World's Most Important Problem?

What are the most important project(s) to work on? I say addressing **bad/irrational thinking** is the priority because it plays a significant role in every other major (and minor) problem. Rational, effective, good thinking is what lets us accurately determine what is and isn't a problem, how to prioritize it, and what methods of dealing with it will be effective rather than counter-productive. It reduces our risk of being wrong about what we're doing and helps us resolve debates and disagreements correctly (which helps get people working together instead of working at cross purposes). And it makes us better learners who can make progress on any intellectual or scientific issue faster and more easily.

by Elliot Temple, Feb 2020

- First candidate: **aging**. Kills a ton of people.
  - What makes aging a hard problem?
    - 1. Human biology/metabolism/ etc. is really complicated.
      - This problem is compatible with a direct approach. Work on aging. Done. But the bad thinking problem makes this harder.
    - 2. People are bad at thinking.
      - This problem gets in the way of a direct approach. It's a reason the direct approach will be much less effective until after this is dealt with.
        - Could we just get 1,000 really smart people who are good at thinking and have them work on aging?
          - No because the problem is more severe than that. There aren't 1,000 people who know how to think well. There are major errors about who to think which are standard ideas in our culture, which smart people think are good and rational, which are actually disasters.
      - Imagine if Aubrey de Grey (AdG) was a significantly more effective thinker. What difference would that make?
        - What if AdG's audiences were better thinkers so it was much easier for him to convince most people he talks with or even just 10% more people who could donate money, get involved, spread the word, etc?
          - What if people were more curious and self-directed learners so AdG didn't have to repeat himself so much, and people would seek out the info online and learn it on their own just because he put up some videos and articles and wrote some books?
            - What if there were 100 other people being similarly effective to AdG?
      - Bad thinking is continued on a separate tree. This node lets the arrow fit.
- Second candidate: **Environmentalism** (including worries about pollution, overpopulation and resource scarcity), is wrong and threatens to spend 16 trillion dollars destroying wealth and to have men with guns enforce new laws to prevent tons of production, wealth creation, etc.
  - You can work on this problem fairly directly by debating global warming, spreading info about facts and myths, criticizing the 97% of scientists agree claim, pointing out benefits of larger populations, explaining how market prices handle resource scarcity, explaining how technology can find alternatives, etc.
    - Your success at explaining all these things is related to how well people think (both yourself and the people you're trying to persuade). Your ability to even be on the correct side of these debates, instead of spending your time advocating for the wrong side, is based on your own thinking quality.
  - You can also work on this problem less directly by trying to help people think more rationally and logically so they're better equipped to consider environmental issues well.
- Third candidate: **socialism**/ communism/Marxism.
  - You can work on this directly by e.g. explaining the economic calculation problem, the idea of "market socialism" as a defense, and the flaws with that.
    - How much people will listen or understand depends on how well they think, how willing and able to learn they are, etc. And whether you're advocating the right ideas depends on your own thinking quality. How do you know Mises is right instead of Marx or Keynes?
  - You can also work on this problem indirectly by helping people think and learn better, debate more rationally, etc. If you do, it'll make the job of economists easier to educate people, and it'll help economists think better themselves and sort out their disagreements more rationally.
- Fourth candidate: **social justice**, postmodernism, Antifa, LGBTQ activism, etc.
  - You can work on this directly, e.g. by posting internet memes mocking SJWs, doing journalism so people know more about what Antifa does, or creating your own gang that goes around and defends people from Antifa when the police won't.
  - This problem will also benefit from people being better at thinking. Then they'll be better able to see the errors in these ideas instead of getting drawn into harmful causes. (And if I'm mistaken about whether these things are good or bad, working on stuff about rationality and bad thinking may help me learn better and change my own mind.)
- Fifth candidate: **Islam**. It can spread sharia, jihad, violence, terrorism, etc.
  - This can be approached with foreign policy, major religions could try to convert Muslims, moderate Muslims who want reform instead of Sharia could be politically supported, we could restrict immigration to protect ourselves, we could improve our army and police and focus on defense against violence without worrying about the ideas that can cause violence, etc.
  - Islam is ideas. If Muslims thought better, they could become atheists or improve Islam to be less violent and oppressive, similar to how Christians improved their religion in the past. Christianity used to be uncivilized but is now civilized. And lots of the problem is Western people dealing with Islam poorly: discouraging reforms, encouraging Muslims to think they're wronged victims, etc.
- Sixth candidate: **War, crime and violence**.
  - Direct approach: better police, courts, prisons, militaries, diplomats, laws, etc.
    - There can be circumstances where crime is wise, e.g. some crimes under tyranny. Bad government involves thinking errors by law-makers, so more rational thinking would help.
  - Indirect approach: People who are better at thinking will better understand why violence is a bad way to solve their problems and know better options. They'll know better ways to get money than crime. They'll be easier to negotiate with.
- Seventh candidate: Inventing **AGI**. Or preventing AGI or some other technological singularity kinda thing from destroying civilization.
  - There are direct approaches like working on AGI code. If the people doing that were better at thinking, they'd do a better job of it, avoid dead ends more, etc.
  - Better thinking would also help people better reach correct conclusions about the danger, or not, of AGI.
- Eighth candidate: Meteor, plague, nuclear war or other mass death event.
  - There are direct approaches like more telescopes to see meteors coming, working to advance plague-related medical science, and creating better quarantine areas. If people were more rational thinkers, there'd be more scientists, more effective scientists, and more reasonable and effective political leaders too, so this problem would be significantly easier to deal with.
- Ninth candidate: Poverty or inequality.
  - People need better ideas to understand what is and isn't a problem, why, the causes of the problems, appropriate solutions, etc. The reason this stuff is semi-stuck (though poverty has actually been dramatically improving) is because people *disagree* about these topics. Although there are direct approaches like working hard to make extra money to hand out as charity/aid, people need better ways of resolving disagreements and finding the truth to know what should be done and the right way to organize society.
- Should everyone work on the most important project? Should all the world's resources go there?
  - No! We don't have to pick one. It's good to have people and resources working on every project I've listed and many more.
    - I think more people should work on the bad thinking problem, and I also have considered switching problems myself (the aging problem is particularly tempting because I don't want to die, though I do think a lot of the other problems could potentially lead to a lot of death, it's not like I or others are safe if we don't die of aging). Bad thinking is already my specialty so even if it wasn't the most important I probably shouldn't personally switch.
    - The bad thinking and anti-aging problems are both getting far too low an allocation of resources and smarts, in my opinion. For the others, it's less clear to me resources are under-allocated to deal with them. Maybe they have enough, or more than enough, given the current situation, and what we need is more smart people and better thinking so there's more available to allocate to more problems.

