

Remarks on Howard Margolis

I first met Howard at a conference in 1982 in a strange little village in Northern Denmark. There was nothing to do but eat fish and drink ale. So Howard and I spent our time going for long walks and taking photos of bleak farmhouses. Next we met at a conference at Dalhousie University, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Taking Howard to the airport, we passed a lake and Howard fancied a swim. I still remember him dashing through the airport leaving a trail of puddles.

In 1985 I was at Caltech by myself for the year. Howard and Joan were at Irvine at the time, and they showed me great friendship. Howard even tried to teach me windsurfing. Good fun, but fairly terrifying.

Howard was a singular scholar who published many books. The first of these was on Selfishness, Altruism and Rationality. This was followed by a number of very original books on risk, perception, mental traps and beliefs.

I think he found the pure model building that has become something of the rage in economics to be very annoying; he delighted in pointing out how some of the models were quite ridiculous. He was more interested in deeper aspects of cognition: why we find calculation of probabilities very difficult: why we use certain rules of behavior, why we look for certain kinds of patterns.

Personally, I find the work he did on the scientific revolution to be the most interesting. We all know something important happened about 1600: Copernicus, Galileo, Kepler, and then Newton. The magnificent edifice of science that keeps our society going was started by a few people seeing the world in a radically different way. Howard wanted to understand what caused this change.

His other work was on how people are willing to work for the common good as long as they feel they are not being exploited. Howard's ideas on this are of great importance, and will turn out to be crucial for understanding many aspects of human behavior.

Liz and I visited Joan and Howard in their place by the lake just a few weeks ago, and enjoyed a drink together, while watching the sun go down on the distant towers of Chicago. This time we talked about a paper I was working on, a history piece about social orders. Howard liked some of the ideas and made a number of very nice suggestions. As always, it was a great pleasure to talk to Howard, his quick and subtle mind saw how to make the argument more persuasive.

I shall miss him.

Norman Schofield

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