

The Promise of the E-economy for Freedom: Cautions from the Broader Perspective of Scientism

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Introduction: internet fantasies

This paper traces some of the assumptions underlying the belief that new technologies and institutions adapted to them tend to lead to basic improvements in humanity. The idea is that once better tools are developed, this will lead to better circumstances, including political regimes, laws and public policies.

In particular, the paper explores what philosophical and intellectual developments lie behind the belief that elements of the e-economy—namely, the kind of trade and related activities generated by and sustained on the Internet—will help the cause of freedom, individual liberty.¹

¹Examples of this belief abound. See, *Internet Computing Online*, a magazine that features articles making the case for this position. See, Ian Clark, Scott G. Miller, Theodore W. Hong, Oscar Sandberg and Brandon Wiley, "Protecting Free Expression Online with Freemart," January/February, 2002. See, also, Yacine Atif,

For example, encryption is viewed by some as a way for individuals to decisively escape from the tyrannical tendencies of governments. I argue that this confidence is misguided because it ultimately rests on scientism, a temptation to trust technological tools rather than a commitment to be vigilant in how they are employed.²

¹Building Trust in E-Commerce, @ January/February 2002. For more along these lines, see the materials posted at <http://www2.epic.org/reports/criptol999.html>.

²For a discussion of whether the Internet is a gadget or tool, see http://www.j-bradford-delong.net/OpEd/virtual/technet/An_E-conomy.html.

Exaggerated confidence in materialism

It is a temptation of the human soul to look upon technological progress with much anticipation. This is especially true ever since the onset of the scientific revolutions starting in the 16th century. It was the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes who, upon hearing of Galileo's findings, went to Italy to visit the great scientists and returned to England to begin his life long championing of physicalism in all realms of inquiry. This view, also known as reductive materialism, basically applies the principles of classical physics, mechanics, to all realms of reality, especially that of human social life. It is the view that is sometimes dubbed the grandfather of classical liberalism and one that is evident in the works of such disparate contemporary thinkers as B.F. Skinner, Karl Marx and James Buchanan.³

The major promise of the Hobbesian philosophy is that henceforth we will be able to control the causes that impel human beings to behave as they do and thus develop what Skinner later called a technology of human behavior. We will be able to organize

³Many more could be included among those who propose that a reductionist program can be fully successful. Among economists, for example, there are Gordon Tullock and the late Nobel Laureate, George Stigler. See, Gerard Radnitzky and Peter Bernholz, eds., *Economic imperialism: the economic approach applied outside the field of economics* (New York: Paragon House Publishers, c1987).

society correctly because we know now that all human behavior is based on the same principles as is the behavior of the fundamental materials of the universe, matter-in-motion.

Many thinkers found this to be a hopeful course to take, eager to find some intellectual framework that would offer a surefire way out of the troubles facing human community life. Indeed, it is arguable that Hobbes' approach spawned the later flourishing of the social sciences (reinforced by Hume's empiricism and logical positivism, as well as the emerging idea that there must be a separation between facts and values.

As we know, by at least the evidence of the 20th century, that human beings are far from having solved their political problems via the materialist or physicalist/scientific approach (be it in its Hobbesian, Marxist or positivist incarnations).

Looking to any scientific and technological advance as the major means to secure for us suitable human social institutions is, however, a mistake. At the heart of this skepticism is the simple fact that all tools human beings develop, intellectual or otherwise, may be used for good or ill. This is as true of gun powder as it is of the Internet and one of its tools, encryption.

Claims made in behalf of the unique way in which the Internet will advance the cause of human liberty need to be taken with a grain of salt (Akdeniz, Walker Wall).⁴ Instead, the far less dependable factor of personal initiative must be seen as the primary source of advance toward a freer society, whether at home or throughout the globe. In other words, there is no guarantee that any tool or gadget will usher in some positive result because the human factor, which is quite unpredictable, is the crucial determinate of whether these tools and gadgets will be used for good or ill.

Scientistic temptations

In ancient Greece it was the philosopher Democritus, as well as his very scantily recorded predecessor Leukippus, who proposed that the world is made up of one thing, namely, atoms. Once the laws of atoms are identified, all else can be understood and explained. Democritus also held to the empiricist doctrine that perception amounts to recording copies of the tiny atoms and thus gaining understanding the real world.

