

It dawned on me the other day that secularists face their own problem of evil. In a religious framework, the problem of evil is why an all-good, all-powerful God lets bad things happen to good people. Why do babies die? Why do innocents suffer for the sins of their ancestors (e.g., Adam and Eve)? Why do so many people starve while others have so much? The answers here usually revolve around notions of sin, better after-lives to come, or the inscrutability of God.

Even if we leave God out of the picture, we still face a secular version of the problem of evil. Humans have big brains and yet often they wreck harm on one and all. How can it be that a “smart” species so often engages in stupidity that too often carries over to immorality? If we are so smart, why have we not made better institutions and societies?

In the secular version of the problem we cannot blame God or appeal to notions of sin. We have to appeal to some ideas about what makes humans human and how hard some of the problems we humans face are. In other words, I am not going to blame us humans ourselves, but say that we face very hard problems and, thus, it is not surprising that we so often get things wrong or, at least, not right enough for us all to flourish.

We humans evolved from the same ancestor as Chimpanzees. Chimpanzees are notoriously competitive. In fact, their cognitive skills—which are considerable—have evolved to function in the environment of competition for food, mates, and dominance. Humans surely have competitiveness, as well. But we also evolved the ability to cooperate and cognitive skills that function for cooperative endeavors. This is what has allowed us to make cultures, institutions, cities, and states.

Cooperation on a large scale—that is, any sort that could lead to cultures, institutions, cities, and states—requires solving what I will call “hard continua problems”. These are problems where too much of something is bad and too little of it is bad, but finding the “middle-ground” is hard. The middle-ground is not a matter of “just right”, since the “sweet spot” must always adjust to multiple interacting variables, changing circumstances, and unforeseen problems. Because of this complexity, the “middle ground” is, in actuality, a compromise among competing pressures and a point that is always being buffeted around a range of possibilities and prone to falling off at the too much side or the too little side. It is a balancing act.

It is certainly possible that intelligence of a different sort than we humans have or some form of alien “higher intelligence” could solve such hard continua problems better than we do. It is possible, too, that “machines” could help (or hurt) in solving such problems. It is also possible that we can learn to do better—maybe even much better—in the future. But, nonetheless, the problems are and will remain hard for any foreseeable future because of the nature of the world we human beings live in (i.e., it is complicated and made up of continua and not discrete variables for the most part).

At any rate, my own view is we are not doing all that well now and that we ought to meditate—at every level—on how to do better. I would argue that it is the role of leaders to study and think through these hard problems in the name of change for the better. It

is the role of all of us to ensure that such leaders replace many of the ones we currently have. And, remember, we are all leaders, or should be, in our own lives and endeavors. "Followers" always customize, on the ground of practice, the policies of "leaders" and in doing so, they are, for better or worse, leading too and, actually, the only leaders that matter at that moment.

I will discuss six hard problems that we humans face and must solve if we are not to harm each other. Each problem is a continuum where the problem is to find the "sweet spot" where we get the best results and, then, to adjust this sweet spot as we face change. What makes this all the harder is that we must find and continually adjust sweet spots on all six continua as they, in turn, affect each other.

1. **LINKING**: The first problem is linking or coupling. In any system, if too many elements (people, tools, or people and tools) are linked in too many ways with too many other elements, the system is fragile. Problems can spread and ramify quickly through the whole system and bring it down. Systems with too many links can also too easily resonate into less than optimal static states. On the other hand, if the elements are linked to too few other elements or are linked to too few diverse elements, the system cannot function optimally or can become an echo chamber.

2. **OPTIMIZING**. Humans tend to seek to optimize any system they are in in order to succeed with their own goals in their own ways and with the least effort. That is, humans seek to "game systems". Too much optimizing leads to ruining the system for all by cheating and, thus, changing the very nature and purpose of the system. Too little optimizing, on the other hand, can lead to rigidity, rote rule-following, and a lack of emergence and innovation.

3. **BONDING**. Humans naturally bond to their kin and other people "like them". In doing so they create solidarity and nets of reciprocity necessary for survival. Too much bonding can lead to inbred fear and exclusion of others (as well as over-valuing kin against the needs of groups and society, the very foundation of corruption). Too little bonding, on the other hand, can lead to too little support for networks of reciprocity that can support us in times of need.

4. **FREEZING**. When human cooperate in large groups they cannot think about every variable all at once. They have to off-load some cognitive work to routines. So institutions often "freeze" good solutions so that people do not have to rethink them, but just follow procedures. The problem is that as things change these frozen solutions can become poor ways of proceeding, but are followed nonetheless because we have ceased to think about them at a deep level. Too much freezing or making it too difficult to unfreeze procedures can lead to rigidity and obstacles and obstructions on the path to success in a fast changing world. Too little freezing or not freezing enough can lead to chaos as people reinvent the wheel over and over again or are forced to cognitive overload when solving new problems.

5. **COMFORT**: All humans tell stories and believe things that give them hope and comfort in a harsh world. This is why humans can be so dismissive of evidence. There is plenty of research that shows that too little comfort can lead to a lack of hope and illnesses like depression. On the other hand, too much comfort can lead to illusions and a lack of attention to the world. This, in turn, can lead to illness or isolation in echo chambers.

6. **CARING**. Humans cannot be effective in the world unless they care about what they do and feel what they do counts. Too much caring about too many things and caring about too many less important things can lead to anxiety and tattered arteries. Too little caring, on the other hand, can lead to indifference and free riders.

It is, indeed, hard for groups of humans—small or large—to hit sweet spots on each of these related continua. It is harder yet to continuously inspect and re-set these sweet spots in the fact of human diversity and fast-paced change. Sadly, no one discipline studies these hard problems and their inter-relatedness. We need a new trans-discipline here, perhaps one called something like “Human Continua Studies” (HCS).

Getting these continua problems wrong leads to malaise, corruption, illness, and a lack of trust in groups, institutions, and society. Often, too, these ill results are not just failures of effectiveness, but forces of harm that looks a good deal like what religious people call “evil”.

Linking: Too much leads to fragility. Too little leads to failure. Goal: Strength.

Optimizing: Too much leads to destruction. Too little leads to rigidity. Goal: Innovation

Bonding: Too much leads to incest. Too little leads to death. Goal: Society.

Freezing: Too much leads to obstruction. Too little leads to chaos. Goal: Order

Comforting: Too much leads to illness. Too little leads to illness. Goal: Resilience

Caring: Too much leads to anxiety. Too little leads to indifference. Goal: Effectiveness