Jan 27, 2015

People seem to get pleasure/happiness from projects, games of skill, and thinking, but economics does not talk about the utility from doing a cross-word puzzle, or figuring out the theory of relativity. For example, I seem to enjoy trying to figure stuff out and then attempting to explain it to others.

Some people like to write.

How would an economist approach such activities, if at all? How do other fields approach it? If you are interested in such questions make sure to read the sections on flow, and happiness by doing rather than consuming.

A big issue in CT is discounting the future. Why do we do it and why do some people discount more than others. I talk about that briefly on the book. Might it be a question of how much empathy you have for your future self?

Jan 27, 2015

In the book I say that once basics needs are met the guy on the street would say that one of the things he want is friends, suggesting that people with good friends are happier.

Is this true? What does the research say? When was the last time you read something about the economics of friendship or relationships? Find out what there is out there in psychology and economics. Economists typically think of interactions between people in terms of increased productivity (trade specialization, etc. not in terms of the having friends increases utility.

I was reminded of all this this morning by reading the following NYT article about companionship between animals of different species.


If nothing else there are some cool videos, like the one with the tortoise and the dog. Note that they quote Marc Bekoff, a Boulder biker, who has written many books on the emotions of animal. For a long time animals were not thought to have emotions.

Do they? A topic could be animal emotions and what it tells us about human emotions and how humans make choices. Do animals have emotion-specific preferences?

The article also mentions empathy, which could be a topic.

Can homo economicus have empathy, or is she only nice to other people because she wants something from them?
What is empathy, its foundations, theories of, how it relates to choice theory and morality, etc? Actually that would be a bunch of different topics.

Look for gaps in the book and fill one in. For example, what do you personally believe causes happiness, and that I do not discuss.

Might Edward be accused of mis-characterizing “consumer theory” (what I am calling choice theory). That is, might I be guilty of making up something, calling it, incorrectly, what economists assume, and then tearing it down. To address this question, you would find some different descriptions of CT and see how they are consistent, or not why my axioms. For example, start with a micro principles text, an intermediate micro text, and a graduate micro text.

In chapter 2 I suggest that neoclassical choice theory was developed by a bunch of Christian white males in England. I did a bit of research on this, but not a lot. I mention that original CT assumed cardinal, rather than ordinal preferences, but other than that do not talk much about the classical CT that the neoclassical theory replaced.

In the chapter on happiness, not everyone agrees with my description of how happiness works in the brain. Someone could run with that, finding studies that get results in contradiction to what I say. An important issue is whether wants can be different than likes.

On a completely different note:

Maybe you could do your own study (either alone or with another class member) on how behavior is affected by something. Review some of the psych studies discussed in chapters 5 and 6. While your project is not going to develop and complete something that would get published in some high-level psych journal or behavioral economics journal, maybe you could propose a study (a research proposal), including a simple trial run on a sample of convenience (some college students). I might have some ideas. This path would not minimize you work load. If you are a psych major, consider this.

You could write an essay introducing a student in the class to the field of “behavioral economics.”. You would need to relate it to how it is the same and different from what is in the book. (Note that BE is an expanding field in economics but CU does not have any real behavioral economists.)

Too much of the research I discuss wrt emotions and drive states has to do with SEX. In my defense, arousal is easier to invoke than emotions such as sadness and curiosity, but I don’t want to come across as dirty-old-man. So, it would be create to come up with some research on other emotions. I mention some of research on such emotions, but I am sure there is more out there that I have not found. What are other emotions? If you got to go with sex, are there studies that study how the behavior of females is affected by arousal?

An interesting area is how “right” vs. “wrong” is affected by emotional/drive state).
Is rape a rational endeavor? Why do people do it? What might an economist say about rape other than the activity produces negative externalities?

Recently I have been thinking about bullying. Are their economic studies of bullying? Is it “rational?” From a CT perspective. What do psychologists say about it? I started researching it, but got side-tracked.

Is happiness simply an emotional state? What exactly is an emotional state?

There are many critiques of homo economicus. Am I adding anything to the discussion? Am I providing an accessible critique for students of economics?

Would a homo economicus drink booze or take drugs. If so, why? Is addiction something homo economics can experience? If so, is it a bad thing?

One chapter discusses a drug that invokes trust (making people more likely to enter into market transactions/trades). I mention one study. You could find other studies and more recent research on this drug, seeing if it support what I say. My guess is that it effects are more complicated. I forget the name of the drug by it helps mothers and babies bond.

Many of you are probably dualists (the mind is something more than the physical brain) rather than materialists (see the beginning of the chapter on happiness). If you are, defend your position that I am wrong to be a materialist.

Why do sports and physical activities bring pleasure, at least some of the time? What the hell are endorphins and how do they work.

Depression and anxiety: Expand on what I say in the book and how it relate it to happiness.

Anyone a Buddhist? Expand on what I say about happiness, and Buddhism, to tell us more about Buddhist economics.

Read someone’s book on happiness (Bertrand Russell, Johnathan Haight, and relate what I say to what they say.