⁴For some of the serious obstacles to Internet based advance toward liberty, see Yaman Akdeniz, Clive Walker, and Davis S. Wall.

We may call this the first scientific temptation, meaning, it is a view that's very tempting to adopt because it appears to conform to the requirements of science, which include analyzing everything into its smallest components and learning why it all behaves as it does by reference to how these smallest components behave.

I am, of course, begging an important question by calling this view a temptation, implying thereby that it is mistaken, even blameworthy, yet often yielded to by philosophers and other thinkers. Perhaps it is right to try to get to the simplest of all entities and thus produce the simplest of all explanations! The rest will then be easy to grasp.

Nevertheless, it will become clear shortly why so characterizing the approach is apt enough. It is, arguably, a kind of shortcut that avoids the difficulties of a more pluralistic conception of the world wherein different principles may govern different kinds or at least types of beings.

Thomas Hobbes advanced the modern version of Democritus' view when he proposed, inspired by the scientific work of Galileo, that there is nothing else in the world but matter-in-motion and that all the distinctions, differences and varieties in reality are just nominal—in name—only. Here, too, the temptation to

reduce everything to just one kind of thing and from learning the laws of that one kind of thing then to arrive at an explanation of everything else had not been resisted. The classical mechanical framework held out a great deal of hope and this is one reason it seemed promising. Just as with the inanimate portion of nature, wherein understanding leads to the ability to control from science to technology so with human nature. We would understand what we are and then apply this understanding, just as social engineers envision it, to the successful and benevolent manipulation of human affairs.

In contemporary times it had been the psychologist B.F. Skinner of Harvard University who laid out a similar scientific point of view in his books *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* (1971) and *Science and Human Behavior* (1968). Skinner claimed he identified a technology of human behavior by confining himself to elements of human life that are observable, eliminating all references to mental or internal entities such as feelings, mind, purposes, intentions, memories, or thinking. Of the last Skinner said it is best understood as the probability of verbal behavior, making it, thus, quantifiable and subject to scientific study.

Scientism and classical liberalism

Following the diminished intellectual and, especially, philosophical reputation of the moral and religious views of human life, the mantle of science became a must for any discipline to gain respectability. Classical liberalism jumped at the chance to derive whatever benefit it could from the scientific perspective.⁵ While Hobbes combined his reductive materialism and radical individualism with what to him seemed a highly efficient absolute monarchy, those who followed in his steps got wind of a version of public choice theory and realized that instead of trusting some monarch, it is the market place that should be entrusted with working most naturally and efficiently.⁶ Just consider the simple point that in

⁵It is vital to realize that there were other approaches by which classical liberalism had been defended, e.g., the normative or moral tradition of natural law and the Christian tradition of individualism. For more on these, see Tibor R. Machan, *Human Rights and Human Liberties, A Radical Reconsideration of the American Political Tradition*, Chicago: Nelson-Hall Co., Inc., 1975; and, J.D. P. Bolton, *Glory Jest & Riddle, A Study of the Growth of Individualism from Homer to Christianity*, New York: Barnes & Nobel, 1973. It is mainly because of the new prestige of the natural sciences after the 14th century that it is the positivist version of classical liberalism that gained more impact. This is not all that different from what happened among the critics of classical liberalism, such as socialists. Over the humanistic socialism of Charles Fourier, it is Karl Marx's scientific socialism, so called, that emerged as the most prominent.

⁶Often, following Hayek, the case against all powerful government is made on grounds of the lack of sufficient knowledge needed to coordinate human (and, of course, economic) activity from above. It is, in fact, the impossibility of gaining the requisite type of knowledge, namely, local information, the bulk of which is concerned with individuals knowing about themselves what they need and want.

Newtonian space what moves most efficiently is whatever encounters the least resistance or friction. From this it is not a very long way to the idea that human behavior should not be burdened with regulations, regimentation, interference and whatever else could stand in its way, blocking or impeding self-improvement.

Why resist the temptation?

Despite what seems to me a seamless move from the mechanistic conception of the university to a deterministic conception of human life, there are problems with all this. For one, the very activity that produces these intellectual conceptions is difficult if not impossible to fit within such a framework.⁷ One aspect of an intellectual conception or theory is that it may well be mistaken, wrong. Indeed, one often makes mistakes in conceiving of the way things are. That is just what those who embrace the mechanistic idea claim about those who do not and embrace some alternative.