Bad Thinking

- What are the causes of bad thinking?
  - Bad parenting, education, schools.
  - Static memes.
  - Second-handedness and focusing on social dynamics over objective reality.
  - Mistakes in our culture.
  - What sort of solutions could we work on?
    - 1. Treating kids better so we don't break them so much.
      - Better parenting.
        - Providing better info about our culture and how to think critically.
        - Make parenting compatible with (classical) liberalism.
        - Make parenting compatible with Critical Rationalism, the epistemology (by Karl Popper)
      - Better schools and/or more homeschooling.
        - Like parenting, make schools compatible with liberalism and Critical Rationalism.
      - Helping kids deal with static memes and social dynamics rationally.
    - 2. A way to improve the thinking of adults who've already been harmed.
    - 3. Philosophy articles spreading better ideas about epistemology. E.g. stuff about the myths of induction, justification, and strong arguments, and the use of decisive criticism.
    - 4. Philosophy articles about thinking, discussing and living methods. E.g. stuff about overreaching, Paths Forward, impasse chains, and the problem solving method: "Given we disagree about X, how can we proceed?"
    - 5. Educational materials to teach people the basics better and replace their confusions with clear knowledge. E.g. articles about grammar, logical thinking, grouping, arithmetic, basic economics, basic science, brainstorming, outlining, using notes, etc.
    - 6. Develop new ideas about reason, logic, epistemology, etc.
    - 7. Bad philosophers are a major root cause of problems, as Objectivism has explained. Could address do stuff meant to address them.
      - TV, mainstream books, textbooks, magazines, music, movies, schools/teachers and parents broadly aren't thought leaders, they mostly spread ideas that are already high status. Philosophers are some of the high status sources of ideas that go on to influence a ton of stuff.
- What's the extent of bad thinking?
  - The extent is approximately everyone.
    - Basically everyone denies or disagrees about the extent and severity of this problem. But due to their bad thinking and unwillingness to engage in rational debate, it's very hard to change their mind or for them to learn better.
- What's the severity of bad thinking?
  - A lot but it's hard to quantify.
- Working on bad thinking helps with *every* other major problem, at the same time. That's a huge benefit.
  - Working on part of many problems, at once, adds up. E.g. suppose bad thinking were one quarter of each of the nine problems above. Then working on it is like working on 2.25 problems at once. Meanwhile working on the problems directly is like working on 0.75 problems at once, since you're only working on the part that isn't about bad thinking. With those numbers, working on bad thinking is *three times more powerful*.
    - I think a quarter is a conservative underestimate. For most of the problems, I think bad thinking is more than half the problem.
    - There are more than nine problems in the world. Working on bad thinking will help with all the other major and minor problems too.
- Maybe money could help with bad thinking.
  - How to get money?
  - How to use money?
- Chicken and egg problem.
  - How do you help bad thinkers think better? They'll misunderstand, misuse and disagree with the help.
- Error correction: What if these ideas about bad thinking are themselves mistakes? What if we accidentally educate people with even worse thinking than they had before?