



## Nutty notions for handing out a billion

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If you want proof that intelligence skips a generation, meet Peter Buffett.

Son of famed investor Warren, Peter describes himself as a composer, but of late he has started to dip his toes into the waters of philanthropy.

The results are soft-headed, to put it kindly. In fact, one wishes Warren would just blow his riches buying an island — Australia, perhaps? — instead of letting his son give it away.

Unfortunately, with the billion dollars at his disposal and a last name to gain attention, Peter's views are likely to influence philanthropy for decades.

In an op-ed in March's Chronicle of Philanthropy, called "Philanthropy Must Lead With Its Heart," Peter and his wife Jennifer write that after a decade of running the NoVo Foundation, "We've searched long and hard, but we can find very few indicators that tell us things are truly getting better for more people. Or that they will anytime soon."

Seriously? Hey, Pete, let's take a brief tour through some of the data. Starting with life expectancy.

According to the Web site [HumanProgress.org](http://HumanProgress.org) — which contains a collection of useful data from the Cato Institute you might want to check out — "Average global life expectancy at birth hovered around 30 years from the Upper Paleolithic to 1900.

Even in the richest countries, like those of Western Europe, life expectancy at the start of the 20th century rarely exceeded 50 years." Today, average life expectancy in the world is 67.9 years.

Or what about income? "In 2010, global per capita income stood at \$7,814 — over 10 times more than two centuries ago."

Even violence seems to have fallen. As Harvard Professor Steven Pinker wrote on Slate, "The only sound way to appraise the state of the world is to count . . . The kinds of violence to which most people are vulnerable — homicide, rape, battering, child abuse — have been in steady decline in most of the world. Autocracy is giving way to democracy.

“Wars between states — by far the most destructive of all conflicts — are all but obsolete. The increase in the number and deadliness of civil wars since 2010 is circumscribed, puny in comparison with the decline that preceded it, and unlikely to escalate.”

Steven Hayward wonders whether Buffett has ever picked up a statistical abstract.

A professor of public policy at Pepperdine University, Hayward suggests the data is clear, obvious and easy to find: “Perhaps he could use his money to hire a panel of social scientists to study these questions for him.” Easy money.

Buffett seems to be criticizing the tendency of philanthropists to want to measure results of their work rather than just “lead with their hearts.”

Of course “benchmarking” can be taken too far — is it possible to quantify the effects of supporting a journal of poetry? — but Buffett does not even approach this point.

Like a college freshman who thinks he’s stumped his professor, he asks: “How do you measure a worker’s dignity? How do you measure joy?”

Well, how about asking if a worker enjoys his work? Or how many hours of leisure he has, a number that’s steadily increased in the past century.

As for joy, well you’d need to have a lot of leisure time — maybe even be independently wealthy — to keep up with the burgeoning number of books measuring happiness.

So what accounts for Buffett’s lack of contact with reality? No doubt a certain isolation from the actual needs of real people is part of the problem.

In a New York Times op-ed last year, he criticized people who were funding micro-lending and financial literacy in developing countries because such efforts only mean “people getting to have more stuff.” Yeah, buddy, easy for you to pooh-pooh.

Rather than more “stuff” — you know, food, clean water, vaccinations, access to education — he says, “It’s imperative that we see ourselves in a loving relationship to each other and our planet if we are going to survive — collectively and quite possibly individually.”

Hayward suggests that it is Buffett’s environmentalism that is really driving this nonsense.

“There seems to be a deep-seated need for some kinds of people to embrace an apocalyptic outlook. . . And nothing enrages environmentalists more than pointing out to them environmental progress.”

The fact that we have less air and water pollution now with more people than ever on the planet drives environmentalists over the edge.

Sadly, the results of such thinking are hardly innocuous. The NoVo Foundation, with its billion dollars, has the potential to do great harm.

As Hayward points out, it was foundations that thought of themselves as being the most compassionate toward the poor — like Ford and Rockefeller — that ended up supporting “coercive authoritarian policies that resulted in gross violations of human rights,” including forced sterilizations, throughout the developing world.

Sorry, Peter, but “love” is not all we need.