For a good summary of the issues, see F. A. Hayek, *The Fatal Conceit*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991.

⁷Two recent books develop this theme in detail: John Searle, *Rationality in Action*, Boston: MIT Press, 2001; and, Stephen Tollman, *Return to Reason*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001.

Yet, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to make sense of this phenomenon of making a mistake, let alone of thinking badly; that is, the way the mistake is being made, within the mechanistic, deterministic framework. Other living things do not make mistakes, do not behave badly like this. The very idea of truth versus falsehood makes little sense unless there is freedom to make a mistake, to act badly. Right and wrong presuppose not being forced to do what one is doing but having chosen freely.

Although those advancing the scientific view would wish to explain being wrong in some way compatible with their determinism, it is not likely that they can accomplish that goal. This is especially so if they combine their criticism of alternative views with holding those who have produced those ideas responsible for having made a mistake.

In addition to this elementary problem, the deterministic view of human life has difficulties with explaining some of the facts about such a life. For example, whence all the diversity, variety, in how human beings live and what they believe? It is fairly simple to understand such diversity and variety in the framework of a view that takes human beings to have free will. Their freedom makes all the variety possible, in art, culture, politics, philosophy, religion, cuisine

and the rest. But if human beings, like other living things, are hard-wired, it is very difficult to understand why they would be hard-wired to behave ineffectively, inefficiently, badly, destructively, self-destructively and the like.⁸

Furthermore, the results of scientific understanding include the development of technology and engineering, areas wherein human beings have made both wonderful as well as disastrous decisions and achieved both constructive and destructive ends. This, too, makes little sense within the determinist-scientific framework in which whatever occurs is just part of the value-free processes of nature. The idea that war machines or weapons for mass destruction are bad things that one ought not to produce makes no sense if it is all a matter of *que sera, sera*.

Techno-idealism and complacency

When people trust in gadgets as the exclusive means by which solutions are attained, their focus on personal vigilance and other virtues is likely to diminish. Science and technology will solve the problem, so why bother with self-improvement?

⁸This is especially problematic, by the way for environmentalists who also embark upon blaming and praising us for our various ways of treating the environment while denying basic differences between human and other animal life and wishing to remain purely scientific as well.

One prominent classical liberal presented a case a while back for the potential of the liberating power of encryption,⁹ claiming that once this technique has been perfected, the state will lose most of its power. A skeptic from the audience noted,¹⁰ however, that not only is the state busy at work to break all the encryption codes but, as a last resort, the state could sabotage such evasion of its powers by simply shutting off the electricity.

In addition to the unreliability of technical devices for purposes of securing our liberty, reliance upon such devices for this purpose can undermine the personal resolve needed to protect individual rights. Furthermore, the belief that technology can deal with the threat of tyranny can lead to what we might call a soulless approach to politics. In other words, devices are treated as the means for doing what requires human thought and passion and commitment to values.

All in all, what is needed is the fullest possible acknowledgment of the insight that the price of liberty is indeed eternal vigilance. Although the emerging technological tools and

⁹David Friedman has advanced this position in no uncertain terms, for example, at a symposium at the Cato Institute. Many others who champion classical liberal, libertarian politics have a similarly hopeful outlook regarding the potential for securing liberty by these and related means. See *Laissez-Faire City Times*, an Internet publication many of the writers and editors of which see the Internet along these lines.

¹⁰This skeptic was the author.

devices can all be used to facilitate such vigilance, without the personal commitment of the citizenry, those tools will be insufficient for this task. Since such commitment is a matter of individual choice or initiative, it is unreasonable to expect any guarantee of advance (Machan).

None of this is to deny that very positive results may emerge from the invention of the Internet and other tools produced via science and technology. Only these must not be confused with the kind of measures needed to secure and maintain the infrastructure of a free society, measures that can only come from the sustained efforts of human beings.¹¹

References

Machan, Tibor R. 2000. *Initiative: Human Agency and Society*. Stanford: Hoover Institution Press.

¹¹A more elaborate discussion of this topic may be found in Op. Cit., Stephen Toulmin, *Return to Reason*. See also, Tom Sorell, *Scientism: Philosophy and the Infatuation With Science*, London: Routledge, Ltd., 1991.

