinaire libertarian and decry the Problem of Political Authority. Governments should leave people alone unless the social benefits of doing otherwise clearly heavily outweigh the costs. Since no government on Earth comes close to observing this moral truism, grave injustice is commonplace – even in the morally self-satisfied First World democracies.

Needless to say, people who agree on priorities can easily disagree about the best way to achieve them. My prescription for swiftly ending Absolute Poverty, for example, is open borders, globalization, and economic freedom. Most people who share this priority probably disagree on the solution, but that's okay. Debating the best way to solve the world's second-biggest problem has a huge potential upside. Debating the headlines does not.

I expect few readers to agree with my top three priorities. But I hope we can all agree that we spend far too little time discussing that most important issues on Earth. Fortunately, we can improve – and New Year's is a focal time to start. Who else wants to adopt the Priority Resolution?

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