

THE FIVE TENETS OF ETHICAL PRAGMATISM – OR HOW YOU RECONCILE THE GOOD WITH THE JOYFUL

1 THE PROBLEM

People whine. People whine far too much. Usually it's even the same people that in Sweden during summer whine that it's too hot that also whine in wintertime that it's too cold. And, in my experience, people whine when they see that someone, who they perceive is doing something good, also lives well.

Or, even worse, they may even be HAPPY about it – for shame! :-O

I understand why that may be provocative. Either you're an angel of altruism, leading an ascetic existence of minimal creature comforts, suffering alongside those who suffer – or you're a selfish pig who maximizes your profits, only caring about yourself and feeling damn good in your capitalist abundance of riches.

Maybe the latter can soothe their conscience and donate a bit of their wealth (willingly or through taxation) to the former, as the former rarely has anything against taking up such offers for the greater good, to live off of what the latter earned through their vicious greed.

But any other role in between is frowned upon or summarily discredited as a work of fiction. There are only the poor, kind-hearted angels in our midst or wealthy, greedy narcissists. Period.

At least that's the commonly held perception.

If there's something I've learned and observed throughout my life is that people like to categorize others, fit them into neat little boxes and when the pieces don't fit and the assigned roles get mixed up and confused, annoyance and disbelief is often the result.

A week ago, I deleted a photo of an altogether too expensive and fancy of a car of one of our investors from my page when one of my tireless European volunteer friends got an indignant look on his face upon seeing it. I myself, often get somewhat more affectionately labelled "volunteer de lux". Like the time when I, after driving two trucks across Europe and standing out all night in the backwoods of Slovenia handing out supplies in the midst of bleak and oppressive refugee camps until eight in the morning, used my own money to check into a high-end hotel to collapse on a soft, luxurious king-sized bed in exhaustion.

And of course I understand that it would be even more provocative if people knew that my torn up jeans cost as much as the average monthly salary in the neck of the woods where I try to make a difference, and that my worn-out leather jacket costs as much as a motorcycle in some of these poor and down-trodden locations scattered across the world.

And of course it can bother me too, as it dawns on me that a few hundred dollars' worth of donations can mean the difference between life and death in some of these places, while I take a cushy taxi home after an insane shift of work compensated by disproportionately insane amounts of money, eating lunches and dinners with important investors and dignitaries, and as I fly across the world staying in luxury hotels for even crazier amounts of money, all in the name of my continued employment. :-/

2 THE SOLUTION

All of this has bothered me to an intolerable extent. To a degree where I not only scrimp out on everything I do, but has also turned me stingy and irritable when coworkers express their desires for fancy laptops and gadgets, or when my four year-old angelic kids want some toy that cost a few hundred bucks, don't want to finish their food or say that they "hate" something the children in Iraq or Syria or any number of places would be overjoyed to even get a glimpse of.



But luckily, I travel a lot doing what I do. And every time I step onboard a flight, I absorb the wisdom of that sage flight attendant before me – the one who always notes "in case of an emergency, always put on your own oxygen mask first, before you put one on your child". It doesn't matter if I'm in Singapore, the US, Brazil or Jordan. The wise-beyond-their-years flight attendant always says the same thing.

"Always put on your own oxygen mask first, before you put one on your child".

Aside from nuclear power plants, there is no other industry as safety-conscious as aviation. If ever there's a crash, they not only pay huge amounts of damages and get dozens, if not hundreds of people's lives on their conscience, but the entire industry suffers as people get more reluctant to step on a plane.

In that industry, they have after decades of research about safety come up with a universal truth – if you don't save yourself, you can't save others either.

And somewhere around here, we find the center of the Venn diagram where the cores of ethics and pragmatism intersect.

No decent parent in the whole wide world want anything else but to ensure their child's safety above all. It's such a natural instinct that we as parents could give our lives as testament to that truth. Parental instincts are so strong that most of us would even give our lives to save someone else's child.

Common ethics say that you should do it as the right thing to do. Your heart agrees.

