

Musings

Here you can find various and sundry thoughts on my interests.

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Review of Dawkins Article

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This is commentary on this [article](#), originally printed in Forbes.

<http://www.forbes.com/asap/1999/1004/235.html>

When I read a piece like this, I think there is hope for mankind. At least I believe it until I watch CNN. Then I see W or Ashcroft anointing themselves as the most recent messiahs, and I once again despair. Print it out and read it; it is far more enjoyable than reading it on the screen.

I found this piece from a link from the Penn and Teller website. Penn and Teller are my favorite kind of debunkers: funny militant jerks who care not a whit that they might offend someone. I wish I had that kind of chutzpah.

In the article, Richard Dawkins details the way in which modern religionists are co-opting scientific language and conclusions in ways lacking any of the robustness that science itself requires. Is that irony? I can never get that straight.

My friend Chuck describes me as a militant atheist. I find that amusing and true. The saying that "converts make the best zealots" probably applies though I fear using religious imagery to make a point about atheism. I guess for this audience that is okay. In the spirit of not taking religion lying down, I offer this article. I wish I had written it.

To offer a taste of what it contains consider this paragraph:

If you count Einstein and Hawking as religious, if you allow the cosmic awe of Goodenough, Davies, Sagan, and me as true religion, then religion and science have indeed merged, especially when you factor in such atheistic priests as Don Cupitt and many university chaplains. But if the term religion is allowed such a flabbily elastic definition, what word is left for conventional religion, religion as the ordinary person in the pew or on the prayer mat understands it today--indeed, as any intellectual would have understood it in previous centuries, when intellectuals were religious like everybody else?

It also offers a better counterpunch to “agnosticism” as a viable alternative. As most of you know I, like most militant atheist including the “patron saint” of atheism (thanks once again to Chuck for that coinage), find agnosticism to be void of any real value as a word.

Musings on Microsoft

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In response to this article in the Seattle Times:

Nimble edge slowly erodes for Microsoft

As bleak as the technology sector looks, there's one bright spot: The Microsoft monopoly is dead. Perhaps "dead" is too strong a term. Statistically, Microsoft still rules...

Full story: http://seattletimes.nwsources.com/html/paulandrews/134614233_paul13.html

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Your Life. Your Times.

This is the first article that I've read that articulates why Microsoft might be in serious decline. Andrews equates Microsoft of today with IBM of the 1980s. I think he is right. I don't think the situation is hopeless, but should Microsoft fail to recognize and adjust to the shift, my personal work life and many who signed on since 1998 will continue to decline. If ever there was a time to cash out, it will be soon. This paints a grim picture for anyone who might like to retire on the strength of stock options.

Microsoft seems to have two choices: adjust to being a large, bureaucratic company or stop being one. The only reasonable way to stop would be to actually break up the company I don't think that is such a bad idea though it is radical. It is already broken up in many ways. Office is a lot different from Visual Studio, which is different from Games or Xbox. I don't think that the upper management embraces the monolithic company practices that are required if you are in fact a large juggernaut. So don't be. Break up the companies into smaller more nimble companies, and you won't have to ask a leopard to change its spots.

From Paul S. (edited slightly):

I don't have a good enough grasp of the market to comment. However, I've heard more than once that you still have to be a geek to set up and use Linux, so I'd think that Microsoft's lead remains safe as long as

$$\text{TEU}(\text{MS}) + \text{C}(\text{MS}) < \text{TEU}(\text{Lx}) + \text{C}(\text{Lx})$$

where TEU = Total Effort to Use, C = Cost, MS = Microsoft, and Lx = Linux.

In other words, to continue succeeding, Microsoft needs to keep lowering the frustration rate for the non-technical users of the wide world while (and here's where our docs and community efforts come in) increasing the success chances for the coders and sysadmins (System Administrators) of the world, while, if possible, lowering their TCO.

I don't have a clue what to do about PDAs or games, since I'm pushing the envelope when I use Caller ID or venture beyond FreeCell.

I see the logic of Paul S.'s viewpoint but disagree in one way. The significant market where Microsoft does not seem to be making as much progress as hoped is servers, where the total cost of NT is still higher. There, companies are more than willing to hire a "high priest" sysadmin, a person who prides himself on being a geek, who possess the arcane knowledge of Apache server or, for that matter IIS, which is still pretty much a black box to most people.

