Assume that you are reading this book review from the comforts of your office chair or some stationary position. How fast are you moving? Come on, quickly close your eyes and guess without peeking at the answer in the next paragraph!

When I ask this question of my students, the typical response is zero miles an hour, which is the wrong answer. When our bodies are fully stationary, we are actually travelling at approximately 67,000 miles an hour as spaceship earth orbits the sun. Simultaneously, we are rotating on the earth’s axis at 1,000 miles an hour. Yet, we don’t feel dizzy, do we?

Next, how many breaths do you take in a day? Come on, guess again! Several years ago I participated in a week long silent Buddhist meditation retreat where we counted our breaths for several hours and then extrapolated the amount over 24 hours. The average rate was 18,000 breaths a day, with a range from 15,000 to 21,000. In order to take one breath, many bodily functions must harmoniously interact. Otherwise, we die. How many of those breaths are you
conscious of? Probably not many. For the most part, our lives operate on auto-
matic pilot as we live day by day until we die.

Now the $64,000 question: Why are we taking 18,000 breaths a day on this
chunk of rock speeding through space at 67,000 miles an hour?

Aristotle assumed that we were engaged in a communal activity aimed at
creating a “good” or “just” society. Thomas Aquinas, having Christianized Aris-
totle, assumed we were evolving toward Heaven on Earth. Adam Smith foresaw
an evolution toward wealthier nations, while Karl Marx foresaw a workers’ para-
dise. Most modern scholars are more modest and, for a variety of debatable
reasons, prefer not to impose any particular meaning on anyone.

In his fascinating new book Nonzero: The Logic of Human Destiny, Robert
Wright, an engaging journalist for The New Republic, boldly declares that the
purpose of our existence is to create—drum roll please—added complexity.
Whether we like it or not, this evolution has been going on the past four billion
years or so. Globalization is simply its latest incarnation. According to Wright,
complexity is not merely the consequence of evolution, it is the purpose of evo-
lution and, as it says in the Bible, this is good.

Flexible Determinism

If labels must be tossed on Wright, you might as well call him a biological
and historical determinist. These types of views may be out of fashion in
academia, but I happen to think that Mr. Wright is right. Wright wants the reader
to take a step back and view history from the perspective of all cultures’, rather
than any particular culture’s, point of view. Or, dare I note, from a cosmic God’s
point of view?

Wright’s brand of determinism leaves a lot of flexibility for bumps and bruises,
wrong turns and U-turns, and most importantly, free will. The directional flow
of history can be, and has been, misdirected when new technologies that could
integrate people fall into the hands of those opposed to individual liberty. Ac-
cording to Wright, history exhibits distinct patterns in the long run, but is very
unpredictable in the short run. The long-term pattern follows the logic of non-
zero sum games, thus the book’s title. The short-term patterns are anybody’s
guess, similar to hourly stock fluctuations on the New York Stock Exchange.

Wright is solidly on the side of Henri Bergson, Teilhard de Chardin, and
anyone else who sees the world evolving toward greater complexity. The world
is overflowing with overlapping interests, or nonzero sum games, and with the
passage of time these interests expand in depth. All of this leads to the current
age of globalization, where one day every person will be deeply connected to
every other person, wherever they happen to have been born or live. Potential
terrorists will empathize with the personal life situations of people working in
lower Manhattan or Oklahoma City, and vice versa, in the true sense of brother-
hood and sisterhood.
In his own words, Wright sees the historical and biological pattern of humans in the world evolving as such (6):

New technologies arise that permit or encourage new, richer forms of non-zero-sum interaction; then (for intelligible reasons grounded ultimately in human nature) social structures evolve that realize this rich potential—that convert non-zero sum situations into positive sums. Thus does social complexity grow in scope and depth.

Wright is a biological determinist first, and a historical determinist second. Nonetheless, he organizes the book in reverse order. The first two-thirds of the book examines these evolving patterns from a history of the world perspective. The remainder of the book is an exploration of biology (which I confess to not having understood) and some inadequately developed metaphysics about "consciousness" and "god."