But then pragmatism comes into play, and suddenly we hear what decades of research has shown is the most important aspect to achieve the desired result, that the child lives, and that is that you save yourself first. Your heart may give you a goal to achieve, but your mind is the more important tool to achieve it.

It's a collaboration between heart and mind, the meeting place of ethics and pragmatism.

That's what I call ethical pragmatism.

As soon as I'm on that plane and listen to that flight attendant, I've slowly but surely always come to the conclusion that I can achieve far more good in the world if I take good care of myself (including the most important thing in my life – my family), than if I sought martyrdom and wore myself out, sacrificing my health, my economy and my social relationships to devote myself exclusively to a cause, no matter how good.

Or the inverse – if I take care of myself, my economy and social relationships, putting on the proverbial oxygen mask first, I will achieve far greater things and far more good than without it.

So that's the choice I've made for my life, and I call it ethical pragmatism, or EPM for short. It's neither ethical egoism nor altruism or even utilitarian.

Below you'll see 5 points that outline the extent and application of that philosophy in practice and how it has shaped my life.

3 THE FIVE TENETS OF EPM

The First Tenet of EPM – Do good but take care of yourself.

According to altruism, I shouldn't spend a single dime wastefully, but be as frugal as possible to help others in greater need instead.

But according to ethical pragmatism, I won't be as effective as a tool to do good for others, if I don't put on the oxygen mask first to ensure my continued existence, to maximize my utility and thus maximizing the benefit for those in need.

The Second Tenet of EPM – Do good in a long-term sustainable way.

According to certain branches of ethics I should work myself to death and only work with helping those in need which, aside from my own children, I see as the single most meaningful thing I've done with my life.

From a pragmatic perspective, I've seen so many kind-hearted angels who have done just that, jumped in and did the "grand tour" of volunteering during an incredibly intensive period, burned out and crashed, leaving their economy in shambles, surviving day-by-day. Or they've gone back to their normal lives, soothing their aching conscience that they've "done their part", or worse, gone on to be miserable about not being able to do more.

For me, this is like having a "summer cat" – wonderfully cozy for you, but not so cozy for the cat who's grown fond and dependent on you, and then can't survive once you finally abandon it. :-/

The Third Tenet of EPM – Do good and do it for as many as possible

I borrow here, the fundamental principle of utilitarianism.

From certain perspectives, business is considered one thing, volunteering another. For some, almost to an extent where companies and the corporate world is considered outright "evil" for any number of reasons and only us volunteers are the "good guys".

From a more pragmatic perspective, however, we can note that the world's greatest charitable donations come from The Bill Gates Foundation, contributing over \$4 billion dollars every year. Gates himself wouldn't have been able to contribute nearly as much for the greater good if he wasn't initially a very successful businessman and engineer.

From an egalitarian perspective, there is no qualitative difference between giving your all to help a single person and distributing that help across hundreds, as each person has equal worth and, all things being equal, that “help” is in practice a quantitative and finite resource.

Likewise, from a teleological perspective, the measure of a person’s intrinsic moral worth is in their intent. For a person to desire to do good, that intent remains the same no matter if you’re helping one person or a thousand.

Thus, anyone who does good for a handful of people can be considered just as “good” as those who help many. Any notion of competitiveness in charitable or utilitarian acts is a moot point – all of you who do good in the world are, inside and out, my heroes.

No one can do it all, but everyone can do something.

But with ethical pragmatism, the quantitative can’t be avoided – if you, using a company as a tool, can help more people in need, that’s something that’s objectively more good for the world.

It doesn’t make you a better person, but it makes the world a better place.

Some of us volunteers who have seen how “efficient” government agencies and the large-scale global organizations are in managing refugees, we also know there’s quite a bit left to do. :-/

The Fourth Tenet of EPM – Do good and don’t be ashamed of making money.

This may be one of the hardest points to achieve, if simply because, as stated above, people like categorizing their fellow men.

There are those that do good, and there are those who make money and ideally the twain shan’t meet (if ever, the latter should support the former at most).

Because that’s how it is – conventional ethics say you can’t make money and do the optimal good at the same time.

