

## Dialogue Concerning Two Chief World Systems

by Chris Frank  
for a seminar on Galileo and Hobbes

Once there sat a man at his desk. Hard at work, he noticed an ant crawling across his legal brief. "Hey!" he said unto the insect, and he raised his hand brush it away, or perhaps to strike it dead.

"Hey what?" replied the ant. "I am but fulfilling my purpose," it said. "Can I say the same of you?" The man, taken aback by the question, put down his hand and thought. The ant, keen to talk its way out of a jam, continued, "Ants must eat, so I will find food. And when I do, I'll tell my comrades and then find more."

MAN:

*That's* your purpose? To find food for others to eat?

ANT:

Yes. There are many like it, but this one is mine. Other ants move earth, so that I may have a home. Others fight, to protect my home. We all fit together, and together we all move forward. But you, sir, seem skeptical... is not your purpose similar to one of these?

MAN:

My purpose? My purpose is to be happy.

ANT:

Happy?

MAN:

Yes. Let me explain it to you. When you work, it doesn't benefit you personally. You call your friends, they eat the food you found, and then you're off to work more, with a full stomach but not much else. For me, this isn't so.

When I work, I get paid – that is, in exchange for my labor, I receive money, which I can exchange for other men's labor, or the products thereof. I work so that in my free time I can pursue what makes me happy. While your job is an end in itself (and not a very good one), mine is a means to an end (and a great one, because it has made me a rich man). Being a rich man, I don't have to waste much time working. I do what I please. I can see from the look on your face that you're puzzled, so let me explain further.

Today, before you interrupted, I was playing music at the piano. Later tonight I'll eat an expensive meal with a beautiful woman, and afterwards we'll go to the theatre. Still later, other men and women will join me at my home, where we'll drink wine and discuss whatever pleases us, until whatever hour we please, whereupon we'll rest and then do it all again tomorrow. Or maybe we'll do something different, but the difference will be in logistics only, for the greater goal is the same: happiness.

ANT:

Forgive me if I misunderstand, but what you're describing seems absurd. You work as rarely as you can, squandering your time on activities that produce nothing. When you *do* work, it's not to meet the needs of those who depend on you, but to be paid? "You needn't do more work until I am gone," your money says unto you. How alarmingly inefficient! Your race must progress much more slowly than mine; for while we are a perfect machine, your parts must spend time learning how – or even why – to work together.

MAN:

Ah but there's so much more to life than efficiency! Though, indeed, the human race gets done a great deal; we've done things so tremendous, you'd scarcely believe them. But you needn't just take me at my word. Indeed, it must be difficult for you to understand something you've never seen firsthand. The system I'm attempting to explain lacks much resemblance to yours, and may well be entirely unthinkable for you. Poor ant! The real world is so much bigger than yours, and you yourself are so small. Perhaps instead of trying to convince you with words, I can show you what I mean. Come with me tonight, to dinner, to the theatre, and to the party!

ANT:

I find your snobbery insulting, and I have spent too much time away from my work as it is. Ants must eat, and I will find food.

MAN:

What if you don't? Someone else will, and your comrades will be just fine. You're replaceable. Hell, *I'm* replaceable; I have no control over that, but I do have control over my happiness. Come with me tonight, and tomorrow you'll find your comrades fed, housed, and protected.

ANT:

You're correct in that it's difficult for me to understand what you're saying, but wrong in thinking I still wish to. I will not go with you because I may come back tomorrow and find myself replaced, and then I would have no purpose. I will not go with you because I don't trust you. I will not go with you because I'm afraid of you, and that knowing your world might change mine for the worse.

MAN:

My world will indeed change yours, but for the better. You'll see, my friend.

And the man put the ant inside a small glass jar, and brought the ant to dinner anyway. Just getting to the restaurant was a surreal experience: the ant traveled more distance than he could ever previously have imagined, more quickly than he could comprehend. And he tasted food better than he'd ever known, with combinations of flavors that he didn't have the words to describe. And from where he sat on the table, he could see not just the man (and his beautiful woman), but a hundred men and women, all enjoying such wonderful food.

Then the journey to the theatre was another unfathomable distance, but this time the ant was less impressed and more aware. And the theatre was new, powerful, and exciting; he didn't always know what it meant, but it moved him so. And he felt many emotions for the first time; he didn't have the words to describe them but he soaked them up hungrily. And the voyage home was long, exciting, but now only slightly impressive; whereas the party that awaited them was longer, more exciting, and wonderfully impressive.

The ant tasted wine for the first time, and felt its delightful effects. He laughed, for the first time in his life, with the man and his guests. They listened to recorded music, singly loudly along, and eventually the ant sang, too. He practiced the art of conversation, and they spoke of politics, philosophy, religion, sex, art, and money: the most important things in the world. The discourse between the twelve men and women present stretched the ant's mind by more than twelve times his first conversation with the man alone; their ideas were more than the sum of their parts. By the end of the night, the world was a very different place.

