
Newsletter from Boston

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Number 6

Apologies for how long it has been since the last newsletter. I started writing this in mid-summer, but before I could finish up, a proposal came up that took all my time in August and September. Nonetheless, that doesn't really explain why it has been so long since I have written, so ... I won't.

State Lotteries

I have become increasingly exasperated with the increasing reliance of the states upon the lottery to raise general revenues. In fiscal 1994, the state of Massachusetts raised 4% of the state budget from lottery revenues, and they are looking to increase this fraction. Rather than honestly deal with their needs to increase taxes and/or decrease expenditures, many states have cowardly decided to decided to transfer an increasing fraction of the cost of state services to some of the weaker and politically less powerful of their citizens. It is time we explore the morality of this decision.

You may wonder why I claim that the sale of state lottery tickets to those who voluntarily buy the tickets represents an increased burden on the working poor. I'm sure you all realize that most of the people that buy lottery tickets regularly and

in significant quantity are not the most affluent members of our society (for obvious reasons). Now our system of taxation is a progressive one

that has those that are most affluent paying the largest fraction of the cost of the state services, with the assumption being that not only are they most able to pay, but also they are the largest users and greatest beneficiaries of state services. The state

lottery changes the relative fraction that each of the economic classes contribute to our state coffers. But, why should we be concerned? People that buy lottery tickets are not forced to contribute; what is wrong with a lottery if the people want a lottery?

For many years, lotteries were illegal and associated with organized crime (the "numbers game"). The social concern was obviously that gambling can be destructive. Now, I am not arguing that the lottery should be made illegal again; I am generally opposed to having the state forbid various behaviors and actions of the citizens unless an overwhelming social good can be demonstrated. But I oppose the state's involvement in

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this enterprise, and I violently protest the active use of advertising by the state to promote this activity.

Let me make clear my objections. Imagine that the state was to get involved in the sale of cigarettes, another area where concerns for the welfare of society can limit individual freedoms. Now I suspect that there would be much public opposition against involvement by the state in cigarette sales, in spite of any revenue enhancement that might occur. But now imagine the public uproar that would occur if the state were to use television and the advertising media to encourage people to smoke, thus increasing state revenues; the state actively involved in promoting an activity that is demonstrably detrimental to at least a fraction of its citizens.

Yet, this is precisely what the states are now doing. In their increasing need for revenues, and their strong reluctance to go to the electorate and explain their financial needs, they are now encouraging the working poor of our society to spend their funds on lottery tickets, buying into nearly hopeless dreams rather than using their few available funds on their own real needs. *Mystery money, lucky roll, wild millions, megabucks*, etc... how many different ways has the state found to talk these working people out of their few extra dollars?

Have you have been in a convenience store, watching a woman buy 20 lottery tickets at the same time that she struggles to find enough money to buy something for the young child whose hand she is holding? Or have you seen the older gentlemen who you previously saw using food stamps at the grocery store, today buy 10 lottery tickets. Our state is selling false dreams to these

poor people. Doesn't it remind you of how the cigarette companies used to make cigarette smoking seem like such a wholesome activity?

I am not arguing that gambling is wrong or that the lottery should be banned. But gambling can be debilitating for some people; the involvement of the state promoting this activity is shameful. If we are going to use the gambling losses of our population to fill our state coffers, then let us *at the very least*, ban the use of advertising to promote this activity.

On Free Will and God

Do you believe in God? Do you believe you have free will in making decisions? Have you considered whether it is consistent to believe in both God and free will?

For those of you that are agnostic, please bear with me (Durand, don't skip all of this because I am going to explain free will to you shortly). For those of you who don't believe in God, please carefully rethink your position since it is entire ill-conceived (to have a *fundamental* belief that something does not exist is to elevate it's primacy and accept its existence in a essential sense).

Now if you accept the existence of God but believe you have free will, I must ask, what is the nature of the God you perceive? Do you believe that God is all-powerful, all-knowing and entirely good? Well, then you've got a problem; because, if we each have free-will, our free-will must allow us to do as we desire, even if that encompasses "evil" or creates pain or evil for another. Now if God is all-knowing and all-powerful, then if God does not act to prevent your evil/harmful act, then God cannot be entirely good. And if

God is entirely good (as it seems that God should be) then, God cannot be all-powerful and all-knowing. To quote McTaggart (*God, Evil and Immortality*, 1906), “For it is quite evident that a God who cannot create a universe in which all men have free will, and which is at the same time free from all evil, is not an omnipotent God, since there is [at least] one thing which he cannot do.”

While this may seem a merely theoretical problem, it has fundamentally affected religious thought, especially in the 19th and 20th centuries. Explaining the presence of evil has, of course, pre-occupied philosophers for generations (the problem of Job). Philosophers have concluded that evil exists to allow Man to have free choice. But God cannot avoid responsibility for allowing Man to create evil. Furthermore, evil that results from the actions of one individual may hurt another individual that has done no wrong. In our century, the magnitude of this evil has become so manifest as to threaten all religious philosophies.

