Oh, the Economics You’ll Find in Dr. Seuss!

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by Ben Miller and Michael Watts

**Abstract**

We provide a list of economic concepts and issues covered in all of the children’s books

published by Theodor Geisel, writing under the pen names of Dr. Seuss, Theo LeSieg, or Rosetta

Stone. We discuss his treatment of the concepts and issues that appear most often and that are

treated in greater depth, especially in his works for relatively older readers. We begin with a brief

biography to show that much of the economic content in these works reflects Geisel’s personal

experiences or the major historical events of his lifetime. Some of it may also be attributable to

college courses in economics that both he and his first wife completed.

Key words: Introductory Economics, Seuss, children’s literature

JEL codes: A20, A21, A22

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**Biography1**

Theodor Seuss Geisel (1904-1991) was born in Springfield, Massachusetts. His

grandparents emigrated from Germany and they and his parents were active in the large German

community in Springfield. By 1919 the family owned one of the largest breweries in the

Northeast. In World War I the family strongly supported the American war effort, but Theodor

was sometimes referred to as “the German brewer’s kid,” and the family began to call themselves

Americans instead of German Americans. During the war Theodor collected tin foil and sold war

bonds, leading to a disastrous stage appearance at an awards program featuring former president

Theodore Roosevelt, which contributed to Geisel’s lifelong stage fright.

Prohibition reduced the family’s income but they never faced poverty. Geisel attended

Dartmouth College from 1921-25, and took two principles of economics classes described in the

college catalog as designed “to train for citizenship and business life” (Morgan and Morgan,

1995, p. 29).2 He was a bright but not particularly serious or dedicated student, well liked but

shy. His main social and creative outlet was the college humor magazine, The Jack-o-Lantern,

where he worked with Norman Maclean (the author of A River Runs Through It) and succeeded

Maclean as the editor in his senior year. But Geisel was quietly removed from those duties by the

college after hosting a party at which alcohol was served.

When his father asked what he was going to do after graduation, Geisel reported –

overoptimistically as it turned out – that he had received a Dartmouth scholarship to attend

Oxford for graduate study in English. His proud father had the award announced in the

Springfield newspaper, so after Theodor applied for the scholarship but did not receive it the

family paid to send him to Oxford. Graduate coursework and academic research did not suit him,

however – his class notebooks from both Dartmouth and Oxford are full of Seuss-style drawings.

He dropped out of Oxford after one year to tour Europe, often traveling with his family and future

first wife.

Geisel returned to the United States, married, and after a short period of financial

struggling in New York City enjoyed great success with advertising drawings and slogans for

companies including Standard Oil, NBC, General Electric, and Ford. He illustrated two popular

books, and wrote humorous essays and drew cartoons for the magazine Judge including the

cartoon that first attracted the notice of Standard Oil. Some of the cartoons appeared with the pen

name of Seuss, his mother’s maiden name, which he initially pronounced in German to rhyme

with “voice,” not goose. He soon added the title Dr. to reflect his father’s unfulfilled hopes for

his graduate degree at Oxford.

After writing a popular catch-phrase for a Standard Oil insecticide, “Quick, Henry, the

Flit!” and developing a series of gasoline ads featuring Seuss creatures, he was financially secure

and moved to a large apartment on Park Avenue. For rest and inspiration he and his wife

travelled all over the world. With her strong support he began writing Dr. Seuss children’s books,

at first with no success. The first Seuss book, And to Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street, was

turned down by 27 publishers until a chance sidewalk meeting with a friend from Dartmouth who

was working at Vanguard Press led to its publication in 1937. This and the later Seuss books

received mostly excellent reviews, but at that time the children’s literature market was small and

Seuss’ hallmark color illustrations made his books relatively expensive, given the existing

printing technology. Royalties from the first books were not nearly enough to replace his

freelance income. Bennett Cerf then offered a more generous contract to publish any books he

wrote, promising more extensive marketing support, so Seuss left Vanguard. His first Random

House books did not sell any better; but Horton Hatches the Egg, published in the fall of 1940,

was a major success. Other work in World War II, followed by a short stint working as a

scriptwriter in Hollywood, resulted in the next Seuss book not being published for seven years.

