

Miscellaneous Principles



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Introduction

- This chapter discusses some miscellaneous principles that are useful to know about

1. You are a product of your environment

You are a product of your environment

- The environment you live in influences your outlook on life:
 - You can best see this if you experience *other* environments
 - Travelling is a great way to do this
 - Reading biographies or watching documentaries can also help
- The examples on the next few slides illustrate this

Example: Martin Luther King Jr.

- The following example comes from Chapter 28 of *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King Jr.*
- Martin Luther King lived in a middle-class area:
 - He moved to Chicago for a few months to take part in an anti-racism campaign
 - He and his family lived in an apartment in a slum area of Chicago (so he could become acquainted with such living conditions)
 - “Our own children lived with us in [the slum area], and it was only a few days before we became aware of the change in their behaviour. Their tempers flared, and they sometimes reverted to almost infantile behaviour.”
 - “[The slum area] was just too hot, too crowded, too devoid of creative forms of recreation. [...] And I understood anew the conditions which make of the ghetto an emotional pressure cooker.”

Example: Andrew Mawson

- The following example is from:
 - *The Social Entrepreneur* by Andrew Mawson
 - Page 103 in the (unnumbered) chapter *Learning From Laura Ashley*
- Andrew Mawson organized a community centre in an impoverished suburb of London:
 - The community centre was staffed by local people
 - He was offered use of a large mansion in Wales for a staff meeting
 - Initially his staff were intimidated by the mansion's grandeur
 - One woman was too frightened to sleep the first night because she found the lack of traffic noise to be disturbing
 - "Yet, after a few days [...] all our mindsets had changed, and we were having entirely different conversations about ourselves, our homes and our plans for the future."
 - "This experience taught me how profoundly true it is to say that we are products of the environment we live in"

Summary and advice

- The environment you live in influences your outlook on life
- If you want to change the world then:
 - You should try to experience other environments
 - Doing this helps you to better understand the world you want to change

2. Just because a theory explains the facts
does not mean the theory is correct

Multiple theories can explain the same facts

- A theory may explain the facts, but the theory can still be wrong
- Example: Why does the sun rise in the East and set in the West?
 - Old theory: the sun revolves around the earth
 - More modern theory: the earth spins as it revolves around the sun

A puzzle for oppressed people

- Black people in the 1950s' USA frequently wondered *why* white people oppressed them
- Relevant quotes from *Black Like Me* by John Howard Griffin
 - November 14: “The Negro cannot understand how [...] the whites as a group can still contrive to arrange life so that it destroys the Negro’s sense of personal value, degrades his human dignity, deadens the fibres of his being.”
 - “Why do [white people] do it? Why do they keep us like this? What are they gaining? What evil has taken them?”
 - November 19: “None of [the oppression] really makes any sense.”
 - November 28: “What sense could a man make of it?”
 - August 17: “Why do the whites hate us—we don’t hate them?”
 - “I was dismayed to see the extent to which this youth exaggerated—how could he do otherwise?—the feelings of the whites towards Negroes. He thought they all hated him.”

Competing theories

- Why *did* white Americans hate and oppress black Americans?
- Black people knew of one theory (offered by white racists):
 - “Black people are intrinsically inferior to white people”
 - Of course, black people rejected that theory because they did not consider themselves to be intrinsically inferior
- The Nation of Islam (NOI) is a religious group that combines concepts from mainstream Islam with unorthodox additions (considered heretical by mainstream Islam)
- The Nation of Islam (NOI) offered an alternative theory to explain racism...

The Nation of Islam's explanation for racism

- The NOI story of creation:
 - Originally, all humans were black and were good
 - A scientist with a grudge against God used selective breeding principles to progressively lighten the skin colour of his followers
 - Over the course of 800 years, his successors created white people
 - As each generation became lighter skinned, they became more evil.
 - The white people were fully evil, devils, and knew themselves to be devils
- The above is from Chapter 10 (“Satan”) of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*
- A white person can easily dismiss the theory
 - “I’m white and I do not ‘know myself’ to be a devil; therefore the theory is wrong”

If the theory fits the facts...

- When Malcolm X first heard the NOI's story of creation, he did not believe it
- But then he thought back on his life:
 - He recalled *many* white people who had caused harm to him and his family
 - He could not recall a *single* white person who had been good to him
- The theory seemed to fit the facts of his life:
 - There was no competing theory that fits the facts
 - So he started to believe the theory
 - He joined the NOI and became a minister
- Malcolm X was not alone in believing the theory:
 - Through his excellent communication skills, he helped to convert tens of thousands of black people to the NOI

Is there a better theory that explains racism?

- A later part of this training course entitled *The Bell Curve of Intolerance* offers an alternative theory to explain oppression
- Different theories suggest different tactics to combat oppression:
 - NOI's theory suggests either:
 - Violent war between black people and white people. Or
 - Black nationalism: black people (somehow) obtain their own country and rule it themselves
 - The *Bell Curve of Intolerance* suggests using Gandhi's Satyagraha tactics to stop the oppression and thus facilitate an integrated society
- If you believe in one theory then the tactics of another theory can seem dangerously misguided

Summary and advice

- Just because a theory explains the facts does not mean the theory is correct
- There might be other theories that also explain the facts:
 - Perhaps some of those other theories have not yet been discovered
 - Or perhaps you have not read widely enough to have encountered those other theories
- So believe a theory if it seems to make sense to you
 - But keep an open mind. Perhaps you will encounter a better theory in the future