One conclusion that follows is that evil, at least in one sense, is due to the existence of multiple free wills. And if God were to protect those who are “innocent” from those who act in a hurtful fashion, then God would be limiting free will. So we must conclude that if we are to accept our own individual free wills (and I think that without free will, life has no meaning), then those of us that believe in God must conclude that God must be limited in some capacity.

In particular, God must either not be all-powerful, or must be unwilling to use that power. The distinction is not particularly important. We must accept that God is limited in responding our prayers and to evil as it occurs; it is the price of our free-will. A further consequence is perhaps

even more disconcerting. Quoting again McTaggart: “If God is not omnipotent, the fact that God exists and is good gives us no guarantee that the universe is more good than bad, or even that it is not very bad.” Our free-will and the subsequent loss of God’s omnipotence carries a high price indeed.

This leads us naturally to consider the possibility of miracles. CS Lewis (*Miracles*, 1960) defines a miracle as “an interference with Nature by supernatural power.” He means that Nature involves a natural leading of cause to effect; miracles involve any perturbation to this natural order (even if this perturbation occurs only at the level of mental thought).

Now, we must first accept that if the power of God is so limited by the necessity of our free will that miracles are not possible, then God ceases to have relevance during our life time. Now while this may not be totally contradictory to the concept of God, it nonetheless eliminates God in all aspects of our life and thus begs the question of how we know, perceive or believe in a God. God is then limited as arising as merely a logical possibility, but, in the absence of miracles, any further “contact” prohibited.

Now those of us that believe in God have what we feel is more than merely the logical possibility of God. It seems then that if some of us have knowledge of, or believe in a God, then, as a basis of our belief, God must have some power to act in our domain, and thus performing “miracles” (following CS Lewis’ definition), since knowledge of God cannot be a part of nature (by definition); this is a necessary consequence of our belief. Since we have established that God cannot perform all manner of miracles

as this would restrict and in the limit, eliminate our free-will, then we must ask what is the nature of the miracles that God can perform.

I return to the “Godgame” that I mentioned in the last newsletter (*The Magus*, John Fowles, 1965). The Godgame describes how God acts to set-up situations, dilemmas and possibilities, but then God acts no further, leaving us to decide how to proceed (“To bring us to this – not for themselves, but for us.... I was so sure. It was logical, the characteristic and perfect final touch to the godgame. They had absconded.... How could they be so cold? So inhuman? So incurious? So load the dice and yet leave the game?”)

Miracles then would be those acts of God that create wonderful, puzzling, and coincidental situations in our life that invite our action, but allows us, and us alone, to resolve how we will act. God is then limited as to what miracles can be performed; only those miracles that establish situations that enhance the action of free will are allowed. It is in this fashion that God can introduce a fundamental predilection toward goodness to the universe (by setting up situations that allow good the possibility to triumph).

Notice however, that this is just a suggestion as to how God might act through miracles to affect the universe, not a proof (unlike the consequences derived above which seem to be unavoidable). One can imagine other schemes of limited miracles that would also allow God to affect the universe without limiting our free will.

Now you agnostics (Durand pay attention) are not immune to this analysis. You all feel that you have free will, but you are unconstrained by the necessities of a theology. However, you must think carefully about what is meant by having a

free will. As best as I can understand, free will is something more than just allowing that we can act in ways that are not implicit in the previous state of the universe (i.e., a free will clearly involves our ability to make decisions on our own, past what would follow from cause and effect, but free will also involves something more than this). For example, random actions would allow us to act independent of the previous state of the universe, but we would not consider this to represent free will.

Instead, free will must involve some level of our control over our actions where our control is not implicit in the state of the system (i.e., control of our actions do not follow from only cause and effect but result from something that our “soul” can control). Now if we accept that a soul (a euphemism for our self-consciousness, outside of nature) exists for each of us (a necessary corollary of a free will), and if we accept free will, then we must accept something supernatural, since Nature involves no more than cause leading to effect and this precludes free will. Thus those of you that are agnostics may also be forced to renounce free will since your free will requires the supernatural and the supernatural is but a small step from God (Durand, are you still with me?).

I conclude then with the primacy of a free will (a seeming necessity of humanity), that requires a supernatural (God?), and the logical constraint that in so far as this supernatural aspect of life can be considered to be God, then this God cannot be omnipotent. Since God, who we define as good (not a necessity), cannot be omnipotent we conclude that the universe, as we know it, is not guaranteed to be good, a somewhat sad and

challenging conclusion. But one that allows us, through our free will (and perhaps with God's help), to make our own contribution to the goodness in the universe.