At the start of World War II Geisel drew political cartoons for a New York newspaper,

PM, again published as Dr. Seuss and sometimes noting that he was the “one and only Dr. Seuss

of ‘Quick-Henry-the-Flit’ fame.” The cartoons led to a contract with the Army, where he worked

with Frank Capra, Meredith Wilson, and the animators Chuck Jones (later of “Roadrunner” fame)

and Fritz Freleng. Geisel worked on a series of animated training films featuring the character

Private Snafu, and helped produce the training film Your Job in Germany for the occupation

program. He was ordered to include a no-fraternization policy with which he strongly disagreed

in the film script, and because of that policy he later worked to have the film rescinded. After the

war he returned to writing and drawing children’s books, with great success due partly to new

printing methods that made color illustrations far less expensive.

His most influential book was The Cat in the Hat (1957), in which Seuss adapted the

reformist pedagogical ideas of Rudolf Franz Flesch on how to teach reading, by stressing phonics,

rhymes, and illustrations rather than memorization and word recognition from pure text (Menard

2002). It has also been argued (Lerer 2008) that the Cat is written as a counter-culture, anti-

Organization Man character, along the lines of Alan Ginsberg’s poem “Howl” and Elvis Presley’s

“You Ain’t Nothin But a Hound Dog,” which appeared in the same year. But other critics have

noted that most readers (old and young) are more sympathetic to the plight of the goldfish and

children than the Cat.

The Seuss legacy is indisputably important today, and has been for more than half a

century. Bennett Cerf claimed that of all the Random House authors (including William Faulkner

and Eugene O’Neill) only Geisel was a true genius. Geisel repeatedly said he was just lucky,

often citing such unlikely events as those that led to the wife of a Standard Oil executive seeing

the cartoon that led to his lucrative freelance contracts while waiting at a beauty salon, the chance

meeting on a New York sidewalk with the college friend who worked at Vanguard Press, and his

inspiration for Horton Hatches the Egg – which was having two drawings blown around on his

desk when he left an office window open, resulting in a composite image of an elephant sitting in

a tree. Cerf and Geisel were clearly both partly right, but with even this brief history and Geisel’s

interests and abilities, it is not especially surprising that many economic concepts and themes

appear in Dr. Seuss.

**The Seuss, LeSieg, and Rosetta Stone Books**

Table 1 lists all of the books published under the pen name Dr. Seuss, a dozen books

published as Theo LeSieg (Geisel spelled backwards), and one published as Rosetta Stone.

Geisel did not illustrate the LeSieg books himself, which all appeared in the Beginner Book series

at Random House. The books are listed in chronological order by original publication date, with

a summary list or description of economic concepts and themes we find represented in each of the

works. In some cases we found no substantive economic content, and so we simply list

“nothing.” Books from the Beginner Book series are noted with an asterisk. One book, Gerald

McBoing Boing, originally appeared as an Oscar-winning animated feature. Several books

appeared posthumously. We do not discuss other forms of work published as Dr. Seuss, such as

the editorial cartoons or his one feature-length movie, The 5,000 Fingers of Dr. T.

[insert Table 1 about here]

To provide a better sense of the range of the economics in these books, we discuss several

groups of concepts and themes that appear most often and in greatest depth, after first reviewing

the economics content – or often the lack of such content – in the books from the Random House

“Beginner Book” series, including some in the “Bright and Early,” and “Read Aloud” series.

Geisel co-Directed this series with Phyllis Cerf, developing books for young, beginning readers or

even pre-readers, using a small number of short words with illustrations to allow children to

understand the stories even if they could not read. The text is usually presented in rhymes, and

sometimes as tongue twisters. Understandably, there tends to be less economics in these books

than in the other Geisel books.

There are some notable exceptions in the Beginner Books, however. For example, in Mr.