No doubt it does take a lot specialized knowledge to set up and administer Linux, but people are doing it. And I think there is a phenomenon like the gas company or another utility company. Once you've done the hard work of setting up your network, you don't fire the sysadmin. He has to show up everyday anyway just in case of an emergency. If you are going to have to pay him anyway to sit around most of the time, you are more than happy to have saved money on your hardware/software by using arcane technology that was cheaper. Because the one thing your admin will have is time. He can spend that time going to training, reading difficult manuals, and configuring things with hidden utilities.

No one doubts that Microsoft owns the desktop market, but as a market segment, the growth is slow. This is the typical problem of a monopoly. It is hard to sell "better, more efficient" electricity. Everyone has electricity and is happy with its performance. Let's not quibble over when or if Microsoft were ever a "official" monopoly. None of these facts are affected by that distinction.

In segments like PDAs and game boxes, there already is a lot of competition. Most of it is better suited for competition in that market too because Microsoft likes to think it can develop games or the Xbox the way it develops Office. That doesn't turn out to be true.

Java was originally developed to be an embedded system language. It has an advantage there so even our language offerings have serious competition there.

I'm not being fatalistic. I think Microsoft has a good chance of surviving and making money. I just think the next twenty years will be more like IBM's last twenty. Do think the average Microsoft manager thinks of himself as a white-shirt-wearing, pencil-protector-toting IBMer? Well he should. And the sooner that the everyone comes to this conclusion the sooner we can move on to the next stage of corporate giant-hood.

From Paul M. (edited slightly):

Here's another viewpoint -

Microsoft? Serious decline, you say? Really? With that kind of market share, IP and cash position? You've got to be joking! There are very few companies who wouldn't be envious.

Microsoft will never be like it was in the past, with skyrocketing growth. It might not have the "nimble edge" - that doesn't mean it won't be successful. The company will transition to a more stable, established business environment. I predict that there will be a lot more focus on business side at Microsoft, maintaining a balance sheet that is attractive to investors. That is not a bad thing. It's how most businesses run.

Worried about becoming an IBM? That wouldn't necessarily be bad: For the period Jan 1998 - Jan 2003, IBM stock outperformed Microsoft. In that period, Microsoft stock price grew 48%, IBM grew 61%.

Cashing out? I would too, if I thought there was a better equity to hold - do you know of one?!?

As far as breaking the company up, the current trend for diversified companies is to focus on a core set of business, and shed the units that are unrelated to the core. So like Ford & GM shed their parts businesses, like AT&T spun off financial services, Microsoft might divest some business units. (Or spin the ones off that have the promise of growing much faster than the rest of the company - like 3Com did with Palm).

However, investors are focused on sales & earnings growth, so Microsoft has to be most interested in finding ways to grow. The most straightforward means to grow in an established business thru acquisitions, and nobody has a bigger war-chest than Microsoft. Not a bad position to be in, really. So, rather than breaking apart, I predict that Microsoft will get much bigger.

The trick is going to be making the right decisions, efficiently managing a larger and larger entity, all the while retaining a talented work force.

Or maybe not!

I don't disagree at all. But the IBM we are talking about is not the 1998 IBM but the 1985 IBM when Compaq, Dell, and countless others were taking its market share. When IBM brought out its killer OS that fizzled and became a joke.

I don't worry that Microsoft will be around in 20 years; I worry that the next twenty years of my employment will be the ones where the company re-builds. Most people in software, and especially the managerial positions at Microsoft, had their formative years in the past 15. That's too bad because those business practices are irrelevant in many ways. Some managers will change but many will not change. That's why Microsoft consistently makes decisions that leave a lot of savvy business people scratching their heads.

When I mentioned cashing out - I meant my stock options. Those were supposed to be an incentive to hire on and stay at Microsoft. Five years of options are now worth nothing - literally. This is not much of

an incentive. The moment that my options are worth more than zero, I will begin to cash them out. I own enough Microsoft shares outright.

My thought to break up Microsoft is admittedly radical. It is driven more by the personalities that I see at Microsoft, people who laugh at the IBM mentality. Well if Microsoft wants to succeed as a big company like GE or IBM, then they better stop laughing and get with the big company mentality.

I don't really think Microsoft will disappear. But I think for the first time in years, you can imagine how that might happen. Lots of people thought that a lot of about a lot of companies: Compaq, (now HP), Digital (now HP), Wang (now gone), and Lotus (now IBM). I am saying that unless Microsoft changes a lot internally, there is a chance (where there wasn't much of one before) that Microsoft could find itself a shell of what it once was.

