

## The Future's Horizon

People will always complain. No matter how well something is done, complaints will always follow. That is why you can tell a lot about any civilization by what its citizens are complaining about.

In the 1980s college students began to start complaining loudly — that sometimes people called them bad names at school. That is when I knew that our civilization had reached a new plateau of civility. Because if that was all they had to complain about, our society had already changed drastically — for the better.

Most of the time complaints are “telling details”, full of useful social information. Sometimes, though, the complaint is so common that it has been repeated in every culture since time immemorial. What I will be discussing in this essay is whether there is any solid evidence for one of those common complaints.

That complaint, which is especially voiced by retired literate individuals, is that human culture is slipping, that our ethics, or intelligence or technical skills are not being repeated in the younger generations, and so the future looks bleak for humanity.

My favorite translation of ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs is a short letter by an older teacher, who complains bitterly about how his students don't demonstrate the same respect as previous generations of students did, about how hard it has become to teach such undisciplined students anything useful for their future lives, and about how the great culture of their civilization is in serious danger as a result. This was written almost 5,000 years ago.

That made me wonder, when I read it decades ago, whether the problem is a continually declining level of civilization, or merely a misperception. In the case of the aging teacher, it is easy to see that his students were only a few years younger than he was when he started teaching, and that their and his interests were far more closely aligned then, leading to respect and cooperation — to the extent that is at all possible in a classroom. But the older the teacher became, the greater the gap was between his students and him, which led to less mutual understanding and less respect and cooperation. That, and the usual failure of memory to be objective when looking back on a hallowed past, easily explains this common pedagogical complaint.

But it is not as easy to conclude whether our civilization as a whole is deteriorating or improving. In this particular election year, the emotional vote may be obvious. So before I describe the Future's Horizon, before I explain the reasons I think we all have to be optimistic about where human civilization is generally trending — even though I would not suggest being too optimistic about our continuing to be part of those trends for more than a few more decades ourselves — I would like to explain the ground rules of my approach to such analyses, because it is very hard to assess how we are doing or where we are heading without knowing the rules of the game we are playing.

And we really don't know those rules. No one left us the blueprint. It would certainly have helped out a whole lot if someone had. But no one did. Recognizing this in my early 20s, I set about the task of deducing the rules of the game. My analogy for the task I set myself was that it was like watching as many baseball games as it takes to deduce the rules of the game.

Imagine actually doing that. If you didn't know any of the rules of baseball, how many games would you have to watch before you could deduce them all? Assuming you were a very keen and attentive observer, that is. 3,000? 5,000? Maybe 10,000? And when you finally concluded that you had deduced all the rules, do you think that the "infield fly rule" would be among them? Probably not. That might take another 100,000 games to deduce.

Funnily enough, it is important to explain, at this point, that whenever I think about baseball and its rules, I also think about Jean Claude and Tokyo. Jean Claude is a French businessman I met in 1998 in Tokyo, right after I had flown in from New York to join ongoing discussions to acquire a failed Japanese life insurance company for a French billionaire. Jean Claude, I found out within the hour, was the French bidder's team leader, and he took it upon himself to initiate each new member of the team into his personal fraternity. I was warned by my boss, Jean Claude's most recent victim, to be prepared, but above all to not fail the test.

So I was ready at 11:15 pm, as the business negotiations petered out for the day, when Jean Claude cornered me as I was leaving to get some sleep at our hotel across the street. At his insistence, we jumped in a cab and set out for a Roppongi gentlemen's club called Al Capone. Shortly after we arrived, Jean Claude arranged for the two of us to sit at a rather large table where we could overlook the dance floor, and then he disappeared for several minutes. He returned with five young women, one from Japan, one from Romania, one from Italy and two blondes from the Russian steppes, who were our hosts for the night.