How deterministic is Wright's history? Very. He parallels history's destiny to that of a poppy seed. The poppy seed is intended to become a poppy, but someone walking by could think the growing flower is a weed and uproot it at any moment. Similar to most anthropologists, Wright begins history with hunter-gatherer societies. These cultures embodied a substantial number of nonzero sum integrated division of labor tasks. For instance, hunters gathered food and shared their excess with others in exchange for a service or product that fulfilled one of their own unmet needs, be it cooking their food, doing their laundry or maintaining communal peace. Wright claims that "progress" occurred incrementally when new integrative technologies (such as more efficient and effective ways to gather, cook, and distribute food) were created and adopted. Problems arose when powerful constituencies played zero-sum, rather than nonzero sum, games by monopolizing, rather than democratizing, the new technologies. From the beginning of human existence applied ethicists have had to remind society's leaders to govern technologies for the benefit of everyone, not just selfishly.

A Candide "everything works out for the best" theme runs throughout Wright's historical analysis. He repeatedly argues that something as tragic as war is not as zero-sum as some people think. Typically, the conquering people inherit, integrate and spread what they perceive to be the best technologies of those they conquered. In addition, wars foster alliances or mergers within and between communities under attack, fostering more integration, social cohesion and trade. A common enemy or tragedy tends to bring people together, as exemplified in the United States following the September 11th World Trade Center disaster.

Wright delightfully reinterprets some well-engrained Western-civilization myths. For instance, savages were not as savage, and barbarians not as barbarian, as commonly held myths suggest. Wright writes (135):

So thank heavens for barbarians! If dominant civilizations are stagnant and decaying, contributing little if anything to the march of non-zero-sumness, it is just as well (from cultural evolution's standpoint) to have troublemakers nearby.
Wright’s historical flow is similar to Adam Smith and Karl Marx’s flow of history, with hunter-gathering societies evolving into the age of agricultural, chiefdoms, feudalism, and then industrialism. Within each of these cultural stages, leaders serve the public interest “not because they are public-spirited, but because neglecting the public welfare can diminish their own welfare” (85).

Exactly when does progress take place? According to Wright, societies make evolutionary progress when creative individuals and powerful constituents confront the two major prisoners’ dilemma problems: (1) lack of communication and (2) lack of trust. Creative minds develop, and powerful constituents permit the implementation of, new technologies that overcome these problems, such as writing, money, boats, airplanes, legal systems, telephones, televisions, computers, and the internet, among others. The bigger the empire, the more essential are the communication technologies.

**Cultural Similarities and Differences**

Importantly, not all cultures on earth transform themselves at the same rate. The speed of complex transformation is a function of cheap transportation, cheap communication mechanism, and dense populations, all of which fosters interaction among the culture’s most creative minds. Rather than emphasizing the cultural differences among China, the Near East, Latin America, and Western society, as historians and anthropologists tend to do, Wright emphasizes cultural similarities.

At different paces, each culture evolved into higher levels of complexity, from city-state, to multi-city state, to empire. Eventually, each culture either adopts, or independently develops, the best technologies available. Otherwise, the culture stagnates and declines while the leadership torch is passed to another culture on spaceship earth. For instance, while European cultural progress slowed down during the Dark Ages, which Wright maintains really weren’t that dark, China was busy inventing or further developing banking, military fleets, magnetic compasses, printing, iron and gunpowder. But when the Ming Dynasty became isolationists, opposing free trade and contact with foreigners, the torch of progress was passed on to Western European imperialists.

Where is all this complexity leading us? According to Wright, it will lead to a world-wide democratic government with many smaller political and cultural systems, like a United States writ large. This evolution can be seen in both the breakup of artificial nations, such as the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, and the voluntary coming together of cultures under larger political and economic units, such as the European Union, NAFTA, MERCOSUR, and Association of Southeast Asia, among others.