Atheism and Prayers

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I am an atheist. I am not an agnostic. I consider the agnostic position gutless at worst and redundant at best. I don't care if it offends you that I don't believe in god. In fact, I don't believe in anything. And if you want to argue that point, at least know what atheism is.

When you tell me that you'll pray for me, you are assuming that those intentions are meaningful to me, that they represent a common set of values. They don't. It is presumptuous.

If I were a Satanist and I told you, a Roman Catholic, that I'd put in a good word with the Prince of Darkness for you, you would be offended. You would likely see that kind of action on my part as stupid. It is also likely that you might tell me explicitly that you don't want me to take that action on your account. I doubt that you would be uplifted.

That's how I feel about any kind of prayer for me. When you say that you'll pray for me, I wonder to whom? Which god exactly? If you want to pray, that is your business. I am not trying to persuade you not to pray. But don't tell me you are praying for me and expect it to provide me with good feelings.

Religion is pervasive in American culture. It's pervasive in other cultures too, as in Iraq and Iran, but I've never lived there so I'll confine my comments to American culture. Much of Western civilization is filled with Judeo-Christian imagery so it is considered normal that holidays (note the origin of this word) such as Christmas and Easter are seen as de facto for everyone. But really, they aren't. American aboriginals did not celebrate these holidays before the arrival of Europeans.

Roman Catholics and other christian religions like to put on an ecumenical face, one of alleged tolerance. As far as I can see, that tolerance only extends to other religions that are more-or-less derivative of the Roman Catholic religion.

If you know that I'm an atheist and yet you persist in foisting your beliefs on me, that's weak. It's intentional, and it is a kind of proselytizing.

Road away from Religion

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I would love to be a person who isn't occupied with thoughts of religion. I would love not to care. I envy people like my wife who have a rather well-adjusted attitude toward any kind of religious question. When asked about a religious question or about the existence of mankind, I would love to blithely reply, "I never really gave it much thought."

But I am not like that. So what.

I was raised in a rather pious Roman Catholic home. I have raised questions about the dubiousness about the creation story since I was a little kid. I remember irritating my mother with my opinions on the logic of "living together." If marriage is so sanctified, doesn't it make sense to make sure that you are going to be able to tolerate living together before you actually get married?

I don't hate myself for wondering these things, I just wish I didn't. That's okay.

I accept that I think of so-called "existential" questions more than most people. I don't see why I should apologize for this anymore than I should apologize for waxing about my last golf game. With certain fellow golfers, that is acceptable and fun. With other non-golfers, it's boring. I recognize that phenomenon and adjust my behavior, but I don't adjust my love for the game of golf. Same with religious questions, some will find it boring. Well then don't read it. But I am not required to keep my thoughts to myself.

There are many people who are atheists as a matter of fact. They are unconcerned with questions about god. They are not militant about maintaining a secular government or judiciary. Good for them. I am not one of them. I think that religion poses a threat most of the time because it is fundamentally intolerant of those not of the "chosen" religion. I think religious teaching encourages fear, discourages discovery, and emphasizes hate. If you find yourself saying, well not my particular faith, then see the comment about the "chosen" religion.

Do not expect me to quietly keep my viewDo not expect me to quietly keep my view to myself while religious doctrine is foisted on me. I'm just letting you know that I am not going to do it. And if that bugs you, then engage me in a conversation about golf. I can go on and on about that, too.

Return to Atheism

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You were born atheists, all of you. This is proven everyday when Guatemalan kids are adopted from Roman Catholic homes and raised in new homes with new religions, taking on the religion of their new parents. Or adopted Chinese kids, who start out as godless communists or Taoists, but become mega-church Christians.

Religion in this case is *belief*, and it is inculcated in kids. That's a big word inculcated. My mistake. It is taught to kids by their parents mostly. Occasionally it is taught to them by some charismatic neo-Nazi but it is taught to them even so.

But every time we elect a president to who "knows what he believes in" and he executes a plan based on that belief, we all give up our ability to think. Do you remember when people believed in slavery? Spend a couple minutes thinking about that next time W says he *believes* in democracy.

It doesn't matter if he believes in it. Is it the best system the human mind has come up with so far? Does it give the most freedom to the most people? Is freedom a good thing or a bad thing? Just think about. Don't tell me what you believe.

Footer

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