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The Good News You Haven't Heard and Then Some (Inconspicuous Deliberations)

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Humans have evolved to pay attention to things in motion. If our ancestors had focused only on slow and diffuse changes in their habitat, they would not have lasted very long living among predators. So, we as their descendants naturally pay a great deal of attention to things like the Islamic State or troop movements in Ukraine. Yet, in the 21st century, we can't afford to limit our attention to things in motion. As Einstein warned, not all things you can observe and measure are worth knowing, and not all things worth knowing are measurable. In some important cases, processes are diffuse, and cause and effect are separated by too many layers of time and space to lend themselves to quick observation and causal explanation. They are nevertheless very real, and deserve our attention.

One such diffuse, slow, but highly consequential change is the way humanity has become one big learning community. The consequences of that change are all around us. For example, there was a time when the world was divided into cultures of making and cultures of taking; today we debate proper levels of taxation and regulation, but no society considers plunder and pillage as a sustainable route to prosperity. Was there one decisive event that led to this consensus? Probably not. Is that a reason to overlook the significance of this consensus? Obviously not. Or take the death penalty: In the nineteenth century, nearly all countries had capital punishment; today 140 countries have outlawed it. Clearly Amnesty International and various European bodies deserve some credit, but a far more decentralized process of deliberation and learning is also likely at play. Or consider high and hyper-inflation: In the 1990s, nearly 40 countries in the world endured sustained hyper-inflation. In the last 10 years, only Iraq and Zimbabwe have. Policy makers around the world seem to have converged on the merits of fiscal prudence. One 18th century Swedish king was inspired by Ottoman practices to create the first ombudsman; today more than eighty countries have ombudsman-like structures. Or take divorce: 50 years ago, it was illegal in Brazil, Chile, Italy and Spain; today only the Philippines does not allow divorce. It seems we redefine what is feasible and what is desirable on an ongoing basis, and in that process we study what our peers across the world do. As a result, we have become a virtual learning community, and that may be the best news for 2015.

Admittedly, we need such a process as we navigate the treacherous waters and minefields of our interdependence. They have been called "problems without passports," and there are many of them. The most visible example today is Ebola, while the classic case has been climate change, but there are many such centripetal forces which defy conventional borders and bind our fates. When the financial sector in the United States sold unsound products or when the bookkeeping in Greek public finance was revealed to be shoddy, the consequences were felt across the world. When Indian mothers overuse antibiotics to protect their children, the chances of a drug-resistant infection emerging in other parts of the world increase. When an invasive species from one part of the world can travel the globe in the ballast tank of a large container ship, marine life in all harbors and surrounding seas is at risk. When one country uses a weapon of mass destruction, it erodes the norm and stigma around their use. The manner in which chicken farms in Thailand or pig farms in China are managed have become a public health concern for everyone, as 80% of infections are common to animals and human beings, and over-crowded conditions for farm animals increase the chances of mutation and the next pandemic. Marine biologists now tell us that they find plastic particles in fish all around the

world; we have treated oceans and seas as a global garbage disposal, and now we have to eat each other's garbage, albeit in miniscule but steady increasing portions. And then there is climate change, the ultimate centripetal force. No force has rendered national borders as inconsequential as climate change. Emissions from the other side of the world have as much effect on the climate you experience as emissions from your own city, rendering distances irrelevant. And even the most powerful country is not powerful enough to insulate itself from the consequences of actions by others. The shared sense and vocabulary which come from being a virtual learning community are indispensable as we set out to address these epic challenges.

What problems without passports and centripetal forces have produced is a world where we live with billions of others with whom we share a planet and increasingly a destiny, but not countries and civic processes. To put it another way, we have become used to the notion of being the authors of our lives, and now our lives are increasingly co-authored. How to manage that co-authorship of not only our own lives but also our collective destiny is, quite possibly, the most difficult and consequential question of our age.

There are, to be sure, a couple of suboptimal responses to the challenge of this epic interdependence. One possible response is to do nothing and to continue to assume that international affairs can be conducted as if countries are billiard balls, with impenetrable and homogenous insides, that come into infrequent but predictable contact with each other. Another response is to hope for better global governance, delivered by brilliant technocrats and better designed institutions. I am not convinced that either option would do the trick. The growing movement of capital, ideas, goods and people and the resulting dynamics described above, have consigned the billiard ball model of international affairs to the dustbin of history. Multiple layers of global governance have indeed delivered a great deal of cooperation, and yet the challenges which await us regarding climate change and responsibility-to-protect, and the depth of our growing interdependence require a more fundamental and robust framework than technocracy. They require genuine, sustained engagement with each other.