Brown Can Moo! Can You? (1970) there are examples of specialization, training, education, and

experience goods. Great Day for UP (1974) is about capital goods and toys that help people get

“up,” including stairs, ladders, elevators, Ferris wheels, and kites. My Book about Me (1969)

catalogues personal and family characteristics (including height, weight, wearing glasses or not,

and types of houses and other possessions in different countries), personal habits and preferences

(such as what the reader wants for his or her birthday – “But if it costs too much, forget it.” –

p.25), different modes of transportation used to get to school, and different jobs a child might

want to do after growing up. The Shape of Me and Other Stuff (1972) features examples of

different goods and services and differences in personal characteristics.

Although there is very little economics in Dr. Seuss’s ABC (1963), which features alliterative

entries for letters of the alphabet, the entry for S offers a nice example of diminishing marginal

utility: “Silly Sammy Slick sipped six sodas and got sick, sick, sick” (p. 44). I Can Read with My

Eyes Shut! (1978) encourages readers to invest in human capital, including economic

understanding. On p. 23 Seuss writes, “You can learn about the price of ice” and in the

accompanying picture of a bucket of ice a sign reads “Nice ice for sale: Ten cents a pail.” (p. 23)

One of the LeSieg books, Come Over to My House (1966), discusses and illustrates substitutes

in production, product differentiation, the distribution of income/wealth, and happiness as a

function of absolute and relative income and consumption. Other LeSieg books illustrate simple

ideas broadly related to human capital, such as the importance of good dental care and learning

how to print/write.

Turning to the Seuss books for older readers, the frequency, amount, and depth of economics

coverage all increase notably.

**Scarcity, Choice, and Opportunity Cost**

Seuss presents the basic economic problem of wants, resources, and opportunity cost in

several books. In Hunches in Bunches (1982) a young character considers the different things he

might do (such as eating, playing football, or things that have more delayed gratifications). After

recognizing that choosing to do one thing means giving up doing something else, he decides to

eat six hot dogs for lunch – perhaps not the wisest consumer choice, but at least a start toward

evaluating the costs and benefits of different choices.

In Seuss’s extended imaginary alphabet book, On Beyond Zebra (1955), he uses the letter

Nuh to introduce Nutches. These are creatures that nest in small caves, but there are never

enough caves for all of the Nutches. In Happy Birthday to You! (1959) Seuss describes the land

of Katroo, where a special bird makes sure that on your birthday you get everything you wish for.

The narrator of the story wishes he could do that for the children reading the book, but knows and

says that is really not possible, so they can’t really have everything they want.

Two other Seuss books provide the most extended treatments of scarcity, choice, and

opportunity cost. In I Had Trouble Getting to Solla Sollew (1965) an initially naïve youth

discovers the trials and tribulations of the ordinary business of life, first by stubbing his toe and

then by having troubles (embodied in a creature called a Quilligan Quail) sneak up on him from

behind when he focuses all of his attention ahead to watch for rocks to avoid stubbing his toe

again. He never had trouble before and doesn’t want any more, so when other characters tell him

of lands where there are no troubles he sets off to go there, only to learn the hard way that troubles are part of life everywhere. He experiences floods, military conscription, shirking coworkers, and other problems large and small. Eventually he decides to go home and prepare to deal with whatever arises: “But I’ve bought a big bat./

 I’m all ready, you see./

Now my troubles are going/

To have troubles with me!” (p. 56)

In Oh, the Places You’ll Go! (1990), Seuss presents a generally optimistic and uplifting view of the choices young people will make in their lives:

You’re on your own. And you know what you know.

And YOU are the guy who’ll decide where to go.

You’ll look up and down streets. Look ‘em over with care.

About some you will say, ‘I don’t choose to go there.’

With your head full of brains and your shoes full of feet

you’re too smart to go down any not-so-good street. (pp. 2-4)

But Seuss also warns of hard times and choices in everyone’s life:

Wherever you go, you will top all the rest.

Except when you don’t.

Because sometimes you won’t.

I’m sorry to say so,

but, sadly, it’s true (pp. 15-17)

…And the chances are, then,

that you’ll be in a Slump.

And when you’re in a Slump,

you're not in for much fun.

