Social Software and the Ills of Society

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Philosopher: Our project is drawing to an end, and our previous discussion has made clear that it will not be so easy for the social software enterprise to address, let alone cure, the ills of society. To get the discussion going, I would like to start today with a quote that I found in a collection of talks from the physicist Richard Feynman. It is from one of the pieces in *The Pleasure of Finding Things Out*, a digest of a talk on "The Value of Science". The talk starts like this:

> From time to time, people suggest to me that scientists ought to give more consideration to social problems—especially that they should be more responsible in considering the impact of science upon society. This same suggestion must be made to many other scientists, and it seems to be generally believed that if the scientists would only look at these very difficult social problems and not spend so much time fooling with the less vital scientific ones, great success would come of it.
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> It seems to me that we do think about these problems from time to time, but we don't put full-time effort into them—the reason being that we know we don't have any magic formula for solving problems, that social problems are very much harder than scientific ones, and that we usually don't get anywhere when we do think about them.
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> I believe that a scientist looking at nonscientific problems is just as dumb as the next guy—and when he talks about a nonscientific matter, he will sound as naive as anyone untrained in the matter.
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> Richard Feynman, [3, page 141]

Logician: So the obvious starting question is: If one of the most eminent physicists of the twentieth century believes that he is as dumb as the next

guy when it comes to curing the ills of society, who are we to think that we are smarter?

Philosopher: That's right. But maybe I should remind you that Feynman was not a great lover of philosophical reflection. In the same book, he says about the philosopher Spinoza that courage to take on the great questions does not help if one can't get anywhere with those questions.

Logician: Yes, Feynman was fond of saying that he was going to investigate the world without first defining it. And social software is as much about defining things as about investigating the social world.

Computer Scientist: But we are all "the next guy", aren't we? We all share a responsibility to inform ourselves about what ails society, and about what can be done. For I agree with Feynman that there are no specialists we can pass the buck to. So I am reading up on what I think is the most pressing issue that our society is facing, the prospect of climate change. But now my spouse has started to complain, telling me I should stop reading books on issues that I cannot do anything about, as it is bound to make me depressed. That's probably right. So what should I do?

Philosopher: Your spouse has a point. If you get depressed you will not be effective at anything, so your first duty to yourself, your family, and the world is not to get depressed.

Computer Scientist: Some of my friends claim they need the affluent lifestyle that modern industrial society affords in order not to get depressed.

Philosopher: Occasional shopping sprees as a cure for depression? You cannot be serious.

Computer Scientist: More like watching the water from the upper deck of *RMS Titanic* and thinking, hey it's rising fast, better order a few more bottles of champagne before it's too late.

Logician: I can think of some relevant thoughts. One is the puzzle of the peacock's tail, why it has such a big tail which serves no useful function. One commonly accepted explanation is that its function is to impress peahens, and until we change *their* nature, there is not much hope of changing peacocks. There is a tendency which humans have to consume much more than they need and this needs to be tamed.

Philosopher: What you are saying is that excessive desire — the tendency

to consume more than one needs — causes problems. This sounds curiously familiar, for it is what the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism are also saying: there is suffering, suffering has a cause, the cause is desire, one can put an end to suffering by overcoming desire [4].

Logician: Another relevant thought is the tragedy of the commons where one party benefits at the expense of other parties, as we discussed in the Chapter starting on page **??**. India's hot climate has already become hotter and a glacier which used to feed the Ganges river is receding so that there might be eventually a period of drought.

Philosopher: Colder countries like the US which have caused global warming may even benefit as we may find coffee growing in Vermont at some stage.

Logician: Finally, I do not know if you know *The Road Less Travelled* by M. Scott Peck [5]. Peck is a psychotherapist; he talks about the tendency of most humans to believe that a problem will go away if one does nothing about it. Of course this is not the case.