Polite conversation ensued for the first ten minutes, and then one of the Russians leaned over to the other and whispered, "с днем рождения". Midnight had just tolled, and I had studied enough Russian to understand Happy Birthday, so I asked Natasha if it really was her birthday. It was, and it turned out that Tanya was her younger sister. I turned to Jean Claude and explained that we had a birthday girl at the table, and should get a cake for her. Jean Claude valiantly sent someone out to get one, but apparently of the very few things that are impossible to buy in Roppongi after midnight, birthday cakes are one.

So we settled on champagne, and soon the birthday party took on a life of its own. First we sang Happy Birthday in English, and then in Russian after a little tutoring, and soon we were each singing childhood songs in our native language for the others, which we kept up in round robin fashion, including French songs from Jean Claude's childhood, until the club closed.

Needless to say, hosting a family birthday party was not the usual way to spend two hours at Club Al Capone, so during the cab ride back to our hotel, Jean Claude just stared at me, silently, trying to figure me out. Finally he said, "Zhorzh, zat was by far ze weirdest night I have ever zpent in Roppongi. But I *really* enjoyed it."

Several years later, Jean Claude came to San Francisco as part of a trip to Napa Valley to put their wines to a personal test. He asked me to take him to a baseball game, and to explain it to him, as he had never seen a baseball game in his life, and found the few glimpses he had had of baseball to be very confusing.

We sat in my law firm's seats, about 10 rows behind the Giants' dugout. It was a beautiful, sunny afternoon, and I found it thoroughly entertaining to live the baseball analogy I had been using for decades, explaining to the French incarnation of Bacchus the difference between a ball that one hits and a ball that means you get to walk to first base if you get four of them before you get three strikes. By the 5<sup>th</sup> inning, Jean Claude was beginning to make some headway against the rules when his education was totally disrupted by two scantily-clad young women who moved into the empty seats next to us. First they waved to their friends up in the bleachers, and then they began attempting to attract the attention of the roving cameras that feature spectators between innings. Jean Claude was very attentive from the first minute of their gyrations, but it was the 7<sup>th</sup> inning stretch before their pictures suddenly showed up on the Jumbotron screen. Jean Claude's face lit up the next second, and the second after that I noticed that his purple-shirted right shoulder had edged into the picture too. So I shoved my right shoulder into his left shoulder, pushing Jean Claude completely onto the Jumbotron, his grinning face directly in front of the women's bare midriffs, as they danced up and down wildly and the crowd roared its approval.

That was Jean Claude's 15 seconds of American fame. And this time, without any hesitation, he told me, "Zhorzh, I will remember zis moment my entire life." And so have I, which is why I always think about Jean Claude and Tokyo when I think about my rules of baseball analogy. Because no matter what the rules of the game are, it is important to remember that the spectators are also part of the game — and they are always improvising.

So we should approach this task of discovering life's inherent patterns not only with extreme hubris but also with humility. Because even if we are successful, there are probably several equivalents of the infield fly rule which are bound to escape our attention. Forever.

The first highly useful distinction I made was to define the difference between human conceptions and inherent patterns — that inherent patterns could not be violated. They can be expressed in many different ways, but never violated. So if a proposed pattern could be violated in any way, I considered it proof that it was just another human conception — perhaps a useful generalization, and even mostly true, but still violatable and therefore not an inherent pattern in life.

The law of gravity, for example, appears to be an inherent pattern in matter. It cannot be violated — at least according to our current assumptions. It might prove, in the future, that we have misunderstood and mislabeled this pattern. That it is simply the result of the accelerating momentum of other particles of matter, or some other explanation that makes it all clearer to us not only how gravity works, and how much force is entailed, but also why. But for now we think we are on to a fundamental, inviolable law of nature. And we probably are.

On the other hand, there is the rule: Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife. Which is either honored in the breach, or intellectualized to death by deciding, after lengthy deliberations, that only the wife of the neighbor on the next block was meant by that rule — whom you would never in a million years covet anyway. This is a good example of what is not an inherent pattern.

But I do think there are inherent patterns, similar to the law of gravity, which influence our personalities and are totally inviolable. They are not behavioral rules, though.

