

**STUBBORN ATTACHMENTS: A VISION
FOR A SOCIETY OF FREE, PROSPEROUS,
AND RESPONSIBLE INDIVIDUALS**

(TYLER COWEN)

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Finally, the age of sophisters and calculators has fully arrived, and its herald is Tyler Cowen. He, economist and blogger, is here to tell us the purpose of life. It is to die with the most toys. Well, that, plus maximum freedom to do whatever we want with our toys while we are still alive. *Stubborn Attachments* is just about the sort of thing you'd expect from a left-libertarian philosopher, namely a clever and partially accurate construct that is internally coherent, but floats free of human reality and ignores any human value other than that found in the box labeled "Approved By John Stuart Mill."

Still, while I think much of this book is clueless, it's brief, to the point, and actually fairly interesting. In particular, time is a critical concept in Cowen's thought, and his thoughts related to this can be stimulating. And in this book Cowen does not show the childlike faith in technology that he earlier showed in *Average Is Over*, although maybe that's just because he subsumes technology within the general category of his main goal, wealth increase. The primary benefit to me of this book, however, was that it helped me advance my own thoughts on a related question—can a rich society stay a virtuous society?

But before we get there, let's examine what Cowen has to say. His primary point is to outline his path for maximizing our future value as a species. He is clear about what are the two goals that together constitute that value, such that its increase can be effectively measured. The first goal is material prosperity, meaning individual and collective wealth—not just goods and services, but also such things as leisure time and unspecified "environmental amenities" (by which he appears to mean an unspoiled natural world as some kind of special good, doubtless a form of virtue signaling). All these things together make up "wealth plus." There is no need to get people to agree on the rank order of different goods; if wealth plus increases, necessarily on average more good things are available, allowing approved "plural values" to flourish. That is, if wealth increases, everyone can have the biggest piece of pie.

All that matters is that wealth always increase, never faltering. Thus, the measure of whether any social process is desirable is whether it is “ongoing, self-sustaining, and [creates] rising value over time.”

This leads into the second goal. As can be deduced from Cowen’s focus on “plural values,” which implies the primacy of Enlightenment values of emancipation and liberation from unchosen bonds, that goal is maximized individual autonomy. Cowen also sometimes characterizes it simply as “liberty” or “freedom.” Maximum individual autonomy tends to follow from wealth; the author informs us that “Wealthier societies . . . offer greater personal autonomy, greater fulfilment, and more sources of fun.” But atomized autonomy is, to be clear, an independent, standalone goal. If everyone had to be poor for some reason, autonomic individualism would still be the highest good for Cowen.

In sum, the ground of Cowen’s book is that nothing matters other than wealth and having fun as each person defines it for himself, and nothing can be permitted to get in the way of achieving both, and then increasing their magnitude and scope. However, there is one critical limit. Namely, there exists some set of unspecified “human rights,” which are “absolutely inviolable” and can never be traded for, or eroded in favor of, more wealth and fun. These are trump cards hiding in the wings; they are never actually played in this book, but they appear to be meant as a way to prevent Cowen’s stated goals from adversely affecting other political values he holds dear, presumably roughly those of the left-wing elite that today dictates cultural thought in America. Thus, for example, were someone to have the temerity to point out that allowing unrestricted abortion erodes future wealth because a society with no children has no wealth, Cowen would doubtless slap the “abortion rights” card on the table to silence any discussion or inconvenient wrongthought.

Other sections of this book address mostly technical philosophical matters related to this core structure, such as different theories of consequentialism. Cowen, who is very well read in modern literature relating to ethics and morality, seems keenly aware of the claim that “right” and “wrong” are incoherent concepts when unmoored from some set of transcendental requirements, which is the inevitable end of endorsing consequentialism (of which utilitarianism is the best-known type). He dodges this problem by stating up front that “I will not consider meta-ethics, the study of the underlying nature of ethical judgments. Instead,

I will simply assume that right and wrong are concepts which make fundamental sense.” Following this precept, Cowen talks throughout the book about “common sense morality,” which is meant to form a bridge over various thought experiments that cripple modern meta-ethics, such as arguing over when it is morally acceptable to murder a child to achieve some benefit.

This approach is a good one, for otherwise Cowen’s book would degenerate into something of no applicability to real life and of no interest to mainstream readers. I do not quarrel with Cowen’s idea of common sense morality—except for the name he gives it. A more accurate, or the only accurate, name is “Christian morality”—that is, the morality that has underlain the thought of the West for two thousand years. Cowen either doesn’t realize that’s what he is talking about, or prefers to ignore it. For any Western society prior to Christianity, other than the Jews, any aspect of Cowen’s “common sense morality” would be laughed at as weak and stupid. For example, Cowen talks over and over about “our obligation to help the poor.” Where does this obligation come from? The ether, apparently. In the same way, I suspect that most of what Cowen considers unspecified “absolute human rights” are merely Christian beliefs dressed in Enlightenment clothes (as are all other claims of human rights). And thus, he also ignores that such morality is only “common sense” as long as Christianity, or its echoes, are the default moral position of the majority of the people in a culture. In the not very distant future, this will no longer be true in the West, and it already is no longer true for many culturally dominant segments in most countries. At which point, the resonance value of Cowen’s common sense morality will decline to zero, and anybody reading him will wonder what he was smoking, as the vicious morality of pagan Rome reasserts itself.