Computer Scientist: The Road Less Travelled happens to be one of my favorites. Peck makes this very useful distinction between neurotic behavior and character disorders. When people assume responsibility for problems that are not theirs — as when a child assumes that she is responsible for her parents' divorce — this is neurosis. So being neurotic is worrying about things one cannot change. Having a character disorder is refusing to take responsibility for what one can change. Neurotic behavior is generally easier to cure than character disorder, for neurotic people are used to taking charge.

Logician: Reminds me of the famous Alcoholic Anonymous prayer: O Lord, give me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to address the things I can change, and the wisdom to see the difference.

Philosopher: Ah, Reinhold Niebuhr's serenity prayer. Anyhow, the ills of society look more like character disorders than neuroses to me, so if Peck is right they are difficult to treat. But does it make sense to ask the question a psychotherapist asks about his patients about society at large? How could a society or culture learn to take up responsibility for what it is doing to its natural environment? I wonder what would be the societal analogue of this?

Logician: Interaction with wise leaders, of course. Did you know that Angela Merkel is also a physicist by training? But to ensure that wise leaders are elected, we need wise citizens to elect them. So we should promote the teach-

ing of wisdom. It seems to me that academic philosophy has badly neglected this task. To be a lover of academic wisdom is not at all the same as to be a lover of wisdom, or so it seems.

Philosopher: I will let that pass. Maybe we should focus on knowledge rather than wisdom. It strikes me that an important issue concerns the impact of scientific knowledge on society. Scientists tend to assume that scientific results speak for itself, that they do not need scientists as effective messengers.

Logician: Yes, and that assumption is wrong. Getting a message across should be part of the job.

Computer Scientist: But one can understand why scientists — those shy types who have learned that questioning one's own results is the highest virtue — are not very good at that.

Logician: Still there are things we can and should do to improve science communication. Make communication skills part of every science curriculum. Encourage researchers to set aside part of their time for explaining to the public at large what their research means. Encourage scientists to make contributions to the public debate. Set up and improve training programs for science journalism at our universities.

Philosopher: And, to get back to your suggestion of wisdom teaching, maybe it interests you that educational psychologists with a training in philosophy are developing educational schemes for wisdom training. So they think it can be taught, and they may well be right, to a certain extent. Robert Sternberg [6] even gives lists of wisdom skills, with items like "learn to recognize your own interests, those of others, and those of institutions", or "learn to balance your own interests, those of other people and those of institutions", or "learn to integrate your own values in your thinking", or, and this may interest you: "learn to search for and then to try to reach the common good". And then Sternberg takes care to define the common good as a good where everyone wins, not only the ones with whom one identifies.

Logician: Yes, psychologists can be quite lucid sometimes about what it means to be mentally healthy. Not the same as wise, maybe, but close. When Sigmund Freud was once asked what a well-integrated individual should be able to do, his answer was very short: *Lieben und Arbeiten*. To love and to work. That sums it up, doesn't it?

Philosopher: When preparing for this session I came across another challeng-

ing quote, from the psychiatrist and culture critic Theodore Dalrymple:

> One might extend La Rochefoucauld's famous maxim that neither the sun nor death can be stared at for long, by saying that no member of the modern liberal intelligentsia can stare at a social problem for very long. He feels the need to retreat into impersonal abstractions, into structures or alleged structures over which the victim has no control. And out of this need to avoid the rawness of reality he spins utopian schemes of social engineering [1, page 216].

Logician: Ahem — he sounds like a very angry man.

Philosopher: You bet he is angry. He has spent part of his working life as a prison doctor in Birmingham, where he has developed a very sharp eye for the tendency of many of his patients to deny responsibility for their own lives, to pass themselves off as victims, and for the social structures that let them get away with that.

Game Theorist: And he accuses social engineers of escapism. So should we go on doing science as usual or should we try to address the pressing issues of our times? I certainly sympathize with this dilemma, and feel it myself. I am willing to believe that social software can "make this world a better place", but I'm afraid I'm less optimistic that we have chosen the right profession to help with the climate problem. But I would be thrilled to be convinced otherwise.

