

COMMENTARY

Natural law smothered by data

By Eben Fodor

What has happened to the great minds, great communicators and great leaders that so inspired people in times past?

Could it be that the great minds of today are lost in data? Are their thoughts smothered by all the facts dumped on us by the information age? Are they confounded by the complexities of our modern technology?

Thomas Jefferson referred to "natural law" or "natural truths," which he deemed to be self-evident and upon which he based many of his greatest ideas.

But who would dare refer to such a law today? Any reference to nature must be kept purely scientific and be well-documented if we are to expect anyone to listen. Any theory that we put forth must be bolstered by a hearty array of factual-type data.

Today we believe only in what cannot be refuted — the computer, the exhaustive scientific study, the mathematician or accountant, and to a lesser extent, the Supreme Court and the Constitution that it upholds. All other sources are not only subject to doubt, they are worthless heresy.

Is there not, as Jefferson claimed, a natural law or code that all human beings understand and are more or less inclined to follow? Is there no moral or ethical common sense that we all share?

Whether something is right or wrong, fair or unfair, cannot be decided by a statistical analysis of socio-economic data.

Differentiating between good and bad is often difficult. We might like to turn to a computer to generate the correct solution. But there may be no right answer — only a series of moral and ethical tests to which each of us can apply the natural law that resides within us.

We need to restore that trust in ourselves and in our own natural ability to understand and interpret what goes on in

the world around us.

Many of us live as though there will be no tomorrow. We consume natural resources with reckless abandon, and in the process we create pollution at levels far exceeding those that can be absorbed by the environment.

We sit and watch as the population of the world climbs to new heights, now twice as large as it was just 40 years ago. We are already unable to properly provide for those that now exist. Humans are rapidly crowding other species off the planet as we compete for more and more of everything.

Yet at the same time, we know deep down that this lifestyle is wrong and that endless growth is impossible. It's wasteful, shortsighted, selfish and un-sustainable.

We know it is wrong, but we don't act because we doubt ourselves. Today's world seems too complex to say anything with certainty. Simple truths are lost in obscurity.

Modern technology blinds us to the physical limitations of the natural world.

We may be lured into believing our ability to control and manipulate the environment somehow compensates for the impact we have on it. But our advanced technology has actually amplified our individual impact, while simultaneously disguising the damage.

"Primitive" societies are likely to have a clear understanding of their relationship to the earth. They are aware of their connectedness with the past and the future. They know their food comes from the land. And they are aware of their vulnerability and dependency on nature.

We can access this kind of common sense wisdom by carefully consulting the natural law inside us. To assist in this process we can use something called the "Veil of Ignorance" (John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*).

For example, to understand how our policies today will impact those living in the future, we can imagine we are to be

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placed behind a veil of ignorance, and that once the veil is lifted we will be transported to an unknown point of time — present, near future or distant future — and will exist there for the rest of our lives.

The veil makes it clear that if we were to be sent into the future, we would not want those of the present to use all our natural resources — the coal, oil, minerals, etc. Nor would we want them to destroy areas of great natural beauty. We wouldn't want to be left with messes they were too lazy to clean up or prevent themselves.

This exercise of the imagination shows that we are able to objectively consult a form of natural law to help us resolve complex issues. The veil of ignorance can be applied equally well to other issues.

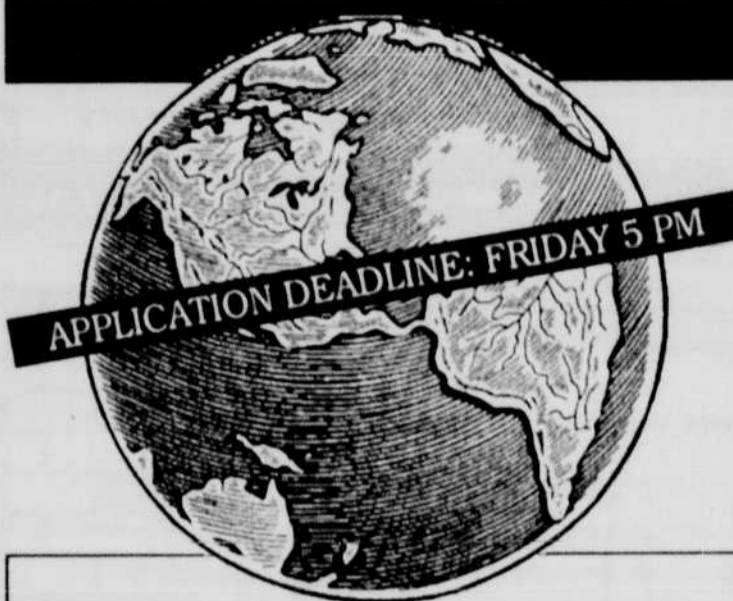
It serves to remove our bias and create an objective framework for evaluation. From behind the veil we know not whether we will be rich or poor, sick or healthy, smart or dull, ugly or beautiful, American or African.

Many of our natural thoughts and reasoning processes have been rendered ineffective by information overload. By appealing to our innate sense of justice, I believe we can find a great deal of common ground in the contentious debates that divide us and widespread agreement on many of the principles and policies for managing our society.

Those great people who once inspired us are among us today, their voices are just getting harder to hear.

Eben Fodor is a graduate student in the Environmental Studies Program.

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