

“7 Hard Problems” is a self-help book for making ourselves (and the world) better.

Why Hard Problems?

You become stronger by working on hard problems, even if you don’t make (much?) progress on them.

Part of the problem with hard problems is that they are “unsolvable”, since both sides of the question typically have some elements of merit or truth to them. The philosopher Immanuel Kant called these kinds of problems “antinomies”¹.

“Seven Hard Problems” (working title) looks at seven difficult antinomies, asking what we can learn from trying to work on them.

How do you work on a Hard Problem?

Carefully. Americans in particular have a touching faith in the power of opposing points of view, but we think of the contest as “win/lose”. You have to work on both sides of a Hard Problem; the truth emerges from the friction.

Do the 7 Hard Problems form a system?

Yes and no. They form a loose series, from “most social” to “most interior.” And I want them to be MECE². But I don’t really believe in systems where everything fits together too neatly.

- 1) **Individual wealth** vs. **commonwealth**. Without individual prosperity, collective wealth degenerates into the “Tragedy of the Commons”, or the more venomous Tragedy of Communism. Without collective prosperity, society falls apart from class warfare.
- 2) **Cooperation** vs. **Competition**. Families, political parties, businesses, education all require both cooperation and competition to run correctly.
- 3) **Local** vs. **Global**. We are told to “think globally, act locally”, but in practice people do just the opposite: we “think locally” (about our tribe, our region, our ethnicity, our section) and “act globally” (death to all infidels, all people of color, all Crusaders). Both global and local points of view are needed.
- 4) **Technology** vs. **People**. Tech-lovers don’t think much about people, and people-lovers don’t think much about tech. We need both.
- 5) **Liberty** vs. **Justice**. Somehow the Right in American politics has gotten a monopoly on “Liberty” and the Left has gotten a monopoly on “Fairness”. We need both in a balanced polity.
- 6) **Science** vs. **Faith**. Science without religion becomes just another religion itself, and not a particularly savory one. Religion without science undoes the entire Enlightenment.
- 7) **“What We Wish”** vs. **“What Is”**. Last but not least: we need to pay attention to “what is” (i.e., Reality), because Reality (global warming, karma, etc.) bats last. But we also need to pay attention to “what we wish”, because without vision and visions we are depressed puddles of nothing. Depressive position vs. paranoid/schizoid position?

¹ Merriam-Webster: “Antinomy: A contradiction between two apparently equally valid principles or between inferences correctly drawn from such principles.”

² **M**utually **E**xclusive, **C**ollectively **E**xhaustive, a McKinsey-ism. They don’t overlap, and together they cover the waterfront.