Computer Scientist: OK, let me try to explain more clearly why I think social software should help. The problem about the climate problem, as I see it now, is that it is a call to arms that is *not* taken seriously by us, despite the fact that we can hear the clarions very clearly. And it seems to me that we don't need more climate science, but more understanding of the mechanisms that allow us to ignore the evidence that we are in grave danger. This is a problem of analysis of social processes, and if social software is about knowledge, incentives and logical structure, as we agreed earlier on in our discussions, then analysis of this problem is certainly on our agenda.

Game Theorist: But I think the economists are very able to develop incentive-compatible market mechanisms, for instance concerning fishing quotas or carbon dioxide emission trading. But what's lacking is the political will, and that also has a lot to do with psychology. The question of political will was hinted at by a letter to the *New York Times*. *(Unfolds his newspaper and*

starts reading)

> To the Editor:
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> Often with the support of their own public officials, our competitors overseas are seizing on opportunities to develop the next generation of renewable energy technologies because they both offer a path to moderating climate change and produce handsome monetary profit.
>
> Sadly for the United States, domestic clean energy industries sputter along as public officials lean toward the special interests of big oil, coal, utilities and automobiles.
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> 'The Capitol Energy Crisis,' by Thomas L. Friedman (column, June 24), is a civics lesson reminding us that it is still politics, and not technology, that remains our greatest challenge in confronting the global dilemma of our age.
>
> *New York Times*, June 24, 2007

Computer Scientist: Yes, this strongly suggests that it is the political will which is defective, and not the technology. In the mid 90's, General Motors introduced an electric car which sold well in California. California had a regulation that a certain percent of all cars had to be electric. Ten years later, the regulation had been abandoned and there was only *one* electric car left in California. What happened? The movie, *Who Killed the Electric Car*, gives an account of it.

Philosopher: A book you might enjoy is Jean-Pierre Dupuy's *Pour un catastrophisme éclairé* [2]. Dupuy, a philosopher at Stanford university, argues that the big problem is that while we know climate change is happening, we still do not believe it, the reason being that it is not inscribed in the future as certain, but just as a possibility. His book argues for adopting a new metaphysics, one that is suitable for approaching catastrophes as the climate problem.

Computer Scientist: I know that book. While I'm skeptical of this argument, it is certainly a very fascinating and innovative one. Also, reading it was very good for my French. The argument reminded me of the way of thinking of a physicist and philosopher from my student days in Groningen, professor H.J. Groenewold, who insisted that in assessing the danger of nuclear power one had to engage in a new calculus of probabilities, where a very small probability of a disaster of infinite magnitude would still lead to an unacceptable risk. But Dupuy's argument seems to be different, and I must confess I do not fully

understand what he means by "the impossibility of believing that the worst will happen".

Philosopher: Yes, I am also a bit skeptical. Do we really need a new metaphysics to understand what is happening? It would seem to me that what we see at a global scale is a phenomenon that we are all quite familiar with at the level of the individual: not wanting to believe the evidence, because it would shatter our picture of reality. It is what some duped husbands do when they pretend not to see that their wives are unfaithful — Pierre Bezukhov's behavior towards his wife Elena in Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. It is what ineffective parents do when they refuse to act on the evidence that their children are on the road to disaster — Prince Kuragin's attitude towards his children, also in *War and Peace*. It is what Hamlet does when he refuses to act on the evidence that his mother and his uncle have murdered his father. World literature tells us all there is to know about self delusion. But individually, not about self-delusion on a global scale.

Computer Scientist: Pierre gets redeemed in *War and Peace*, for he learns that he can act vigorously when overwhelming events come into play. Also, conveniently, Elena dies of a mysterious illness. Redemption also happens to Hamlet. The strong suggestion is that people get wise, not through "wisdom teaching", but through coping with the disasters in their personal lives.