If you are a marketing major, maybe write an essay on why what marketers do is ethical, or unethical. Maybe lay out the argument for unethical even if you don’t subscribe.
Is cognitive behavioral therapy the path to a happier life?

What would a Buddhist say about the pursuit of happiness? And, what, if anything does that have to do with economics?

How has the conception of happiness changed over time? And why? I talk about this some in Chapter 2, but not much.

Jan 21, 2015
Another way to increase happiness? Write about your life Article cites research on how writing about your life can improve it, which is definitely not increased happiness through more money. This path to increased happiness while not discussed in Chapter 4 is germane to what is in chapter 4.

Some of the research cited in the article is by Wilson, someone I cite a lot.

-----Original Message-----
From: Edward R Morey
Sent: Wednesday, January 21, 2015 8:03 AM
To: Edward R Morey
Subject: NYTimes: Writing Your Way to Happiness

http://well.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/01/19/writing-your-way-to-happiness/

Some researchers believe that by writing and then editing our own stories, we can change our perceptions of ourselves and identify obstacles that stand in the way of better health.

January 20, 2015
There was a recent essay in the NY Times Sunday Book Review, “Among the Disrupted’ By Leon Wieseltier

http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/18/books/review/among-the-disrupted.html

For some of you the essay and a topic related to it might be too esoteric.

The essay might resonate with individuals who reject some of the main theses in my book.

My book takes what some would call a “non-humanist” or “post-humanist” approach to behavior and life

For example, I argue that there is no distinction between brain and mind: that there is nothing but the neurons with their chemical and electrical activity. We are what Dilbert, the cartoon character, calls soft, wet machines—sophisticated animals. I present evidence that people do not make choices in the way we think we do.
The author of the essay might describe me as a “post humanist”

Wieseltier says, for example, that things like happiness are non-measurable and it is alarming that economists are measuring it.

There are “metrics” for phenomena that cannot be metrically measured. Numerical values are assigned to things that cannot be captured by numbers. Economic concepts go rampaging through noneconomic realms: Economists are our experts on happiness!

Where wisdom once was, quantification will now be. Quantification is the most overwhelming influence upon the contemporary American understanding of, well, everything.

And even as technologism, which is not the same as technology, asserts itself over more and more precincts of human life, so too does scientism, which is not the same as science. The notion that the nonmaterial dimensions of life must be explained in terms of the material dimensions, and that nonscientific understandings must be translated into scientific understandings if they are to qualify as knowledge, is increasingly popular inside and outside the university.

In American culture right now, as I say, the worldview that is ascendant may be described as posthumanism.

But what is humanism? For a start, humanism is not the antithesis of religion, as Pope Francis is exquisitely demonstrating. The most common understanding of humanism is that it denotes a pedagogy and a worldview. The pedagogy consists in the traditional Western curriculum of literary and philosophical classics, … The worldview takes many forms: a philosophical claim about the centrality of humankind to the universe, and about the irreducibility of the human difference to any aspect of our animality; a methodological claim about the most illuminating way to explain history and human affairs, and about the essential inability of the natural sciences to offer a satisfactory explanation; a moral claim about the priority, and the universal nature, of certain values, not least tolerance and compassion.

And posthumanism? It elects to understand the world in terms of impersonal forces and structures, and to deny the importance, and even the legitimacy, of human agency. It certainly does not mean a “hatred of the human.” There have been humane posthumanists and there have been inhumane humanists.

An essay for the course could argue that my approach to behavior and humans is either wrong, or, at least misguided.

Subject: topic ideas from Max, Jan 20, 2015

Jeff Zax, I am copying you because Max is in your class in income inequality and might want to write about inequality for his research project in my class. Maybe you have some suggestions about the topics he is considering.

Max talked to me about two possible topics

**Topic 2:**

Max, I am thinking that maybe you could look at inequality from a psychological/sociological perspective and contrast that with the economic perspectives.

Read the chapter on whether more income makes you happier, particularly on the distinction between absolute and relative income. The chapter also discusses how we compare on other criteria (athletic achievements, etc.)
Chapter 4: Does consuming more stuff make you better off? Is getting rich the path to happiness?

Some academics and pundits argue that income inequality is unimportant and that the critical issue for betterment is to increase absolute incomes, income inequality being unimportant, which is necessarily correct if inequality is unimportant, but not necessarily correct if relative position is important, which the data on happiness and income suggests.

Note the footnote in the chapter about how the role of absolute vs. relative income is different for those who self-identify as highly conservative.

**Topic 1:**

Max is also interested in anti-immigration sentiments in Europe, particularly Sweden.

This goes to the issue of how tribal (group orientated) people are (the importance of the group). Issues include maintaining the group, judging good vs. bad on the basis of group values.

There seems to be an interesting distinction in the morality of conservatives vs. liberals that relates to the group. The importance of loyalty to the group seems to be more important for conservatives.

There are a lot of ways topic 1 could go.

You might want to look at the work of the psychologist Jonathan Haidt

Search his web page.

If you are interested in how morality differs by political persuasion start with his book

“The Righteous mind: why good people are divided by politics and religion”

Good luck

Edward