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Might nature rule all law?

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Space exploration is based on the ability to transform an understanding of physical laws into a machine or process that does what we want. This is engineering, the design of structures, rocket engines, materials, computers, and many other things that help us achieve our goals.

We all realize that the laws of physics are discovered and derived, and that even though we may prefer different laws of physics so that we can do many more things, we cannot change them. They are beyond humanity or Congress. They are a result of the processes that created this universe. I was interested to read once that if some of the parameters in physical laws were just slightly different, life may never have evolved on Earth — at least, not life as we know it.

Less accepted is the notion that economic laws and political laws are also immutable to some extent. This does not mean that there is only one way to think about economics and politics and how they provide a framework for human activities. What it does mean is that humanity has certain physiological and psychological constraints that, on average, constrain our behavior.

Consider economic constraints. The world has experienced socialism, capitalism, Marxism, communism, and variations of these. Economic systems based on a communal set of rules where effort and reward are not linked do not work. Generally, greater effort and greater initiative, and, yes to my PC friends, greater mental abilities are correlated with greater rewards. That does not mean that one cannot become wealthy as a lazy and ignorant person. We all know examples of these, but the probability of this happening is not large.

(This suggests the following interesting question: Since there are many more people with average skills and intellect, businesses that want to maximize profits must create products that are of interest to average people. Does this create more average people, and do we eventually turn a corner from which we cannot recover?)

What about political laws? Economic and political laws go hand in hand, but there are exceptions. For example, China is both a dictatorship and an entrepreneurial society. It values economic productivity but not political creativity. U.S. foreign policy has in part been based on the premise that political freedoms will come to dictatorships if we trade with them and maintain economic ties. This did not work with the Soviet Union, which buckled under the pressures of the Reagan-led military buildup. It is unclear whether the China will become more democratic as it becomes more capitalist. But clearly, I think, people who enjoy being creative in the sciences and the arts will not want to live in a state where their politics is straightjacketed. It is unlikely that they will be bought off by a materialist life within a dictatorship.

So it is interesting to ponder whether we can make some underlying unifying statements on how laws exist that cannot be broken, whether scientific or human laws. Are scientific laws of nature a guide to what we can expect from human laws? I think the answer is yes, and we will return to this discourse in subsequent essays.

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