One such example is the inherent pattern I call The Importance of Being Important. That is, by the very nature of our experiences, we each feel like we are the center of the Universe. And indeed, whenever we experience anything, we experience it as if we are the center of the Universe. But most of us notice, at some point, that we are surrounded by billions of other minds, who apparently also all feel like they are the center of the Universe too. And, well, we don't like that. We want to be more important than that. And so we do millions of only partially effective things to prove that we are more important than those other pretenders, like rooting for winning sports teams, or switching our vote in an election to the candidate the pundits are predicting will be the winner, or having waiters know our name, or owning a yacht, or having a larger harem than the neighboring sultan has, or renting an expensive car for the evening of our high school reunion, or just hiring someone beautiful to walk down the street with us.

Now, and this is actually relevant to my topic, I can't help mentioning here that there is a very simple solution to this pattern, to The Importance of Being Important. It has two parts. The first is to simply recognize that you are indispensable to yourself. You can't live without yourself. You make every single one of your own decisions yourself — of course, it might seem like your spouse and your children make a lot of those decisions for you. But in essence you made the decision that granted them those powers, and you can, at any time, veto the current arrangements. A slave can always do the same too. It might cost you your life if you do, as a slave, or all your money, if you veto your spouse. But it can be done. The power resides within you at all times. That is free will. Not the loaded, moral-responsibility-laden version of free will. But simply the decision-making capacity of each mind. Something, I might add, that all the other animals share with us.

It is your free will which makes you indispensable to yourself. No one else can make your decisions for you. And you can't get any more important than that to the emotional center of the Universe. The problem comes in also wanting to be indispensable to others. So the second part of solving The Importance of Being Important is to recognize how dispensable you are to others, because they, like you, are only indispensable to themselves. Rather than wanting the impossible — to be indispensable to those who can't possibly see you that way even if they try very hard — you can simply decide to be valuable to others. And being valuable to others is one of the simplest things in the world to achieve. You only need to give more than you take.

Of course, if right now your retirement funds are heavily invested in luxury goods companies designed to make people feel more important, don't worry. Even with a simple answer like this to solve the problem, luxury goods will remain a safe investment bet for the foreseeable future.

So that is one example of the kind of pattern I am talking about. And why is this so important? That the inherent patterns be inviolable? Well, because you really can't trust any other kind of pattern, can you? That's why Pythagoras got so excited when he thought "all is number", when he realized that something unbendable was inherent in everything we experience. And it is also why Plato refined that Pythagorean concept and called his version "The Eternal Ideas" — that gave them the orderly stability and nobility he desired. We are used to "concepts" now, and don't have to get as emotional about them as Pythagoras and Plato did. But I think we can all agree that if life's rules have any exceptions at all to them, and their enforcement is in the hands of a bureaucracy, then we are all going to have to bribe our way through eternity.

At this point you might be wondering what induced me to misspend my youth on such thoughts. But that is only because I haven't told you yet that I am the 4<sup>th</sup> of 12 children. And I'm sure you all remember that chapter in the 1985 bestseller *The Birth Order Book: Why You Are The Way You Are* — the chapter where the author explains why the 4<sup>th</sup> child of 12 always turns into a Platonic philosopher.

Indeed. Because after a few years of turning my attention to these kinds of analyses, I realized that I needed to make a decision on a very traditional Platonic issue: should I pursue beauty or should I pursue truth? My natural inclination has been to explain why what I find beautiful is also true. It is almost everyone's inclination. But I realized one day, after turning the problem over and over in my mind, that I had missed something all along. And it was a colossal bit of hubris. I realized that truth versus beauty is an imagined conflict. And that imagined conflict has been caused by our unacknowledged fear that the truth might not be beautiful. That is, we have been assuming, going at this problem for millennia, that our uninformed imaginations of what is beautiful are probably superior to the beauty of reality. That is a staggering bit of hubris. And so I discounted entirely my own preconceptions about what is beautiful in life, and decided to use clear conceptual reasoning alone to see how many inherent patterns I could uncover. That proved to be an extremely fruitful decision to make.