What we need is a global civics. For a long time now, civics has been dismissed as the boring study of governmental branches, yet civics is, at its core, what we do to co-manage our commons. It refers to our proclivities to co-create and co-habit realms of our interdependence. Public institutions are the result, not the cause, of our civic sensibilities.

Think, for example, about the way we greet each other. Greeting is something we do automatically and without much thought. Yet it may hold important clues. Greetings across the three Abrahamic faiths have one important feature in common: Assalamu alaykum, Pax vobis and Shalom aleichem all mean "I come in peace," respectively in Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. Incidentally, the military salute is based on a convention meant to show that one is not bearing any weapons, and therefore

comes in peace. The practice of shaking hands is presumed to be based on a similar intent of demonstrating that parties are unarmed and mean no harm. In India, Namaste means “I revere you” and is met with the same words in response. In South Africa, Sawubona means “I see you”. These common traits are important and telling. It seems that humanity has decided that the best way to start an interaction is to confirm one’s respect and recognition, and that no harm will come of the encounter. That is, in a sense, the Da Vinci Code embedded in our greetings.

This code makes more sense if we take a longer view. We did not always greet strangers in this manner. In his recent book, *The World Till Yesterday*, Jared Diamond describes the world of our tribal ancestors, where people were divided into three categories: friends, enemies, and strangers. Friends and enemies are relatively straightforward; how to deal with strangers is the critical question. Diamond demonstrates that strangers were treated essentially as enemies, as there were no benign reasons for you to encounter a stranger. But as we came to live in more complex social and geographical arrangements, we could no longer afford to assume that all strangers were malign, because we needed their engagement and cooperation. Therefore, we had to develop conventions and normative frameworks which would rule out harm, and recognize and confirm the parity of each party to the encounter. Kant, for example, explored a right to hospitality in his 1795 classic, *Perpetual Peace*. He posited that everyone should have a right to expect not to be treated as an enemy just because they are strangers. The question in our increasingly interdependent world, then, is whether – or how – we can find a manner to greet not just those who are in our line of sight, but the billions of others who co-author our lives from afar.

Fortunately, we have additional reservoirs of decency and civics. There is a relentless barrage of narratives about our beastly nature and behavior. Since childhood, we have watched animals tear each other apart in countless nature documentaries. The lesson we are expected to draw is that survival at any cost is the natural order. Many of us had some political theory at college, where we encountered the work of Thomas Hobbes. He told us that man is a wolf to other men and that the only way to reign in the beast is to submit to a larger beast, the leviathan. We also recall that Adam Smith advised us not to rely on the charity of the butcher and the grocer for our meal, but on their self-interest. International relations experts thunderously profess that great powers have always been dangerous actors, and so they should not be embarrassed to continue being dangerous and irresponsible. And yet, none of these experts encourage us to act like this as individuals. Take the Ultimatum Game, in which a person gets \$100 to split with a second person. It is called the ultimatum game because the second person has no say on what the split is, and receives, in effect, an ultimatum: either accept the split, or reject the split, in which case neither person gets anything. If we were all convinced of each other’s beastly nature, we would expect the most common split to be \$99 for the first person and \$1 for the second person. The first person would be foolish to offer anything more than \$1, as he is supposed to care only about maximizing his gain, and the second person would be foolish to turn down \$1, as that is more than he had a minute ago. Yet, 30 years of conducting this experiment in all corners of the world reveals that this is not at all how we behave. The average split that people offer is 55-45 – not quite 50-50, but close enough. What is more revealing is that splits

worse that 75-25 are routinely rejected, which would be thoroughly irrational if maximizing our self-interest were indeed the only metric we have. It seems that many among us are ready to pay a personal price to oppose blatant unfairness. We seem to innately understand the importance of fairness. In another version of this experiment, the second person can't reject the deal. In this version, called the Dictator Game, the average split is 70-30, with one in four people giving the second person \$50 or more, even though there is no threat of material punishment in a 100-0 split. So what is going on? Could it be that we are not selfish brutes after all?