P.S. The Pope, John Paul II, has recently written a book entitled *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*. Among other issues, he addresses the relationship between free will, God's omnipotence, and the existence of evil. While the Pope is not clear spoken on the point, he nonetheless admits that, "Yes, in a certain sense one could say that confronted with our human freedom, God decided to make Himself 'impotent'".

Discussion on "Intrinsic Differences in Intelligence"

This topic was covered in the last newsletter and generated quite a bit of discussion and several written responses. Since it has been so long since I have written, I begin by briefly summarizing my argument.

I claimed there that there is no intrinsic difference in "intelligence" between people. I pointed out that I was not really discussing the broad definition of "intelligence", but instead was positing the equivalence of the logical capacity of all people (rather than speed, memory, creativity, or other aspects of mental capability). By logical capacity, I meant the capability of an individual to understand a particular concept. I claimed that all individuals have the capacity to understand any particular logical thought or concept.

My "proof" involved the dependence of any new knowledge on previously learned concepts. I will not reiterate my proof here, but provide the following challenge to those that might be un-

comfortable with my premise: find a particular concept that some people can understand and other people cannot (special note to Joe Perry in New Hampshire: not a concept that you understand and no one else does). Now, if you can think of such a concept, then identify what aspect it is of this concept that some people cannot understand. In my experience, any such concept identified as being understandable by only a fraction of the population is either one that simply requires some further training (learning of other steps) before it can be understood, or is a concept that no one truly understands. All concepts are fundamentally simple to understand, once you have the necessary background to approach them (this is not true just for those of us at universities, but true of knowledge in general). Remember, if you disagree, think of an exception.

Now as regards the responses, Jim Harrison's message that he was not intelligent enough to follow my argument gets highest honors. Past that, the response were mostly similar to one another. Although there was, at most, grudging agreement with my premise, it was surprising that there was no substantive objection to my argument. The one exception was that of Steve Durand who argued that my proof that all new concepts are based on previous concepts would ultimately lead to concepts existing even at birth, a notion he rejected; this is rather an old argument and I refer those interested, especially Prof. Durand, to review Kant's concept of *a priori* knowledge (Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 1787).

Most responses, instead of dealing with the argument I gave, argued with the definition of

what comprises intelligence. They argued that intelligence is something much greater than merely logical capacity. This was rather puzzling since I stressed at the beginning of what I had written that I was not really concerned with the broad definition of “intelligence” but instead with logical capacity and the related notion of educatability. Somehow, the responses nonetheless focused on this point that was already conceded!

I should explain why I chose to use the word “intelligence” to describe logical capacity. As I stated in the previous newsletter, “... our country appears to be moving to update our education system to compete in the new international economic environment, and the issue of educational potential of different individuals may have a direct bearing on the individual rights of these same people.” The issue of education potential of individuals has jumped into the forefront recently with the publication of the new, controversial book *The Bell Curve* by Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray that explores the relationship between genetics and intelligence.

In this book, they focus on the relationship between scores on intelligence tests (“IQ tests”) and various social measures. “Intelligence” is the term commonly used to describe what IQ tests are measuring. Now I assume that most of you are not convinced that these tests truly measure “intelligence”; neither do I. Instead, they seem to characterize, at least in part, the number of concepts absorbed by an individual at a certain age. While this may have important similarities and connections to intelligence, IQ tests fundamentally measure the extent to which one has been educated, not intrinsic intelligence.

The relationship of this measure of intelligence to logical capability seems obvious. While the rate of learning is likely an individual characteristic, the ability to learn is not. I chose the word “intelligence” to characterize the ability to absorb concepts (not the rate at which this occurs) because this is the word used by the popular media when describing issues involving education and IQ. It is this word “intelligence” that is used to characterize those sociological and developmental differences identified by IQ tests, and purported genetic differences in “intelligence” between the individual and between races (Herrnstein and Murray, 1994).

True, the argument I gave in the last newsletter is valid only for logical capacity, but those who insist on this pedantic distinction miss the larger social issues involved.

Summer Lemonade

Debbie Diggs has continued to insist on having a recipe in this newsletter. I have resisted, but the following recipe that I served many times this summer must be shared. I note that this recipe would be far more appropriate in the summer, but as mentioned in the beginning of this newsletter, I had intended to send this letter out much earlier.

Mint Lemonade

2 cups sugar
2.5 cups water
grated peel of 1 orange
juice of 1 small orange
juice of 6 lemons
1 cup mint leaves (fresh)
sparkling water

Heat sugar and water for 5 minutes to dissolve sugar. Cool. Add fruit peel and juices. Pour over mint leaves; cover and let stand for 1 hour.

Strain into a jar; keep in refrigerator. Use 1/3 cup syrup for each glass; fill with crushed ice and sparkling water. Makes 10 to 12 servings.

Mark
