



Mar 1

## Thinking Historically

---

*wes dodson*

Two economists encounter one another on Dirty Sixth, and the one inquires of the other, “How’s the wife, Bob?” Bob, not entirely understanding the question, replies “Relative to what?”

This joke exploits the irony inherent when a member of society does not toe the line of social convention. The convention that is confronted in the joke is the idea that our society seems to have accepted the notion that the proper “frame of reference” for our general condition is other members of our society, typically the members of society with which we regularly interact.

That is why it is funny when the economist seems to suggest that the proper frame of reference for his wife are his previous and subsequent spouses. Operative in the joke is the rejection of the notion that those around us are a proper measure for how we are doing. What is really questioned in this joke is why we limit our frame of reference for “doing well” to the narrow scope of a given time, culture, nationality, or community.

Imagine, for a moment, that we decided to arbitrarily set the parameters for that frame of reference. Let’s use as our “relative to what,” the Royal Family of England. Now stipulate a presumed set of average reader characteristics: probably a UT student, neither fabulously wealthy nor particularly destitute, living in America, not a member of Austin high society, most likely a member of *The Texas Orator*.



Given this presumed reader, and the English royals as a frame of reference, the typical answer given to “How are you?” as “Doing well” would likely become something along the lines of “Well, I am not living in a palace, with servants attending my needs, or engaged to Meghan Markle, but thanks for reminding me of the fact,” with some expletive likely attached.

There is something intuitively nonsensical about using the elite of a society as a frame of reference. However, the problem with using that as a frame of reference seems difficult to pin down. A possible consequentialist claim is that such a standard is impracticable — no society could function if everyone assumed that the life of the elites was the natural mode of existence.

Empirically that is true, but it is not, I believe, the source of the squirm-in-our-chairness of the idea. Rather, the source of discomfort is the idea that such a frame of reference seems to arbitrarily limit pieces of the human experience that seem pertinent. Discounting the experience of the “average Joe” in a given society and time period dismisses valuable data for understanding how to judge our own situation. We are discomfited because there does not appear to be a strong justification why such experiences should be dismissed.

The “average Joe” then seems like a good place to start and one consistent with the way we treat other data sets. Using averages is a good way of understanding where we stand relative to others on any number of measures, with the most familiar one to most readers being the arbiter of our entire future/career/all happiness in life — the GPA. We understand that even when we fall short, or even well short, of our 4.0 dreams, we are still above the 2.7 average first semester GPA that we all remember learning about at Freshman Orientation.

Understanding data points in relation to the average is a perfectly reasonable way of establishing relationships, and is inescapable in a way. It is the basis of many social interactions and plays a crucial role in the way free markets work. As such, it is not the idea of averaging across a data set that underlies the relational problem in society. Instead, it is the mistaken understanding of what constitutes a valid data set for a frame of reference that is limiting our ability to appreciate our modern circumstances.

In the scenario of the English royalty as frame of reference, the underlying problem was that relevant data was arbitrarily dismissed, but what, then, is wrong with the data set that gives us the “average Joe?”

Many would suggest that nothing is wrong, that it is perfectly reasonable to judge yourself in terms of the average, and that, should you find yourself lacking, you ought to work to better your material circumstances. Conversely, should you find yourself far exceeding to revel in your success and enjoy the fruits of your labor. However, I believe that the use of an average from a given time, even that of living memory, suffers from the

same arbitrary dismissal of evidence as the English royalty example, namely the dismissal of the vastness of human experience accessible throughout history.

In considering my suggestion, using as much of the human experience as we have access to as a proper frame of reference, I find it helpful to look at what sparked the idea. As someone addicted to information, I am on a near constant IV drip of audio. I mainline my drug of choice at 1.5x speed when walking to the Six-Pack, and the track marks in my eardrums comprise the path of least resistance for information to enter and alter my consciousness. It was during a euphoria induced by the particularly potent Reason podcast Festivus Airing of the Grievances, that Nick Gillespie prompted the idea for this article, remarking:

For me the paradigmatic moment of 2017 came in, I think it was late November-early December, and I was riding on a subway in New York and I was watching an Amazon streaming show on my Kindle Fire HD which cost me like \$70 bucks . . . I was downloading the episode, while riding on a subway train, using my phone as the tethering device and watching the show even as it began downloading and I was like you know what. . . we are living in a world of wonders. And maybe we have to be underground so we don't think about Trump or the Democrats or Benghazi . . . there are amazing things going on, and if people actually think a little less about politics . . . and look at what's going on in the world . . . these are not the worst of times, they are certainly not the best of times, but they are pretty amazing times.

Such revelry in the wonders brought about by technological advances was unusual for Gillespie, typically a get-off-my-lawn curmudgeon. Nick's comments help to illuminate why we are missing out on much of the joy inherent in an increasing standard of living — we lack the proper conception of an “average Joe,” one based on broad understanding of the average human condition throughout history.

Far from arbitrarily dismissing evidence, using a historical average of the human condition as a frame of reference includes as much evidence as possible. History, then, provides the least arbitrary data set averaging the human condition and has the added benefit of being a more stable data set than trying to keep up with the Joneses.

The argument also has consequential appeal, allowing many people to locate their troubles on the scale of mankind's broader suffering, which has been immense. In this way, history allows access to comparisons such as the daily struggles of the average college student to that of the average farmhand in 1300.

Understanding that the historical average of man has lived a life that Thomas Hobbes famously dubbed, “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short,” provides the proper frame of reference for considering how our modern day problems deviate from the mean. With history as a benchmark, we can begin to appreciate that

we do truly live in a world of wonders, and hopefully when asked how we are doing, we can start to say “Pretty amazing, relative to the (historical) average Joe”.

## Culture

history, reference



WES DODSON

Wes Dodson is a co-founder of *The Texas Orator* and a contributing writer on State and National Politics. He champions constitutional liberties and the exercise of reason, all while juggling school and an expensive podcast addiction.

Leave a comment

◀ Mar 4 Pro Choice, In a Better Way Has Heart Like This ▶  
Related Posts

Feb 7

# America's Favorite Bloodsport

*Mar 10*

## The Nationalization of Student Government Elections

*Mar 21*

## The Economics of SG Voting: Why Every UT Student Should Vote

*The Texas Orator* is a nonpartisan, peer-reviewed political publication that was founded and is maintained by University of Texas at Austin students. We value thorough analysis in our articles and strive to protect the ideals of free speech and unhindered access to information on campus and nationwide. We seek to keep the student body informed of the implications of ever-changing political climates, both domestically and abroad, from a range of voices and perspectives.

Join Our Community

Subscribe to our weekly newsletter!

Email Address

SUBMIT

DONATE



Powered by Squarespace