Fortunately, scholars did not stop asking these questions after Hobbes and Smith. E.O. Wilson, for example, has shown that while egoistic individuals have an evolutionary advantage, so do groups bound by solidarity. Could that be why we oppose blatant unfairness at a personal cost, and act far more generously than crude selfishness would dictate? Robert Axelrod has set out to discover how cooperation emerges without central authority. He designed simulation experiments demonstrating that strategies that start with cooperation and reciprocate both cooperation and non-cooperation proved to be the most successful and resilient. In other words, having some faith in our fellow humans is not foolish, but rational. Elinor Ostrom has demonstrated how we achieve cooperation and reign in selfish free riders without a leviathan, and won a Nobel Prize for her work. She chronicled how belonging to the same normative and social communities, frequenting the same cafés and bars, and building reputation through the same channels all provide formidable venues for binding covenants. Other experiments have proven that we are susceptible to the gaze of our peers. When a photograph of a pair of eyes is placed over a donation box for the office coffee machine, contributions increase substantially. In addition to a commitment to an ethics of reciprocity, it seems we have learned to be attentive to the gaze and regard of our peers, and to avoid their loathing. We know we cannot survive and prosper without the cooperation of our peers. The most current case for this has been made by Yuval Noah Harari in *Sapiens*: Harari argues that no other species cooperate with as many members as we do, or in as many flexible modes. No other human trait explains our place in the food chain as well this one, Harari maintains. This may also be why so many philosophical and religious traditions describe humanity as an interdependent system. Desmond Tutu explains the traditional African worldview, Ubuntu, as the realization of "I am because we are." The Categorical Imperative, the Golden Rule, Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam – all refer to a similar temperament.

Another experiment that tests the rhythms of our cooperative temperament is the Public Goods Game. In this experiment, five or more people are each given \$100. They are told that any voluntary contribution made to a common pot will accrue an additional 50%, and the accumulated sum will be evenly distributed back to each member of the group. As you can infer from previous studies, some people contribute a good deal; others contribute little or nothing. Experiments have shown that the average individual contribution in the first round is around \$30. When more than one round is played, voluntary contributions go down. We are ready to act in solidarity, but we do not want to be made fools of; when we see people contributing less than we do and still benefitting from our generosity, that violates our expectation of fairness and we adjust our contributions downward. Two things have proved to be effective in raising and sustaining voluntary contributions: allowing

participants to punish selfish members while also incurring a cost to themselves, and communication among participants. In *A Cooperative Species*, Bowles and Gintis observe that our linguistic capabilities allow us as a species to formulate social norms, communicate these norms to newcomers, alert others to their violation, and organize coalitions to punish violators. Communication, it seems, elicits and elucidates norms.

Legal professionals and the overwhelming majority of economists have argued for years that all we need are enforceable contracts. Yet, we also need a great deal of trust, without which no system can really function. One thinker who argued for the centrality of trust was Confucius: *Analects XII.7* has a brilliant section which examines whether security, food or trust are vital, and ends up concluding that trust is more central than security and food, because neither security nor food can be secured without a minimal degree of trust. Claus Offe argues that trust is indispensable to coordination and cooperation, as both require perceptions, dispositions and expectations which induce them. Think about all the situations that require our trust on a daily basis. We trust that someone has checked that the water we drink is safe, and that there is a reliable supply for the future. We trust that someone is watching over the banks so that our deposits are worth more than the paper that our account statements are printed on. We trust that the plane we are about to board is properly maintained and won't break apart in midair. We trust that some planning has gone into our children's school curriculum so that they are reasonably well prepared for the labor force of the future. We trust that the roads we drive on have been designed for safety and we won't encounter 90 degree turns on the highway or simultaneous green lights at intersections. We go to sleep with the comfort of knowing that the buildings we live in can withstand a flood or an earthquake, and that they are not ridden with asbestos or radon. We operate with the assumption that if we are physically assaulted, the police and the courts will be guided by the law and not by personal gain or money. We hope that the terms and conditions contained in 27 pages of size 10 font, which we agree to for a credit card, a car rental, or a an email or Facebook account, are not predatory. We assume that the medicine and treatment we are prescribed is the best available at the time. The list goes on and on. The global division of labor which underwrites our prosperity forces us to trust more and more people. Nurturing and sustaining that trust is key to our prosperity, though it is unclear how to go about this.

Replenishing instead of depleting existing reservoirs of good faith and decency is one obvious place to start. Kwame Appiah notes that we all basically agree that we have some obligation to others; that we cannot do terrible things to them; that we have some duty to intervene and help out if their situation becomes intolerable and we can provide assistance at a reasonable cost to ourselves. The thorny question is whether we have any other obligations, and to answer that, he proposes the age-old practice of a wholesome conversation. Appiah's proposal is one that we can all follow. We also ought to shed any sense of hubris. Any sign of implicit or explicit superiority is poisonous for the sort of trust and rapport we need. Genuine openness to engagement and curiosity are becoming the temperaments for our age.

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