And indeed the night did end, guests grew weary and left, and the man went to bed with his date from dinner. The ant, too excited to sleep, watched television. All night. The sun he saw rise the next morning was not the same sun he was used to; had it grown smaller?

Over a breakfast of steak, eggs, and coffee, the ant looked at his friend the man and began to speak.

ANT:

I must admit, though I was once skeptical and afraid, that there is more to life than efficiency. And though you couldn't explain to me how this was true, you were able to *show* me, and now I believe I understand enough that we can speak productively. If I may, I wish to return to something you said yesterday, which, in my ignorant state, seemed hardly relevant, but today seems most important. "Being a rich man," you said, "I don't have to waste much time working." My question to you is this: are all men rich?

MAN:

Certainly not! All men strive to be rich, but not all succeed.

ANT:

If that's so, then are you not an exception among the world of men? Don't most men work as do ants, while a few sit atop the machine and enjoy happiness at the expense of the workers? If our purpose is to be happy, and one is happier the less one works, how are those who must work (to make your happiness possible) ever to be happy themselves? This seems to me most unjust, and most upsetting.

MAN:

Certainly not! It's true that some must work more than others, but everyone who tries hard enough can make time to be happy. Indeed, some people work jobs that pay less than mine, but the work itself makes them happy. The actors in the play we so enjoyed last night were, in fact, working, but not for much pay: passion is their motivation! The songs which we merrily sang along to at yesterday's party were recorded by musicians, who get paid just to play! So you see,

my friend, there are many ways of balancing work and happiness. You can work a job you dislike for great pay, or you can work a job you love for less pay.

ANT:

I believe I understand your defense, but I remain unconvinced. It's incomplete; for can't one work a job one loves for great pay, or a job one despises for little pay, or any combination of the two extremes?

MAN:

Certainly. I've worked plenty of bad jobs for little pay! Sometimes it's necessary. But what *isn't* necessary is that you stay there. You keep your wits about you, you work hard, and eventually an opportunity for a better job will prevent itself. It's up to you to recognize it and take it.

Let me say this another, simpler way. In the real world, you can't always be happy, but you can always be in the pursuit of happiness. And, almost always, you can catch it. If that doesn't make you understand, then perhaps, alas, it's beyond your comprehension.

ANT:

No, no, I see! All that you have said is plausible and well sugared with the sweet honey of rhetoric and music. But it leads me to a radical conclusion, one which I can barely make escape my lips... I have a new purpose!. A better purpose, one that is even more important than finding food. *I must tell my comrades of the real world, and teach them to live in it.*

MAN:

Remember, friend, that telling them may not be enough. You may have to show them. And since seeing you so delighted with the world makes me appreciate it all the more, I'll happily help you any way I can.

And so together the ant and the man showed the other ants the world of men, the real world. They showed them art, poetry, sports, music, literature, theatre, dance, cinema, mathematics, science; all the things the ants had, all this time, never known existed. And their minds stretched, and their world stretched, and they were happy.

"Thank you," said the ant to the man. "You've changed the way I see the world, helped me show it to my friends, and thus forever changed the world we see. I will always be grateful." And the ant and the man took their leave of each other, the man to live in the world of men, and the ant to live in the world of ants, which now were more alike than not.

And, for a short while, the ants were happy. But all of them were so busy being authors and athletes and artists, none could be bothered to find food; everyone had his happiness to explore! Supply began to run low, and the ants noticed too late. When, finally, they did, there was a great fight over who should find food and who could keep pursuing happiness; famine struck the land, and ants began to go hungry.

Out of desperation, one by one, the ants bitterly put down their pens, and each set off to find food. For himself. They were a people divided, hungry, and defenseless, and their neighbor

colony to the East – a colony based on traditional ant values – saw opportunity.

The new world never knew what had hit it. The invasion was swift, left many dead, and the stunned survivors were forced to integrate back into the old world of ants.

The ant found himself working as a forager again. Ants must eat, so he would find food. And when he did, he would tell his comrades, and then find more. They all fit together, and together they all moved forward. But his heart wasn't in it. What used to fulfill him so now left him empty; there was a whole world of which he would never again be a part.

Was he happier feeling so small, but knowing the world's true size? Or would he rather be ignorant, but feel big? He spent much time covering distances he knew were really very small. He thought as he foraged, and he found food but no answers. Food but no answers. Food but no answers. But one day he found a book.

It was the Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems, by Galileo Galilei, and the ant read it, remembering his dialogues with the man. Just to be sure, he read it again. And he learned that the world – the cosmos – was bigger than man; that the Sun, not the Earth, was at its center; that the Earth was but one of many planets. And, though he was even smaller than before, he felt bigger. The ant smiled, and with purpose in his step, he set off to see an old friend.

"You," he told the man, "are an ant."