But since that decision has borne so much fruit, and time and life are short, let's again focus on the effects of some of these inherent patterns on human civilizations in the past, and in what directions we are currently trending.

So there we were as a human race, 10,000 years ago, basically all Neanderthals — not that there's anything wrong with that — each one seeing himself or herself as the center of the Universe, with only a few beginning to extend their perception of their self-interest to include their families. And sometimes even their whole hunting group.

Of course, individual life was unlikely, back then, to end in old age. Violent deaths were the norm, and that must have begun to grate on someone or another, who then imagined it would be far better to retire from hunting dangerous wild animals with sharpened sticks in order to have more time to play golf. Or at least to take up gardening. As I have mentioned, it is natural to think like that when you feel you are the center of the Universe.

The problem, though, with identifying yourself as part of a family, or a hunting group, or a tribe, or even a nation, was that it became ever harder for individuals to think of themselves as the center of the Universe, as they naturally tend to do. Slavery was common. Subservience to tyrant kings, and a few tyrant queens — who mostly dressed as if they were kings — was even more common. The group was important, and individuals didn't matter. Individuals were especially honored if they consciously sacrificed their lives for the group.

But this was a very unnatural state of affairs, and it was compensated for by the rise of religion. I would even suggest that there is no successful religious belief, which has extended far beyond the originating tribe, which does not imply, at least emotionally, that each individual believer is the center of the Universe.

Animism and pantheism dilute the divine too much to provide comfort among all the chaos. The behavior of local gods even seems to be part of the problem more often than part of the solution. Hinduism solved that issue early on by simplifying down to millions of gods, so that there was still always one available to pay attention to the believers' concerns, but not so many that each deva was powerless to help out.

Why a major religion succeeds, though, is clearest in both Buddhism and Christianity, because each started out with a set of interesting core beliefs, but did not go “viral” until it tapped this unconscious well of the emotional need to feel important.

Buddhism was nearly ignored for its first few hundred years, and for good reason. Its austere analysis is that human life basically gets in the way of the purpose of life — nirvana — the return to nothingness (or to everythingness in some versions). But it caught fire anyway when the emotional focus shifted to bodhisattvas — beings who teeter on the edge of accomplishing the purpose of life, of achieving nirvana, but who prefer to focus their energies lovingly on helping distraught believers gain strong footholds on their own path to nirvana. That is, bodhisattvas think the believer is more important to pay attention to than the purpose of life. That puts the believer squarely back in his or her natural role as the emotional center of the Universe.

Paul accomplished the same thing, more quickly, for Christianity. In his heart he knew that the reason for the suffering of Jesus on the cross was to atone for his sins. That God so loved him that he punished his only son rather severely, even if only temporarily, to make things right again with all the sinners in the world — especially him. That is, once again, the believer feels his personal salvation is more important to God than even God's only son's comfort. This, of course, is not how the story is presented. But it is the emotional core of its effectiveness. It is the emotional core of the Good Shepherd parable too, where the good shepherd leaves all the obedient sheep behind in his quest to save the black sheep of the family. And free wills all identify with the black sheep.

In comparison, all the doctrinal differences between Christian belief groups are almost irrelevant to their believers — except to the extent that breaking off into a smaller group, which possesses the truest truth, also makes the members of that group feel particularly important.

The perhaps unintended but interesting thing about the effect on human culture of all these religious beliefs was to retain some attention on the essential importance of individual life during thousands of years of otherwise ignoring it as political power became ever more centralized. And this reemphasis on the individual started right at the beginning of the Judeo-Christian-Muslim culture with Abraham. Jehovah and Abraham negotiated their way to an understanding. And that understanding was that Jehovah would be kinder to Abraham and his descendants than Baal and the other local gods were to their believers. Which is why it was so confusing to Abraham when Jehovah asked him to sacrifice Isaac, especially after promising that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars — the stars Abraham could see that is. Not all the stars in the Universe.