As suggested by the above coalitions, economics drives the politics, and technology drives the economics. Technological and economic integration generates political integration because trading agreements require legal monitoring and enforcement. Wright foresees layers of democratic capitalism uniting everyone on earth. He takes a deep bow in the direction of the World Trade Organization.
and awaits the day when the United States and all other nations, driven by the need to solve nonzero-sum problems, fall under its sovereignty.

Similar to the "Golden Arches" theory espoused by Thomas Friedman (2000: 248) which states that no two countries with McDonald's (i.e., a middle class big enough to support it) have fought a war against each other, Wright argues that economic interdependence decreases the likelihood of war and increases the likelihood of mutual respect. He writes that (208):

You simply cannot do business with people while executing all their male citizens [as in old war conquests], and increasingly we do business with people everywhere . . .

As we've seen, in the process of expanding, non-zero-sumness has brought not only more respect for more people, but more liberty for more people . . .

The world remains in many ways a horribly immoral place by almost anyone's standard. Still, the standards we apply now are much tougher than the standards of old. Now we ask not only that people not be literally enslaved, but that they be paid a decent wage and work under sanitary conditions . . . Still it is hard, after pondering the full sweep of history, to resist the conclusion that—in some important ways, at least—the world now stands at its moral zenith to date. (emphasis added)

Wright maintains that historical determinism was derailed in the halls of academia because of moral objections, rather than historical observations. As highlighted in the above quote, Wright believes that the more complex society becomes the more moral it tends to be. Nonetheless, Wright wants to remain descriptive rather than become prescriptive. He wants scholars and general readers to set aside their moral objections and simply reconsider the facts of history to determine if it is progressing in a particular direction—toward greater complexity.

Asian Economic Development

No matter how integrated the 190-plus nations of the world become, we are still left with a very old problem. World-wide, dysfunctional families are procreating children prior to parents achieving moral maturity. Moralistcally, we are still stuck in the Garden of Eden, with Adams and Eves playing with the forbidden fruit (read sex) and giving birth to Cains and Abels who commit fratricide and other injustices against their brothers and sisters, a problem of biblical proportions.

Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn's book Thunder from the East: Portrait of a Rising Asia documents how this problem is played out in Asia. Kristof and WuDunn, Pulitzer Prize winning husband and wife New York Times correspondents, predict that following a five hundred-year absence Asia will gradually replace the United States in economic primacy. The authors, who write alternating chapters, border Asia with Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India to the west, Mongolia and Russia to the north, Korea and Japan to the east, and Malaysia and Indonesia to the south.
Kristof and WuDunn list the rise and fall of economic powers since 1000 B.C. as China, Greece, Rome, China, Spain, England, and then the United States. They predict that the next stop will be in Asia again. Asia’s percent of global GDP has risen from 19 percent in 1950 to 33 percent in 1998, and the World Bank forecasts that Asia will account for a whopping 55 to 60 percent of global GDP by 2025. Some forecasters predict that India’s, as well as China’s, economy will surpass that of the United States by 2050 if it adopts more democratic capitalism mechanisms.

As an optimistic nationalist and universalist, I do not agree with these predictions. Of course I hope that the economies of India and China skyrocket. But I also possess similar hope for my own native land. Currently, the United States economy is plagued by the dual, interconnected problems of (1) poverty, which by most estimates ranges from 12 to 20 percent, and (2) inadequately educated citizens, where more than 70 percent of the adult population lacks an undergraduate college degree and many urban public schools are a national disgrace. If poverty is significantly reduced, and more people receive a better education, the United States’ economy will continue to blossom.

Kristof and WuDunn, in kindred spirit with Robert Wright, are deeply grounded in utilitarianism. They highlight the long-term communal benefits Asian nations will obtain as a result of (hopefully) short-term personal tragedies. For instance, they write that despite the “terrible human cost” of the Asian economic crisis, it has helped to “destroy much of the cronyism, protectionism, and government regulation that had burdened Asian business . . . [and] over the next two decades, Asia’s upheavals will gradually help clear out the dead wood and reinvigorate the region” (11–12). No more $500 per person dinners in Tokyo’s red-light district for bank regulators!

