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Subject: Book review: Freakonomics

Book Review

Freakonomics: A Rogue Economist Explores the Hidden Side of Everything By Steven Levitt & Stephen Dubner

The title and concept of this book appealed to me more than its actual content, for as a professing Economist myself, I am most interested in Economics as a social science, in understanding the motives and incentives of my fellow man (and woman), not just in how those motives and incentives manifest in terms of dollars and cents. Money merely scratches the surface of human behavior; there is a goal, a motive, and a story behind every transaction. Since I care about people, that's what really fascinates me about Economics.

But I found the content rather mundane and disappointing, really. It examines corruption in teaching, sumo wrestling, and real estate; the economics of the drug trade, especially crack; the crime rate; and parenting, i.e. what difference do parents really make (answer: it's not what you do, it's who you are), and what's in a name? Do names determine destiny?

At the center of the book, in Chapter Four, "Where Have All the Criminals Gone?" is an inflammatory suggestion: that the reason crime rate went down in the '90's instead of increasing as experts expected, was because abortion was legalized in the '60's, so many would-be criminals were never born. This was placed at the center of the book, and seems to constitute its core (although the author explicitly denies having a core or central theme), around which the other subjects are arranged as comparatively mundane window-dressing. Personally, I find the argument plausible only on the surface, for if one follows it to its logical extreme, then the surest way to eliminate the crime rate is to kill everyone.

Ironically he also showed how the odds can be defied; the book concludes by comparing a black Harvard economist from a disadvantaged childhood with "Unibomber" Ted Kaczynski, a white Harvard graduate with a privileged upbringing.

So to understand both crime and redemption, one must obviously scratch below the surface of circumstances and conditioning; one must inquire more deeply, delving into issues of free will, the heart, even the soul.

(In my own practice of Economics, if there were one theme that has dominated my experience in recent memory, it is that we are our own worst enemies. We devote so much time, effort, energy, and money to protecting ourselves from external threats, when in most cases the most daunting threat is the person in the mirror.

If we could only surmount that threat, then so many other external threats would pale by comparison. For example, instead of complaining about the economy or government policies, how about HAVING A PLAN and DOING it? Instead of worrying about identity theft, how about reconciling your checking account and otherwise keeping current and accurate accounting records? Etc. etc. etc.)

But back to the book: it was an okay first attempt; he could have written about any number of things. Malcom Gladwell, author of The Tipping Point and Blink writes about the book, "Prepare to be dazzled." Well, I wasn't dazzled, but I did appreciate Levitt's impulse to "explore the hidden side of everything." It's something we would all do well to emulate.

Hope you're having a great summer,

Kris Freeberg, Economist
[Making End\\$ Meet](#)

Attachments: