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On Baseball and Thorstein Veblen's Understanding of Instincts

Working Paper No. 41

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Abstract: This inquiry seeks to establish that, Thorstein Veblen's understanding of instincts can be used to offer insights into to the game of baseball. Veblen's view of instincts serves as a way for understanding different behaviors exhibited by those involved in the game. Behaviors can be broadly categorized into "self-regarding" and "group-regarding". Applying Veblen's understanding of instincts to baseball offers a novel perspective on actions taken and behaviors displayed by those participating in, as well as those who stand behind the game. Some human actions appear to be for the betterment of the game, and these actions align with Veblen's understanding of group-regarding instincts. Other actions appear to be undertaken for the betterment and advancement of individuals, and such actions better align with what are categorized as self-regarding instincts.

JEL Classification Codes: B25, L83, N12

Key Words: Baseball, Group-regarding, Instincts, Self-regarding,

Thorstein Veblen

This inquiry seeks to establish that, Thorstein Veblen's understanding of instincts can offer insight into understanding of the game of baseball. The ideas of instincts are an intricate piece of human behavior in Thorstein Veblen's view. He uses instincts as a way to understand why human beings act certain ways and to explain that these actions are a predisposition of our human nature. There are instincts that are behaviors that favor one's self and others that are to favor the group, or society. I shall inquire into baseball—one of America's preferred pastimes—through the lens of instincts as Veblen has characterized, offer a novel and different perspective on this game. In addition, this inquiry considers why the game is played in a distinct way that is also evolving over time.

Thorstein Veblen on Instincts

In *Veblen in Plain English* (2006) author Ken McCormick explores key ideas that he has gathered from contributions of Thorstein Veblen (1857-1929). One of these key ideas is Veblen's understanding of "instincts". Borrowing in Chapter 1, titled "Instincts" from Veblen, McCormick (2006, 6) defines instincts as "the innate and persistent propensities of human nature." Instincts are not reflexive actions taking no thought, McCormick (2006, 6-7) explains that, there should be no confusion between these "tropisms" and instincts. Instincts are conscious decisions providing

the fundamental goals of human actions. Human behavior is directed by our instincts, they provide us with the purpose for our actions. In his article “Reconsidering Veblen’s Use of Instincts”, William Waller (2013, 1) advances this idea further, purporting that, Veblen argued instincts are the provider of motive of human behavior but the way in the motive is manifested in actual behavior is the function of both culture and the experience of the individual.

McCormick (2006, 7) writes that, instincts can be placed broadly into two distinct categories, the first is group-regarding instincts and the second is self-regarding instincts. Among the group regarding distinction, McCormick (2006, 7-11) notes there are three, “parental bent”, “instinct of workman ship”, and “idle curiosity”. What Veblen considers as the parental bent is the human propensity to place the needs of future generation above the wants and needs of ourselves. Instinct of workmanship, in the view of Veblen, is an innate drive to perform given tasks to the best of our abilities along with the pride taken with the effort. The human condition of wanting to know is what Veblen deemed, idle curiosity. It is the desire to acquire knowledge without thought of reward but just for a broader understanding of life.

Separate from the group-regarding, McCormick (2006, 14-16) displays the self-regarding instincts, of which there are also three, “Self-preservation”, “self-aggrandizement”, and “our predatory instinct”. The most basic of all instincts in

Veblen's view is self-preservation. It is rooted deeply in all animals and seen as likely the strongest of all human instincts. The instinct of self-aggrandizement is the affinity to compare oneself to others, with the goal of making oneself appear better or of a higher social status. This quest for status and our predatory instinct, in Veblen's eye, are closely related. Our predatory instinct supplies the pleasure we gain from having dominance over others. This show of superiority over others brings with it a signal of higher social standing.

Outside of these two distinctions but intertwined with each is the instinct of "emulation". This is not to be confused with imitation, Waller (2013, 7) ascertains that, imitation or copying is less complex, it is less an accumulation of cultural influence and may be a more simplistic human behavior. Emulation is to copy or imitate with the goal of equaling or bettering others. McCormick (2006, 12) posits that, people have natural tendencies to copy, compare, and rank other's performances. The decision of whom we decide to emulate, naturally shows who we rank better at those activities. This decision of who we emulate is what places it in both group-regarding and self-regarding. Emulation of a master workman would certainly fit into the distinction of group-regarding, equaling the craft of a master workman would benefit all of society. To emulate the style of clothing that someone in the elite class is wearing would be emulating self-aggrandizement and be self-regarding.

Waller (2013, 25) accounts that, emulation of consumption and what Veblen refers to as the “leisure class”, those in society that need not work or, as McCormick (2006, 106-108) puts it, who can afford to do nothing, is termed “pecuniary emulation”. The leisure class are those who sit at the head of the societal table, they set the accepted tastes and standards of the community. The rest of the community trying not run contrary to these sets of standards are apt to pecuniary emulation. Many people are not consciously emulating the wealthy and famous. Rich fashion and standards—like manners—infiltrate the entire community. These standards become conventions of what is right, proper, and beautiful. People try to avoid violating these conventions by living up to the community standards.

The way in which the instinct of emulation works in combination with other instincts is of the norm for all instincts. McCormick (2006, 17) emphasizes that, instincts are connected, they interact with one another. Idle curiosity led to the discovery of the wheel, then workmanship made the wheel come to life, this wheel was then used in a cart to transport food for children as the parental bent, then the wheel was stolen as a predatory instinct and used as a mode of transportation in self-aggrandizement which was then emulated by another. No single instinct is dominant at all times, human nature’s complexities tend to blend each together.

Group-Regarding Instincts

I shall now consider the group-regarding instincts that are designated as: parental bent, workmanship, and idle curiosity as these pertain to the game of baseball.

These instincts provide foundation for game and are also critical for its future.

Were it not for these three instincts, betterment would not take place through time and the game would have withered away years ago. It is due to our group-regarding instincts that the game is passed on from generation to generation with each trying to leave it in a better state and more vibrant and appealing to both players as well as fans.

This generational tendency, namely to offer future players a better game than the one played by the previous generation, is tied to the instinct of the *parental bent*. This is manifested in several ways throughout the career of a baseball player. In the beginning we are the recipients and beneficiaries of the parental bent, as the older and more experienced players taking it upon themselves to instruct the younger, not for pecuniary gain but for the explicit benefit of the younger player. This introduction to the game and education of the game from old to young then is instilled in the young player to do the same as he matures. This creates coaches for little league teams up through the college ranks. These coaches are not doing it for any financial gain but for the benefit of the youth and the game going forward. This cycle helps contribute to advances and grow the game as new

techniques, like when hitters would grip the bat with their hands separated. It became taught that gripping the bat with your hands together enabled you to swing the bat faster. This is how young children are taught today when they are first learning the game. Many of these techniques have been learned and taught by each generation of player.

This growth can be seen now in baseball more than ever on a global scale. Baseball is played professionally in more countries today than at any other time in history. Along with that Major League Baseball is now being played in other countries increasing the visibility of the game along with passing on the passion to the youth of new countries. The World Baseball Classic held every other year, is a competition between various countries of the world fielding their best team to compete against other countries best teams. The games are broadcast worldwide for kids to see and learn where the game could possibly take them.

The instinct of workmanship, which McCormick (2006, 10) surmises is closely related to the parental bent, takes place in many areas of baseball. Baseball fields are created all across the nation. Some like those at Wrigley field or Fenway Park have long storied histories but there are many more without the fanfare but have a grounds keeper just as dedicated to keeping the field in the best shape possible. Many of these groundskeepers are paid a lowly wage or are a coach doing it for free, so his team has a place to play. Workmanship can also be observed in

the continually advancing training methods of the athletes playing the game. Many mantras in baseball allude to the instinct, such as “it takes no talent to hustle”.

Showing that the instinct of workmanship has been a staple of the baseball craft from the early days of the game. The best equipment is made to last, and the companies that provide this equipment are the largest and oldest names in the sport, Rawlings, Wilson, and Mizuno. New companies becoming exclusively player owned with these players trying to provide the highest quality equipment to today’s players.

Evolution of the game can be heavily attributed to idle curiosity, from the wood used to make the bats, to the dimensions of the field, and even to the rules that govern the game. Many of the changes made to the game had to first be thought up and then put to experiment, with no goal but to see how it would work. Not all ideas become a part of the game, but much of the game of today has been made possible through the idle curiosity of the past. The ball would never had been created without the first projectile thrown. The first bat, I can only speculate a fallen tree branch, would never have been shaped into a handle and barrel. Many of the individual pieces that make up the entire game from the 1800’s until today were at one time a random thought or experiment with no objective but to see what might happen.

These instinctual actions are passed on to others, many times without knowledge of it happening, through emulation. This has become much easier as technologies have advanced. Early on, to emulate a player one would have had to see them play in person. Once the game gained popularity newspaper articles brought the game to those not able to attend games to see the players. Next, radio broadcasts gave the listening audience a chance to feel as if they were a part of the action. People were able to try and recreate moments and make them their own. With the advent of television, players were now brought into the family living room. Fans young and old could emulate almost all characteristics of their favorite players. If a player was seen helping kids at the hospital, a fan could give a donation or donate their time to the hospital as well, A kid could work to emulate his favorite players swing or pitching delivery, taking time and effort to try and become the same player his idol is.

Not always for good, emulation in baseball has been used in a pecuniary manner most often. Companies would seek out popular players to advertise their products with or without their consent. This can be seen with early tobacco companies predatorily placing cards of players with their products during the turn of the nineteenth century. Seeking for kids to start using tobacco to be like their favorite player. One player, Honus Wagner, the star second baseman for the Pittsburg Pirates had a problem with companies doing this. He told the companies

they could not use his likeness after seeing his card on a pack of cigarettes. Not wanting kids to take up the unhealthy habit, thus showing his parental bent. Today his 1910 baseball card is the most valuable in the world, one sold at auction in 2016 for \$3.12 million.

Self-Regarding Instincts

When a team is not winning, bad culture and self-regarding instincts come to dominate the atmosphere. In the professional landscape once there seems to be no team goal in sight, the focus of many players turns inward to self-preservation. At the Major league level this has two different effects, for the established players it means trying to create the best individual numbers possible to get fruitful contracts in the future. For the unestablished player this is trying to make a good impression and not be demoted to the minor leagues. At the minor league level, it is about trying to continue a professional baseball career. This instinct becomes stronger as the team becomes weaker and weaker as the team becomes stronger.

The predatory instinct is more noticeable once the addition of money enters the equation. When there is no pecuniary gain, the predatory instinct is present in only how the game is played, to outperform one's opponent. Money entices self-interests in the game that were not there before its introduction. It affects more than

just the players, it affects ownership, and fans, along with the non-interested public. Ownership is trying to create the biggest earning pool possible and the makings of the earning pool is the fanbase. Teams will do everything in their power to stop opposing teams from taking any portion of their market share. This was evident when the San Francisco Giants blocked the move of the Athletics from Oakland to San Jose, which is much more bountiful both in people and wealth, which could be argued would be good for all of baseball. San Jose as a current minor league affiliate of the Giants is their fan base and they were willing to fight with any means necessary to defend it.

Fans play a large role; markets are driven by who can grab the largest share, and teams that have a history of winning have the upper hand. Players enjoy having a large personal fanbase too. There are many reasons for this, one is that people inherently want to be liked and to have a large fanbase is to have many people liking you. Two the more fans a player has, like a team, the more earning potential they have. wanting to procure as many fans as possible can be shown by the instinct of self-aggrandizement. In trying to be noticed many players try and make things they do seem better than other players performing in similar ways. Hitters throwing their bat in the air after hitting a homerun, known as bat flipping. Closing pitchers having a special ceremony on the mound after recording the last out of the game. It can also be seen in how players present themselves on the field,

wearing attention grabbing clothes for example. In marketing it is called building their brand, but I think Veblen would have called it Self-aggrandizing.

Conclusion

This inquiry has sought to establish that Thorstein Veblen's understanding of instincts can offer a penetrating understanding of the game of baseball. Relating Veblen's understanding of group-regarding and self-regarding instincts offers a novel way of viewing the game of baseball, as well as the adaptations that have led to the game in contemporary times. Through these group-regarding instincts of parental bent, workmanship, and idle curiosity, different generations enjoy the game and continue to pass on its many lessons learned from the past. Clearly, the self-preservation, predatory, and self-aggrandizement instincts are evident in baseball. When a team is performing poorly, self-preservation can kick in. Contracts and the associated salaries can prove a motivating factor, bringing predatory instincts to the fore. Self-aggrandizement can also be associated with the seeking of fame and celebrity status. When viewing these actions as instincts of human nature, as Veblen suggests, and not specific to baseball player, we can gain a better understanding of the game that can be played both for love of sport as well as for the love of fortune and fame.

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