Un-slumping yourself

is not easily done. (pp. 18-19)

In other books, unfortunately, Seuss muddies the ideas of scarcity, choice, and opportunity

cost by introducing the wants vs. needs distinction that often appears in works by social studies

educators writing for elementary students. See, for example, The Lorax (1971), the “Yertle the

Turtle” (1958) short story, and Dr. Seuss’s Sleep Book (1962).

**Happiness/Utility, Income, Consumption, and Relative Income and Consumption**

The relationship between income, relative income, and happiness/utility has been a topic

of longstanding discussion and debate in economics (Clark, Frijters, and Shields 2008.) These

topics arise frequently in the Seuss books, sometimes linked to issues of democratic and nondemocratic

political systems. For example, the “King Looie Katz” story in I Can Lick 30 Tigers

Today! And Other Stories (1969) depicts a hierarchical society in which King Looie decides

someone should hold his tail up out of the dirt. That cat wants a tail holder, too, and this

continues until every cat except King Looie is holding a higher-ranking cat’s tail. But the very

last cat in line has no one to hold his tail, yells “I QUIT,” and throws down the tail he was

holding. The whole system unravels as this is repeated all the way up to the king’s tail.

Similarly, in Yertle the Turtle and Other Stories (1959), starting from a situation in which

all of the turtles in a pond are warm, well fed, and happy, the King of the Pond, Yertle, wants a

higher place to view the world because he believes he is the king of all he can see. He commands

the other turtles to stand on top of each other and climbs to the top, hoping the turtle tower will be

higher than the moon. Mack, the turtle at the bottom of the stack, starts to hurt and then burps.

The tower collapses and Yertle falls into the mud:

And today the great Yertle, that Marvelous he,

Is King of the Mud. That is all he can see.

And the turtles, of course … all the turtles are free

As turtles and, maybe, all creatures should be. (p. 29)

The Seuss stories dealing with happiness and relative income are not always linked to

political structures. “Gertrude McFuzz,” also in Yertle the Turtle and Other Stories (1959),

features a young bird-girl who is sad because her one droopy tail feather is plainer than other

birds’ tails. When she sees a bird with two feathers she complains to her uncle, a doctor, that it

just isn’t fair. She spurns his advice to be happy with the feather she has, and eventually he gives

in to her complaining and tells her she can grow another feather by eating a berry from the pill-

berry vine that grows on the top of a distant hill. Instead of eating just one berry Gertrude eats all

 which leaves her with so many tail feathers she is unable to fly. When the new feathers have

to be plucked out so that she can get home, she is left sorer but wiser:

And, finally, when all of the pulling was done,

Gertrude, behind her, again had just one…

That one little feather she had as a starter.

But now that’s enough, because now she is smarter. (p. 46)

In Daisy-Head Mayzie (1994), one day at school Mayzie finds a flower growing out of her

head. This turns out to be a symbiotic relationship: when the flower wilts until it is watered

Mayzie wilts too. The flower makes Mayzie famous and she signs with an agent to capitalize on

her notoriety, but fame and wealth leave her lonely and unhappy. She believes nobody loves her

until the daisy shows her otherwise – dropping one petal at a time to let her count they love her,

or they love her not. Reassured she returns home, goes back to school, and has a happier life.

The daisy never grows out of her head again, except “now and then.” (p. 44)

In Did I Ever Tell You How Lucky You Are? (1973) Seuss takes a different tack, pointing

out that no matter how bad young readers may think things are in their lives, others have it worse:

It’s a troublesome world. All the people who’re in it

are troubled with troubles almost every minute.

You ought to be thankful, a whole heaping lot,

for the places and people you’re lucky you’re not! (p. 6)

This is especially true for those who believe parents or teachers are working them too hard, and

Seuss provides as examples of others who are truly overworked the construction workers building

the Bunglebong Bridge over Boober Bay at Bumm Ridge; Ali Sardi, who has to mow a huge yard

of fast-growing grass during the week and moonlights painting flagpoles on Sunday just to make

ends meet; Mr. Potter, who has a job dotting i’s and crossing t’s at the I and T factory in Van

Nuys; a bee-watcher who has to monitor a lazy bee; and Professor de Breeze, who has spent 32

years trying to teach Irish ducks how to read Jivvanese.