**Utilitarianism, Dirty Hands, and Sweatshops**

Kristof and WuDunn adhere mostly to a utilitarian ethic throughout their book, relying on Joseph Schumpeter’s “creative destruction” metaphor to justify incurring known current pains for anticipated future benefits. No pain, no gain, and if the gain doesn’t happen then maybe the pain wasn’t severe enough. However, from the opening pages, their journalistic training habituates them to populate the book with personal stories highlighting heart-breaking deontological violations invoked in the name of utilitarianism.

The book begins with a startling black-and-white photograph of three motorcycles driven by Indonesian Muslim men in their twenties and thirties, each with a rear passenger whose upraised arms victoriously wave two-foot long machetes and sickles while reportedly shouting “God is Great.” The lead motorcycle drags the headless corpse of a sorcerer they blamed for some of the problems associated with the Asian economic crisis. These local heroes also blamed sorcerers for the mutilated bodies of Muslim leaders hanging in trees whom Kristof suggests were most likely the victims of military extremists.
Despite having committed such a gruesome act, the motorcyclists and their supporters come across as kind, gentle family men who eradicated an evil (the sorcerer) for the good of the community.

Kristof boldly struggles with where to place deontological limits (thou shall not harm others) on utilitarian calculations that generate meaningful benefits to many people. His reporting adds significant realism to the often used Kohlbergian dilemma on whether it is morally right for Heinz to steal a drug to save the life of a loved one. In Cambodia, Kristof meets Sriy, whose parents sold her to a brothel at age eleven to help pay her mother’s medical expenses. After later meeting Yok Yorn following the second malaria-caused death among his nine children, Kristof exposes his following inner thoughts: (123–124)

So as I stood there awkwardly, embarrassed at invading a family’s grief, thinking of my own children, a disturbing thought kept surfacing in the back of my mind, rising again no matter how many times I tried to slap it down: Why not sell the teenage daughter who had spoken to me and save the rest of the children?

The daughter, who was named Phan and was nineteen years old, already had a touch of malaria and might die anyway, but at least such a sale would save the others. It would also provide the money to educate the rest of the children and allow them to break out of this endless cycle of poverty. By sacrificing Phan, the family could save the others.

That obnoxious thought gnawed at me. . . . [A]s I looked at the sobbing Yok Yorn, as I looked at the corpse of Kaiset, as I looked at the seven remaining children. I felt a flash of sympathy for the mothers who had sold girls like Sriy into brothels. Sriy might die [of AIDS], but perhaps her brothers and sisters were now living and learning because of the money that had been paid for her . . . [Sriy’s parents] grieve as much as any parents would, but they see their choice as the best of some terrible alternatives. (emphasis added)

This stark “dirty hands” dilemma, being forced to choose between two undesirable alternatives, informs Kristof’s discussion of sweatshops in a way that profoundly influences how I now think about the topic. Kristof sets up the reader by first describing the terrible working conditions at a Chinese factory where peasant girls, paid by the piece, work from six o’clock in the morning until nine o’clock at night, seven days a week, for three months before getting a day off. Then he interviews an Indonesian woman who considers sweatshop work lucrative compared to her current activity of searching through garbage at a hazardous dump with her young son in hopes of finding items she could sell that would earn her the $1 necessary for them to live another day. Once again, the issue’s magnitude can best be presented in Kristof’s own words (126–130):

It was plain that Tratiwoon regarded the worst of sweatshop jobs as far loftier than her own work, and she was right. Even if her son gets only a twenty-five-cents-an-hour job in a hellish little factory with dangerous fumes, he will sweat less and be healthier than if he stays on at the dump. To people like Tratiwoon, a sweatshop represents a leap in living standards.
What Tratwoon realized but well-meaning Americans often do not is that the sweatshop jobs are never the bottom tier in a country. Even worse are the standard jobs that the poor drift into: farm labor, day jobs on construction sites, sorting garbage, the sex industry, and begging.

