

**Brad DeLong**  
**Grasping Reality with the Invisible Hand**  
Fair, Balanced, and Reality-Based

# ***JOHN HOLBO ON LIFE IN THE SEWER OF ROMULUS***

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John Holbo:

[Wilkinson on Cato, Self-Serving Excuses, Second-Best Solutions \(Ponies and Pandaemonia of Pis-Aller\)](#): Will Wilkinson makes what seem to me very astute comments about the Cato Institute's partisan profile. The occasion is the ongoing Koch-Crane conflict. But these comments are important more for the way they point up typical deflections that occur when the light of 'ideal' theory is refracted through the lens of partisan desire, playing tricks on our view of the landscape of actual politics....

Politics is the art of the possible. Sometimes I'm tempted to say that political philosophy is the science of the impossible. That is, it consists of efforts to be maximally systematic and rational about what ain't going to happen, politically, but should. Political philosophy orbits around first-best solutions. If it doesn't, it's confused. If a liberal/progressive says this, conservatives will of course take to their fainting couches, between gasps: 'utopianism ... procrustean bed ... cruel lopping of limbs ... shall there be no cakes and ale! ... Jacobin Alinskyite!' No doubt the performance is mandatory. Still, we shouldn't let our sense that this is so detract from our awareness of its exquisite nonsensicality. For, as G. K. Chesterton remarks:

No man demands what he desires; each man demands what he fancies he can get. Soon people forget what the man really wanted first; and after a successful and vigorous political life, he forgets it himself. The whole is an extravagant riot of second bests, a pandemonium of pis-aller. Now this sort of pliability does not merely prevent any heroic consistency, it also prevents any really practical compromise. One can only find the middle distance between two points if the two points will stand still. We may make an arrangement between two litigants who cannot both get what they want; but not if they will not even tell us what they want.

Awareness of what is first-best is a condition of being able to aim at second-best. Nevertheless, the thing about second-best solutions is that they may not resemble first-best options. Politicians are typically bad at dealing with the first consideration. Political philosophers are typically bad at dealing with the second. It would be nice if ideologically/philosophically-minded partisans could be those with one foot on the rough ground, the other in the cloud. But it is, per Wilkinson's comment, typical for things not to work out in this happy way. In practice, being versed in political philosophy does not so much bind you as gift you with a plenitude of potential excuses, hence with a capacity for higher-order double-think.

Wilkinson really is saying that the thing about Cato is not that it's in the tank, politically, but that it's a double-think tank, philosophically.

What would be nice, then, would be a political philosophy that did a better job of taking this sort of typical deformation into intelligent account, which would discourage it – since it thrives on not being seen for what it is. (Also would be nice: a pony!) A theory of first-best that talks astutely about second-best. This is inherently hard to do, so I don't say 'theorizes well'. I guess I would propose a sort of line-of-sight rule. Optimally, you shouldn't lose sight of your ideals or of reality. So much so obvious. But really the trick is keeping accurate score with regard to semi-idealistic philosophical and policy proposals. Philosophers like to talk about the difficulty deriving an ought from an is (or an is from an ought). But it's equally important to think about the difficulty in analyzing an is-ought compound into component elements, the better to reduce and potentially reconstitute it....

Every philosophy should try to build into itself as much insulation against double-think tankery as possible. This ought to be regarded as a standard safety feature. The human mind being as fiendish as it is, this effort is bound to fail. Nevertheless, one ought to try.