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The Seuss character who learns most about happiness and its relationship to consumption

is, of course, the Grinch. Like Dicken’s Scrooge the Grinch hates Christmas, and he goes even

further than Scrooge by trying to stop Christmas by stealing all of the presents, decorations, and

food for the Whos’ holiday feast. He gleefully anticipates making the Whos miserable, only to

discover something more basic about Christmas when he hears the townspeople singing carols

despite his grand-scale theft. The Grinch’s heart grows three sizes that day – at the beginning of

the story it is two sizes too small – and he return everything he has stolen. He is invited to join

the celebration and feast, and even given the honor of carving the roast beast.

**Prices and Demand Factors (Tastes and Preferences, Product Variety and Differentiation,**

**Diminishing Marginal Utility, Experience Goods, Demographic Changes)**

The most direct comparison of factors related to product prices in Seuss appears in several

passages from his book of tongue twisters, Oh Say Can You Say? (1979). Finey’s diner features

only the finest and freshest of fish (pp. 2-3). Later, “talk[ing] about money,” if you fly someplace

you should leave your Grox at home because the airlines will double your fare if you take it along

(p. 10). Then, considering thimbles and shingles:

what do you think costs more?...

A Simple Thimble

or

a Single Shingle?

A simple thimble could cost less

Than a single shingle would, I guess.

So I think that the single shingle should

cost more than the simple thimble would. (p. 11)

Many of the unique, imaginary products in the Seuss books turn out to be experience

goods, with demand being too high or low until characters try them. As noted earlier, Gertrude

McFuzz decides to grow dozens of tail feathers to engage in conspicuous consumption and make

her friend jealous, only to learn that having so many feathers is costly and even painful. In Green

Eggs and Ham (1960), after rejecting Sam-I-Am’s advice for almost the entire book, the narrator

finally tries the dish and admits they are good, and good complements, too. In Bartholomew

Cubbins and the Oobleck (1949), Bartholomew is a page who serves King Derwin of Didd. The

king wants more variety in the things that so predictably come from the sky during the year –

sunshine in the summer, fog in the fall, snow in the winter, rain in the spring – and commands the

court magicians to make something new. Despite Bartholomew’s repeated warnings and the

magicians’ admitting they don’t know what oobleck will be because they have never made it

before, the king makes them proceed. It turns out to be a gooey green disaster that dangerously

clogs up everything, and is only eliminated when Bartholomew gets angry and speaks to the king

in ways and tones nobody has ever used before, telling him to admit it was his fault and that he is

sorry. The king does, which turns out to be the magical counter spell. From that day on the king

agrees that rain, fog, sunshine, and snow are enough for anyone, including any king.

In “The Glunk that Got Thunk,” a story in I Can Lick 30 Tigers Today! and Other Stories

(1969), the Glunk is an unwelcome guest unintentionally invented/”thunk” by Sis. The Glunk

calls its mother long distance at a rate of $10 an hour – no doubt reflecting regulated monopoly

rates for long distance calls at the time the book was written – and talks for hours. Sis tells the

Glunk her father can’t afford that and will go broke, but the Glunk keeps calling until Sis

eventually manages to unthink him. “Too Many Daves” from The Sneetches and Other Stories

(1961) is a simple story about how diminishing marginal utility should have led to a mother to

limit her demand for naming all 23 of her children Dave, but did not.

In The 500 Hats of Bartholomew Cubbins (1938) Seuss depicts a hierarchical society in

which peasants must doff their hats to King Derwin, who lives in a magnificent palace with a

“mighty view that makes him feel mighty important” looking out from his balcony. Bartholomew

and other peasants have the same view in reverse, looking up to the palace, and feel “mighty

small.” (pp 2-4). Bartholomew wears an old hat that has been in the family for three generations,

reflecting sumptuary laws and tradition. One day at the market the King passes by and

Bartholomew removes his hat, but the King thinks he did not because a new, identical hat

magically appears on Bartholomew’s head. That is repeated 499 times as various officials and

royal servants, royal relatives, and even archers try to get the hats off; but from the second hat on

as each hat is removed the new hat replacing it is increasingly elaborate and stylish. The Grand

Duke suggests pushing Bartholomew off of a castle tower to settle the problem once and for all,

but the king forbids that. Instead, the king’s desire for the more elaborate hats becomes

increasingly stronger, and finally he offers to buy the 500th hat for 500 pieces of gold.