Fortunately, this decline and end of Christian morality is a problem that will fix itself, because our civilization isn’t going to regress to Roman morality. On its current path, it’s just going to disappear, or be subsumed, since the West doesn’t have children any more. As far as I can tell, Cowen has no children of his own, and the word “children” only appears once in this entire book, in passing, even though this is a book about the importance of making decisions to maximize the future happiness of mankind. That future mankind will apparently

generate itself by a form of parthenogenesis, fully formed and eager to participate in material plenty and limitless, costless, autonomy. No need to discuss sacrifice now so that they may exist, and no reason to mention that having the future on which this book focuses depends on a sharp increase in the number of children born in the West. Move along, now, or Cowen may play a human rights card to silence you!

Before we get to my musings, I have two objections to Cowen's analysis, each of which is also a building block for my own thoughts. Cowen takes some time to accurately gloss the material improvements of modern life granted to us by the West, channeling Steven Pinker. His point is that we want to continue these improvements—life expectancy, food availability, reduced working hours, and so forth. (Neither Cowen nor Pinker would have much sympathy with James C. Scott's claim that primitive man may be happier man.) Such improvements have benefited, typically with a time lag, all segments of our society, and these improvements have also benefited the entire world, to the extent the non-West has adopted what the West has created.

My threshold problem is that Cowen assumes without demonstration that more wealth is always better. "A given individual is likely better off living an extra five years, receiving anesthesia at the dentist, enjoying plentiful foodstuffs, having more years of education, and not losing any children to premature illness. Similarly, people one hundred years from now will be much better off if economic growth continues." Why? The second sentence does not follow. What, precisely, are the blessings that will show they are "much better off"? Twice as much food? I don't think so. Anesthesia and low infant mortality? Those things are already asymptotically approaching their maximum benefit. More education? Also already near its maximum, and often modern education is social capital destroying; more would not be better. That leaves us only with the possibility of more life, and while that's a complicated discussion, it's not at all clear that very extended lives would be good for society. In any case, there is zero evidence we are making any progress on that front (and, in fact, last week it was announced that yet again American life expectancy had dropped).

True, those not already enjoying plentiful food, etc., that is, those outside the West, may catch up in a hundred years, but that does not depend on us maximizing their opportunities, rather on them being

willing to adopt the material blessings offered them by the West, which most of them have failed to do despite plenty of opportunity. The wealth of the West has had, and could have more, “spillover effects,” allowing non-Western cultures to improve their material circumstances. A few cultures have already done that—namely, as Cowen lists, “Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore and China.” Cowen thinks the economic success of these Asian territories is “the highest manifestation of the ethical good in human history to date.” This seems a bit odd, given Cowen’s demands for individual autonomy, something of far less importance in any of those places than in the West. But in any case, it does not show that more wealth is going to be vastly better for people already wealthy.

In fact, those already wealthy might be much worse off if wealth continues increasing. That leads into my second, core, objection, that Cowen places no possible significance on non-material values. Of what does human flourishing consist? Not of being able to buy more goods, or autonomy or “plural values,” though it is possible elements of those play some part. It consists of a broad recognition of the common good, in which each person achieves a type of happiness, *eudaimonia*, combined with, I think, lifting our gaze to the stars, figuratively or literally. Lifting our gaze reinforces the common good, for any society that flourishes cannot be stultified, but must have and execute on the common will to achieve. As David Gress wrote of the conquistadors, “Living under [God’s] judgment, men conceived life as an adventure, and their vivid imaginations conceived great tasks—sometimes bloody, cruel, and murderous—and impelled them to surmount great challenges. Hernán Cortes conquered Mexico for God, gold, and glory, and only a mundane imagination would distinguish these impulses, for they were one and the same.”

Flourishing thus consists of material adequacy accompanied by a joint search for transcendence and pursuit of that which is highest and best in man, spiritual and material. Instead, now that we are rich in material goods, and perhaps because we are rich, we seek more fun, we seek nothing transcendent, and we are able to buy five percent more cheap Chinese crap every year. I don’t think that’s human flourishing, whatever Cowen may say, yet all this is ignored by Cowen for a blinkered focus on quantifiable matters. True, the impulse to acquire paves

the road to flourishing; material goods, gold or otherwise, are part of the spur to achievement. But the key is not to allow that to overwhelm virtue and the common good.

So let's examine my own question, whether a rich society can stay a virtuous society? First, we have to define virtue. Now, I am probably the wrong person for this, not because I lack virtue (though perhaps that is also true) but because the philosophy of virtue is a topic to which I have given little thought. No time to get started like the present, and, after all, other, very smart, people have given it a lot of thought.

What Cowen offers he does not call virtue, but his goals compete as ends with virtue, and are, in fact, one conception of virtue. Those goals, unfettered autonomy, liberty, and freedom, are in effect the Enlightenment definition of virtue. The pursuit of such autonomy once seemed compatible with human progress, and even (incorrectly) has seemed to many like the ground of the modern world. But this new definition of virtue directly conflicts with the older conception of virtue, which has little to do with autonomy. As Patrick Deneen has noted, that older conception, derived from Aristotle and Aquinas, holds that man is by nature social and political, and thus "to the extent that humans are able to develop true and flourishing individuality, it is only by means of political society and its constitutive groups and associations. . . . [L]iberty is the cultivated ability to exercise self-governance, to limit ourselves in accordance with our nature and the natural world." Virtue consists of exercising self-limitation and self-governance; lack of virtue is a form of slavery. Virtue, and liberty, therefore, is the opposite of "living as one likes," and it is the key component of human flourishing as I define it above. Moreover, properly analyzed, Cowen's "virtue" is the opposite of real virtue. I think Cowen knows that, too: despite the words "responsible individuals" being in his title, that concept appears a grand total of zero places in the book, suggesting Cowen realizes that what he has to offer is shallow.

A deeper examination of virtue would focus on the precise application of this framework. What actual actions must a man take, and from which must he refrain, in order to be virtuous? What other implications does this have? Many, certainly—the need for duty, and for treating reality as real, for treating tradition as valuable, if not actually determinative, and for seeing oneself as part of an integrated societal whole.

And for each person in his different circumstances, different applications of the same choices. (Most, and maybe all, of what Cowen calls “common sense morality” is in fact merely applications of the traditional virtue framework, and completely alien to his own framework.) But I will leave that to another day. Certainly, my own political program, tentatively named Foundationalism, will strongly encourage applied virtue through proper definition and incentives. For now, enough to say that the core of applied virtue consists of limitations on personal autonomy, not increases in it.

Can a rich society, then, be virtuous? I doubt if any non-virtuous society can become rich; I mean whether it can then stay virtuous. No society is virtuous all the time; the question is whether, on average and over time, a society can exhibit mass virtue, especially among its ruling classes, who dictate the arc of a society. Past performance may not be a guarantee of future results, but a survey of history suggests wealth necessarily tends to erode virtue. Why? I can think of several reasons. First, the richer you are, the more temptations can be satisfied that run counter to virtue. The richer you are, human nature being what it is, self-limitation is less appealing, and living as one likes becomes ever more easy and pleasurable. Second, by keeping the wolf far from the door, wealth allows us to be stupid and weak, and, what is the same thing but more common today, to allow stupid ideologies to flourish. You can paper over a lot of unreality with money, especially when you can steal money from others who produce value to live your fantasy life. It doesn't work out in the long run; ask the Carthaginians. But in the meantime, you can pretend. Note, too, that this means in the long run, wealth will, through stupidity, inevitably tend to evaporate. Third, wealth encourages the cancerous growth of the state, for several reasons, among them that rent seeking is an easier way to riches than producing value, which inevitably results in a reliance on government rather than self-limitation. Without going too deep into the details, we can say, at a minimum, that it's very hard for a rich society to remain virtuous.

This raises the secondary question, what's the precise relationship between wealth and human flourishing? I have little doubt that for a very poor society, more material wealth leads to more human flourishing. It's hard to flourish if your children are starving. But that says nothing about whether more material wealth will always lead to more

flourishing. Maybe it will lead to less. Maybe flourishing is on a graph, where the x-axis is wealth, and the y-axis flourishing, and the graph shows a normal distribution, with a maximum of flourishing not at either end of the x-axis. Maybe the equivalent to abject poverty on the left side of the x-axis is matched by decadence on the right side of the x-axis, and, past a certain amount of societal wealth, we no longer lift our gaze to the stars. Maybe, in fact, the richer we are, the less flourishing there is, until everything collapses entirely, beginning the cycle again.

Human history is like a cork bobbing on the ocean; sometimes up, sometimes down. Our goal is, or should be, to maximize the ups and keep the moving average getting higher, not try to achieve some utopia. If we can create a virtuous, flourishing society that lasts some hundreds of years, and then falls, or retrenches, but which allows those that follow to build upon it, we have done our duty. We will be the successors to Rome and Venice, and the progenitors, perhaps, of something better in the future, though to be sure without substantial rework our current civilization is imminently doomed. But as to Cowen's book, it has no relevance whatsoever to this project of illuminating and laying the foundations of future ages; it is merely the vaguely clever musings of a man who thinks his philosophy has a future, but who cannot see that he is sitting on the end of a branch, sawing busily away on the tree side of his branch.