The ethical pragmatism flies in opposition of this however – if you make more money, you gain the capacity to do more good than those who don’t. If you capitalize on that capacity, then you can objectively make the world a better place than if you hadn’t made any money in the first place.

Here we have many role models from both the old world and the new – from the aforementioned Bill Gates to Warren Buffet and George Soros. Zuckerberg isn’t exactly hot property right now, but it’s worth mentioning that he donated 99% of his entire wealth to charity.

For many, this might seem like recency bias in selection, but everything is relative. Among the truly recent who have an incredible capacity to change the world for the better, we have during the past few years alone had an outpour of digital revolutionaries, to an extent where they can easily be called a new class of people. Most of them are people with a sharp mind both with regards to the new ABC-technologies (AI, Blockchain and Crypto) that are revolutionizing industry after industry, and sound strategies for what to do with it. But they also have a good heart with what they can do and want to achieve with them.

On the one hand, we have those who have the latter, the so-called cryptoanarchists that want to just erase the old and build anew. On the other hand, we have those who only have the former who only want to build things they can make money off of.

But most of them range the spectrum in between, and have a bit of both – i.e. that understand the technology and strategy as well as wanting to revolutionize and change the world for the better.

They're all ethical pragmatists.

There are a bunch of businesses here (<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/davos-1%C3%B6sningen-p%C3%A5-v%C3%A4rlds-problemen-%C3%A4r-redan-h%C3%A4r-rufus-lidman>) where the intent behind it is good, where we find microloans to the third world, green solutions and digital IDs for refugees without passports etc. Or, as in my own case, digital education and certification that doesn't cost anything for the 260 million children who don't have access to an education even though they live in areas with decent cellular reception, and the 66 million refugees in the world where 90% of them don't have access to education despite widespread cellphone usage.

If you approach this from both a technological, humanistic and strategically sound way, it will generate operations that don't just act as a force of good in the world, but also earn an incredible amount of money.

Or, inversely, that don't just create big business but help change the world for the better.

Investors commonly hold the latter perspective. And investors are needed, both to catalyze prospective businesses such as this, and to enable them to expand. Fact is, these investors are heroes almost as much as the entrepreneurs that then use the investments as fuel to make a difference. Because they have a choice in who to invest in and why.

They can either:

- a) Make money
- b) Make money *and* make a difference

The more that choose the latter, the more good things will be achieved in the world. Those who are infuriated and indignant that these people have nicer cars, watches and clothes than the rest of us are just kind of missing the point.

Or they just haven't gotten the whole thing about ethical pragmatism.

The more of us that do get it though, the better the world will become, and the happier you'll be looking in the mirror. 😊

The Fifth Tenet of EPM – Do good and be happy

Conventional ethics say that if you're doing a good deed, it's something serious, a sober and austere thing to do, and that you should feel compassion more than anything.

To this, I can only say that of course there are those who are as compassionate as I am. But I can also say with 100% certainty that there is no one (!) that is MORE compassionate than I am. :-/

I am, from the outset, what you would call a tough guy, a former streetfighter, boxer and martial artist. I was a sergeant in an armored division, adventurer and climber, surfer and diver, traversing the world. The times I have shed a tear in the 20 years prior to having children I can count on one hand (and all have been about the deaths of those dear to me).

Since my volunteering days started a few years ago (after having children), this has changed completely, and I've cried a flood of tears over the things I've seen and the stories I've heard.

But you know what? I've also gotten to meet some of the most amazing people in the world, heard the most incredible life stories, seen the vitality and spirit of people who are deserving of the deepest, utmost respect. I've gained friends, I've laughed and experienced different perspectives on things, I've seen the joy in a child's eyes many times over, gotten questions, talked to them, hugged them, played games and soccer with them, horsed around with them.

I have in no instance been ashamed of being a happy, outgoing guy. On the contrary, I am utterly convinced that it's been a great advantage, to bring people closer together and get things done better and more efficiently.