Bartholomew accepts the offer, which ends the problem because no new hat appears.

Another example of product differentiation and consumers’ demand for variety (this time

for imaginary creatures) is the central theme of If I Ran the Zoo (1950). Young Gerald McGrew

says lions and tigers just aren’t unusual enough to attract customers any more, so he would open

the cages and let all of them go – blithely ignoring liability and negligence issues – to be replaced

by Seusian creatures that will make customers exclaim “What this zoo must be worth!/ It’s the

gol-darndest zoo/ On the face of the earth!” (p. 52)

In The Lorax (1971) Seuss shows the Onceler correctly predicting strong consumer

demand for products made from Truffula trees. The Onceler explains:

I’m being quite useful. This thing is a Thneed.

A Thneed’s a Fine-Something-That-All-People-Need!”

It’s a shirt. It’s a sock. It’s a glove. It’s a hat.

But it has other uses. Yes, far beyond that.

You can use it for carpets. For pillows! For sheets!

Or curtains! Or covers for bicycle seats!”

The Lorax said,

“Sir! You are crazy with greed.

There is no one on earth

who would buy that fool Thneed!” (p.24)

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But the Lorax is wrong, and soon admits (p. 26) “You never can tell what some people will buy.”

Seuss also illustrates demographic factors related to changes in the demand for various

products, including various kinds of health care – glasses, dentures, and prescription drugs -- in

his one book for those who are still young at heart but not in body, You’re Only Old Once (1986).

He also describes the bureaucratic costs of health care insurance:

When at last we are sure

you’ve been properly pilled,

then a few paper forms

must be properly filled

so that you and your heirs

may be properly billed. (p. 39)

**Production: Specialization, the Division of Labor, Costs, Competition, Human Capital,**

**Shirking and Monitoring Costs, the Work-Leisure Tradeoff**

Seuss writes often and extensively about concepts and issues related to production by firms

and individuals. Individual characters are often seen facing the work-leisure trade-off, and not

surprisingly there is a high premium on leisure by many Seuss characters. That can be true even

if the work they do is recognized as important and rewarding, as in The King’s Stilts (1939) and

Horton Hatches the Egg (1940). The King starts working every morning at 5 a.m., signing papers

presented by his dour chief of staff, Lord Droon. The King’s most important work is to protect

the kingdom’s wall of Dike Trees from regular assaults by Nizzards, mainly by daily inspections

of the trees’ roots and commanding the 1,000 Patrol Cats who fight off the Nizzards, with half of

the cats patrolling by day and half at night. But by 5 p.m. the king’s work is finished and he puts

on his stilts to play. Everyone in the kingdom likes seeing the King enjoy his well earned

recreation except Lord Droon, who fits H.L Menken’s description of a Puritan: a person who

fears that someone, somewhere, is having fun. Droon hides the stilts but tells the King the

citizens did it because they wanted the King to behave more like a king. That sends the King into

a severe depression and he neglects his work. As things fall apart the King’s page, Eric, sees

what is wrong. Eric finds and returns the stilts to the King just in time to have him recover and

win a great battle against the Nizzards. Lord Droon is revealed as the culprit who stole the stilts,

put in isolation, and fed a steady diet of Nizzard meat. The King and Eric still work hard all day

long, but in the evening when they play they really play.

In Horton Hatches the Egg (1940) Horton’s reward for hatching the egg is also well earned,

and Mayzie is clearly presented as an unscrupulous shirker:

I’m tired and I’m bored

And I’ve kinks in my leg

From sitting, just sitting here day after day.

It’s work! How I hate it!

I’d much rather play!