I like to think that Jehovah was simply testing if Abraham had learned his lesson well, if Abraham's conviction that it was not necessary to sacrifice your children's lives to the gods had sunk in deeply. The answer Jehovah was expecting, I think, was for Abraham, the negotiator, to say, "hey, Jehovah, if you are going to violate your principles just like any other god, and are now asking me for human sacrifices, why should I worship you? See you later. And thanks again for the son." That would have been the A+ answer. Abraham was clearly too cautious for that, but his reluctance to perform the sacrifice, his lack of enthusiasm for carrying out Jehovah's demand, certainly qualified as a B- answer. Jehovah might have hoped for more, but settled on that answer as good enough.

Fortunately, there is a relatively new current in human culture, which started 2,500 years ago in Greece, but has only been fitfully applied until a few hundred years ago, and that is scientific thought — using reason to uncover the patterns, the blueprint, of reality.

Unlike the ancient Greeks, though, the vast majority of those recently engaged in this pursuit focus on the easy parts, the parts where it is sometimes possible to hold everything else still and so watch what really affects the other parts more easily — that is, the physical sciences. Even so, picking such low-hanging fruit has been progressing so quickly in the past few hundred years that we now have a steady and reliable stream of food and drink, and a transportation system that can assure everyone they won't starve — unless they are living under the thumb of a tyrant king, since we haven't gotten rid of all of them yet. This increase in our daily physical comfort has made us less grouchy, less fearful, less inclined to be violent, and willing, after all this time, to start thinking about the rights of individuals again. As fears diminished, democracy rose in influence as a real possibility, and slavery started falling out of favor. Even more impressively, as the members of the majority group in power in any democracy gain confidence that they will be able to live their lives mostly as they want to, they begin to tolerate minority viewpoints, because they are no longer seen as a threat.

Because we have learned, by experiencing rich societies, that it is smarter, and life becomes even more luxurious, when we trade with others rather than dominate them, enslave them, destroy them.

We are even inching toward the recognition of how foolish it is for us to attempt to satisfy The Importance of Being Important by being cruel to others. Because it is our habit to maintain our personal importance in any group when we are feeling miserable by making those around us feel even more miserable. This is the secret source of cruelty — the pursuit of pleasure in others' pain. Why would it otherwise be more important to us to keep our relative place in the social hierarchy than to surround ourselves with happy people?

Fortunately, recognizing this folly puts anyone well along the way to understanding that it is completely and unequivocally in each of our self-interests to transcend cruelty, to eliminate it as an approach to dealing with others, because it is just an inadequately thought-out method of trying to maintain one's importance. At a very high personal and social cost.

These changes should also speed up as reason is applied ever more effectively to the most valuable aspects of our lives — the patterns in our own thoughts, in our own emotions, in our own attitudes, in our own personalities. But even without any progress on those fronts, the last few hundred years have already entrenched the effectiveness, even in its infancy, of rationally analyzing the complicated strands of human civilization and of using political checks and balances to keep the importance of individual life in the forefront, so that free will has some chance to express itself without getting so frustrated that it resorts to violence to insist on its natural primacy.

We have even learned, surprisingly, that there is no need for everyone to think alike. There is no need for uniformity in the quest for order and predictability. And the future is full of hope for more tolerance of differences, because a truly scientific attitude, which is still rare even among scientists, not only tolerates differences, but is delighted that other minds have different perspectives and experiences, because that helps tremendously in coming to more objective assessments of reality.

It is understandable, of course, that many feel science and cold-hearted reasoning will cause ever more social problems, without eliminating those we are already dealing with. But that is due to experiments like communism in Russia and China being considered scientific. My favorite anonymous quotation applies here: An idea is not responsible for the people who believe in it.

In theory, and in its effective practice, science is the not-so-arrogant approach. It is even a bit humble. Scientists and rational philosophers not only say what they think, they give their reasons for coming to those conclusions. The best even say, "don't just accept what I say, because it might get you in trouble." A truly scientific mind also doesn't use his or her personality to persuade, or to overpower, other minds. That way she can sleep well at night, too, because she doesn't have to wonder how many she led down a dead end once she realizes clearly, after more research, that it is a dead end.