If someone sees me in pictures of the most tragic circumstances and places, and I look happy, that's because I AM happy. Personally, I am completely binary, I am 95% of the time completely happy and when I'm not, I am so distraught and dismayed over someone else's conditions or absolutely mad as hell on those who put them there (just as how I am almost always all over the place and superintense in everything I do, and if I'm not, I'm completely relaxed, reflective or meditative – it's that neutral middleground I'm not very good at, admittedly :-D).

4 THE EPILOGUE

I'm sure there are cool cats that think everything mentioned above is already clear as day to them. But how obvious it may seem, it's not easy to keep your tongue in check.

On the one hand, we have those who do good deeds but in the midst of all the misery they've seen start to feel that any monetary considerations are foul and distasteful (but nonetheless have no issue accepting both tax-money and donations from those earning the cold hard cash required).

On the other, we have those who are so completely career-focused, creating awesome results for their own sake, who really want to do good in the world but think that all these volunteers who are yelling at the gates have questionable personal hygiene and don't get as much done as they probably could.

We all have it a bit rough bridging these two different worlds – both of them forces to be reckoned with – to accomplish something together that could make a real difference in the world, both for children and the illiterate as well as intellectual giants of business and industry. Why?

Because it IS hard!

The good moralist

A few weeks ago, I wrote a joyful post about how the tech companies are winning over the old analogue businesses and a well-respected (and famous) philosopher friend of mine noted:

“Tech is ruling the world? Like everything is ultimately one big knockout competition and nothing more...? I would say ‘money makes the world go round’ and it’s sad to see you, with your philosophical background participate so whole-heartedly in that race.”

The good pragmatist

This perspective is a prime example for the first of these two opposing trains of thought. And I understand them. And I sympathize. And I respect them.

But I don’t agree with it. I never will. That’s something that sounds good on paper, but will never translate as well into action as the alternative.

And precisely because I have a “philosophical background”, I know the full meaning of what *factum verum* means. That is what’s done is the truth, or in plaintext:

Action speaks louder than words.

And when it comes to “what’s done” there are many who know what both me and other volunteers do in the foundation I started (RHEB). There are maybe fewer that know what me and my wonderful team is doing in my company (AIAR) however. In pictures and websites it may look very slick and high-tech – it may be slick sometimes, and high-tech it is every minute of it – but above all, it’s for a “great cause”. In action.

With as much as possible for as many people as possible.

The big difference compared to other “great causes” is that I don’t share the opinion that doing good is one thing and digging for gold is another. And it’s precisely because of that, that my friend above reiterated the (for many “bitter”) fact that “money makes the world go round”. Because this also means that:

- a) Those yelling at the gates are ultimately not successful in the bigger scheme of things (aside from in soothing their conscience).
- b) Those who think strategically, using modern technology and money as a tool, can often achieve far more.

That doesn’t mean that for me those mentioned under b) are better people than the people in category a) (would I be standing by the pearly gates, I’d welcome both with open arms, the true watershed is intent), it just means that the pragmatist can objectively achieve a whole lot more.

And this is the ethical pragmatism I’m standing behind to 200%.

Mark my words, this is not utilitarianism or the “end justifies the means”, collateral damage or any other garbage conceptions – as long as the means are “evil”, it’s nothing I’d get behind.

But most know as well as I that the means are, with a few exceptions, seldom “evil” – you can kill someone with a hammer and you can build a hospital with it. This only means that the means are neutral and the result of the hammering is about who’s holding the hammer and the

intent behind it (the ethics), so it's the pragmatism that I stand behind (=how much and how many you can ultimately help/support/enable).

It is, according to my own philosophy, two of the most important stands a person can take in their whole life:

- a) Upon your death, do you want the world to have been a tiny bit better with you than without you?
- b) Upon your death, do you want your deeds to have had a more positive effect by having done something beyond the simplest and most obvious?

The first question is the ethical one. The second is the pragmatic one. I don't just respect both, I apply both. And that's what I call ethical pragmatism.

And both you and the world will see the incredible force which we will use for the sake of good by combining both the good of the heart with the power of the mind.

Hugs and thank you for existing. <3 <3 <3