Logician: In that case, reading more may just be a bad substitute for action, making you more depressed. It may be true that our research project cannot stop climate change, but what about getting our institutes to spend money for compensating carbon dioxide emissions on research trips, for example with Atmosfair or Greenseats? And I'm sure there's more innovative stuff one could think of.

Computer Scientist: That's funny. I tend to think about booking Atmosfair and Greenseats flights as particularly bad substitutes for action. I mean, the evidence suggests that we should be giving up intercontinental travel altogether.

Game Theorist: Agreed. I'd prefer to do both: Fly less and support Atmosfair. I just returned from a conference full of Europeans who decided that the next conference will be in Japan. That strikes me as ecological nonsense. By the way, a friend from Rome told me recently that this idea of paying for your carbon dioxide emissions is similar to the indulgences of the Catholic Church, paying to have your sins forgiven.

Philosopher: Very interesting thought. The original idea behind indulgences was, of course, that *past* sins could be compensated for by generous gifts to the Church. We all know that the practice went badly out of hand, with the introduction of indulgences for *future* sins. The protestants protested, and the Catholic Church has mended its ways. The take leave message after confession stresses this: "Go, and sin no more".

Computer Scientist: So it would seem to me that flying Greenseats is similar to buying indulgences for future sins. Truly a bad idea.

Game Theorist: Well, I thought it was a nice analogy, but here's another one from Catholic doctrine. The Church teaches abstinence before marriage, and to avoid the transmission of AIDS. But for all those who cannot be abstinent, maybe using condoms would still be better than getting AIDS.

Computer Scientist: I agree that one should be realistic in rules of behavior one wants to impose. Preachers of sexual abstinence seem to have missed a point about human nature. But are you implying that it is just not realistic to assume people are willing to give up travel by air, because the need for travel is as urgent as the need for sex?

Game Theorist: What I mean is that if we cannot give up flying then flying and compensating for the environmental effect is better than flying without compensation.

Computer Scientist: I am tempted to quote Oscar Wilde: We can resist anything but temptation. Booking Greenseats flights is a procrastination device, for it deludes us into thinking we are acting responsibly. And the reason we love it is that it allows us to go on doing what we all like best, which is flying around the world to spend pleasant time with colleagues at interesting international workshops.

Logician: But giving up intercontinental flights altogether? My goodness, let's hope we are all on the same continent when that happens.

Game Theorist: One thing we *can* all do as individuals is to become vegetarian. If everyone would stop eating meat, that would seriously lower methane emissions without having any of the negative economic consequences that lowering CO_2 emissions seems to entail.

Computer Scientist: Incidentally, the majority of our project participants already appear to be vegetarian. *(Looks ruefully at own steak)*

Logician: I suppose that the social software perspective could come in when trying to find ways for governments to promote vegetarianism, say, by environmental taxes on meat, shifts in farm subsidies, and so on. Colleagues, let's get to work.

Philosopher: A variant of Niebuhr's serenity prayer may be applicable to us, social software enthusiasts. Our formal methods may be useful in contexts where there is the political will to solve the ills of society, for example to create security protocols with various beneficial properties, or to promote vegetarianism, as you suggest. Still, there remain scores of problems where our expertise will not help one iota as long as political will is lacking – formal negotiation theory alone cannot begin to solve the Middle East crisis at this stage of history. Let us hope that we will have the wisdom to see the difference.

References

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[2] Jean-Pierre Dupuy. *Pour un catastrophisme éclairé.* Seuil, Paris, 2002.

[3] Richard P. Feynman. *The Pleasure of Finding Things Out.* Perseus Books, 1999. First Penguin Edition: 2000.

[4] D. Keown. *Buddhism: A Very Short Introduction.* Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1996.

[5] M. Scott Peck. *The Road Less Travelled.* Simon and Schuster, 1978. Many reprints.

[6] Robert J. Sternberg. Why schools should teach for wisdom. the balance theory of wisdom in educational settings. *Educational Psychologist*, 36(4):227–245, 2001.