So here we are, back in the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century, with democracy, of various kinds, most of which are still dripping wet with authoritarian tactics, taking hold of human civilization. And we are actually starting to leave behind the desire to dominate, to enslave others. No one lately has

called for the restoration of the Roman rights of the *pater familias* — the right to kill one's slaves and family members at will. There is plenty of room to improve, to be sure, but the trend is definitely in the right direction. We see cooperation as more in our self-interest than not.

The value of diverse viewpoints, diverse inputs, is also trending in the right direction, even if, in its infancy as it is, most of its advocates just use that idea as a club to try to switch power positions with the status quo.

Even environmentally, which many naturally worry about, the trend is more positive than negative. It is true that the population explosion that occurred because of the creation of a reliable supply of food and drink is straining the system. But it should be remembered that only rich societies worry, and then do something, about keeping our homes clean and healthy. No other animal spends any time on it, so the cooperation that has been elicited in developing environmentally sound habits in millions in the past few decades can be expected to influence the habits of billions within a century or two. And there will probably be plenty of leisure time then to clean up the messes we make in the meantime.

Of course, even in a more civilized future society, those who hope that all those who mourn will be comforted, will still find we fall short of that ideal.

And those who trust that the merciful will always be shown mercy will surely be disappointed.

And those who believe that the meek will eventually inherit the earth will undoubtedly still have a long time to wait. In fact, the meek will probably only inherit the earth if it has been totally spoiled, as environmental activists fear, by the bold — who have then departed for elsewhere, using up all the meeks' savings to pay their travel expenses.

I doubt it will ever be an advantage to be meek.

But those who hope for less violence, especially less random violence, should be pleased.

And those who trust our productivity will create less desperation, and maybe even totally eliminate the fear of starvation, should be delighted.

And those who believe that cruelty is eradicable — well, that's a stretch. But if it is simply, clearly and repeatedly explained why cruelty — why taking pleasure in others' pain — is not in anyone's self-interest, that it only appears to be so because inadequate attempts to maintain the Importance of Being Important obfuscate the reality that being cruel is against our self-interest, then cruelty's pervasiveness in human culture will start to fade. And as our confidence in that approach grows, we will no longer punish those who remain intent on being cruel, which will reinforce the idea that indulging in cruelty is, in and of itself, severely self-destructive and more than punishment enough. Of course, the worst would still have to be restrained by exile or prison, but organized merely as restraint, not as revenge or punishment, which research has shown is very inadequate at rehabilitation.

When we look beyond the future's horizon on this point, we can see the pursuit of justice disappearing, and the pursuit of wise laws dominating. And it is not unreasonable to assume that all that combined might cut cruelty in half, which would lead to a very civilized future indeed.

The crucial element in bringing such a Future's Horizon nearer, faster, is to respect others' free wills, to realize you don't have to live those other lives, but only your own. That leads to the clear recognition that your desire for others' happiness is better fulfilled by being their tolerant friend, rather than hoping to reshape everyone else to conform to your imagination of how they should be and behave.

So should we be thinking that civilization is currently unraveling? I don't think so. The underlying ideational trends favor free will and cooperation and the importance of individual life. All of which should help. After all, the group never experiences anything. The group has no life, no mind of its own. So the pursuit of happiness always has to be one individual at a time. That doesn't mean it isn't very useful to have wise social incentives that value cooperation on great enterprises and projects together. But it does mean keeping the focus on individual life first.

So in this perhaps too civilized future, what will people complain about? The complaint I would hope to hear would be something like: "Damn, I can't think of any reason to take revenge on my neighbor for letting his tree fall on my fence. Maybe it was an accident after all. But — whatever happened to the good old days? I can't even kick my dog nowadays without feeling foolish."

Because then we will know that the civilization we truly desire is right over the horizon.