I have come to feel that the campaigns against sweatshops are often counterproductive, harming the very Third World citizens that they are intended to help. First, in the short term they clearly raise the conditions at existing factories producing branded merchandise for companies like Nike. Second, they raise labor costs and thus encourage mechanization, reducing the numbers of employees needed in the factories. The upshot of these campaigns is to help people who currently have jobs in Nike plants, but to cost jobs overall and to send jobs from the poorest countries to mid-ranking ones.

If Americans want to help Third World citizens in terrible jobs, they would be far better off working with a first-rate development organization like Childreach instead of threatening the very jobs that in the poorest countries are an escalator out of despair.

In a two-page article adopted from their book (which would make for an interesting class reading), Kristof and WuDunn (2000) summarize their belief that “the simplest way to help the poorest Asians would be to buy more from sweatshops, not less.” Sweatshops are the initial price for development in Asian economies going through their version of the Industrial Revolution. In the article, Kristof and WuDunn provide some statistics to support their argument that Asian regions which permitted foreign sweatshops (i.e., South Korean, Taiwan, China) have substantially improved their standard of living, while citizens of regions that resisted foreign exploitation (i.e., India) continue to suffer from the worst depths of poverty.

What to Do About Sweatshops and Our Consciences?

Although I have not yet decided to make sweatshop production my primary criterion for purchasing products, I do find Kristof and WuDunn’s arguments quite compelling. After reading this book, studying the pictures of the people and situations they write about which landscape the book, and discussing this topic in greater detail with some of the many international students from these regions, I have modified my anti-sweatshop views. It is the better of two evils.

Nonetheless, it pains me that sweatshop labor is the best we can do as we stumble our way toward a world-wide democratic government on spaceship earth. I expect that future technology will permit painless child births for women, painless teething for nine month old babies, and painless deaths. Hopefully, the same will be true for future industrializations. Unlike design issues associated with the human body, we have only ourselves to blame for the social design problems of industrialization.

Robert Wright convincingly argues that the flow of cultural history is towards greater complexity. But cultures consist of families, families consist of
individuals, and each individual has a conscience. In the silent moments of the
day, our conscience yearns for our own individual perfection, reminding us of
situations where we either appropriately or inappropriately responded. In case
our consciences are smothered by other thoughts populating our minds, mul-
tiple external sources reinforce the conscience’s point of view. Our parents want
us to be perfect children, our children want us to be perfect parents, our spouses
want us to be perfect spouses, our colleagues want us to be perfect colleagues,
our students want us to be perfect teachers, our teachers want us to be perfect
students, our bosses want us to be perfect subordinates, our subordinates want
us to be perfect bosses, etc.

What holds us back from becoming that which so many others want us to be?
Of course to err is human and everyone is stuck in a similar human predicament.
However, this answer seems inadequate given the daily reminders of our own
conscience. Yes, sweatshop employment is better than prostitution and search-
ing for items in hazardous garbage dumps. But is employing citizens of
developing nations under inhumane working conditions the best other alterna-
tive we can offer?

Given the choice between sweatshop employment or hazardous dumps, sweat-
shops are a life preserver, not a life destroyer. Certainly, a drowning person you
save will not mind if the life preserver you tossed overboard caused harm by
hitting him or her in the head. But even then, our conscience will remind us that
the next time we should aim better because the bad toss could easily have killed,
rather than saved, the person. We remain stuck in Genesis, reliving the mistakes
of metaphorical Adams and Eves raising metaphorical Cains and Abels who
exploit, oppress, or kill each other rather than being their brother’s keepers.

Instead, we ought to perfect our individual character by fully responding to
our conscience, and by creating conscientious children within conscientious fami-
lies, communities, and nations. Such a culture would probably manage workers
in developing nations differently. Some day we will, and the sooner the better.
History, driven by our consciences as well as complexity, points us in this direc-
tion. I think having a one world democratic government will help speed up this
process. In the meantime, spaceship earth continues to orbit the sun at 67,000
miles per hour while its inhabitants struggle to get their act together.

References

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