I’d take a vacation, fly off for a rest

If I could find someone to stay on my nest! (p. 1)

When it appears Mayzie may get to reclaim the hatching egg she abandoned to Horton, acting as

the biological mother in a custody battle, the issue is resolved when the egg hatches and everyone

sees that the hatchling has morphed while in Horton’s care. The new creature can fly using its

large, elephant-like ears, and in all other respects it resembles and clearly belongs with Horton,

not Mayzie. Horton’s faithfulness and unshirking work ethic are featured again, as well as his

special ability to hear faint noises, in Horton Hears a Who (1954).

One of the stories from Dr. Seuss’s Sleep Book (1962) also features the work-leisure

trade-off, for hard working salesmen trying to sell Zitter-Zoof seeds in the Vale of Va-Vode:

Tomorrow will come. They’ll go back to their chore.

They’ll start on the road, Zigger-Zoothing once more

But tonight they’ve forgotten their feet are so sore.

And that’s what the wonderful night time is for. (p. 45)

Not all of the sympathetic Seuss characters have such strong work ethics, however, or at least

not every day. The title for I Am NOT Going to Get up Today! (1987) essentially tells the whole

story of the book, except that the title character is really just a tired little boy, and of course

everyone has some days they would like to sleep in.

The enormously popular and influential The Cat in the Hat (1957) and The Cat in the Hat

Comes Back (1958) books highlight the tension between the Cat’s insatiable interest in playing,

the goldfish’s concern about getting chores done and protecting property, and the two children

who are pulled in both directions. The work-leisure tradeoff is stated most explicitly at the start

of The Cat in the Hat Comes Back, when the children are supposed to be shoveling deep snow:

This was no time for play.

This was no time for fun.

This was no time for games.

There was work to be done. (p. 3)

In both of these books Seuss resorts to a deus ex machina solution, because the Cat is able to get

the work done at the last minute and to undo any damage that has resulted from his madcap play

using technologies or agents with special skills that only the Cat knew about. In other words

these stories both hinge on examples of asymmetric information, which in itself might explain

why the Cat never worries and the others do.

In Daisy-Head Mayzie (1994) the daisy growing out of her head turns out to be illegal as

well as unique, because the Mayor tells her the law states clearly that all daises should grow in the

ground. Specialists, including a florist and a doctor, are called in to try to get rid of the daisy, but

to no avail. Then Finegan, a theatrical agent described as a slick wheeler-dealer who “knows

every trick” (p. 32) explains to Daisy that she can get rich because of her special talent, and signs

her to a contract. (The daisy has to sign the contract, too.) In this story a principal-agent problem

arises in Finegan’s not recognizing the wishes of Mayzie’s closest advisors – her mother and the

school principal – and her long-term best interests; but there is certainly no lack of effort on his

part in securing lucrative appearance contracts and product endorsements.

Gerald McBoing Boing (1950) is another Seuss character with a unique talent – he doesn’t

talk, but makes unusual sounds that turn out to be in great demand as sound effects for movies,

commercials, etc. Gerald’s experience and preferences are just the opposite of Daisy’s, however,

because he goes from being sad and lonely to being rich, well fed, and having many friends.

Obviously Dr. Seuss could tell the story about the relationship between income and happiness

either way, and did.

I Had Trouble in Getting to Solla Sollew (1965) illustrates incentive and accountability

problems in labor contracts. When the young hero complains about the fairness of their working

arrangement, his partner claims “This is called teamwork. I furnish the brains. You furnish the

muscles, the aches and the pains.” (p. 17) Several specialized occupations are also featured in the

book, including a veterinarian, a general, and a doorkeeper.

In If I Ran the Circus (1956), young Morris McGurk has big plans on where to stage a circus

with acts nobody has ever seen – and never will. Morris doesn’t know how the people will be

able to do that acts he imagines – “that’s [their] job, not mine.” (p. 50) He also blithely assumes

that old Mr. Sneelock will let him use the vacant lot behind his store and do most of the work in

preparing the site, selling the lemonade, and collecting tickets at the circus, once he knows the

circus will be next to his store. McGurk has a lot of Tom Sawyer in him, but his schemes are so

far beyond whitewashing fences that most readers and young listeners appear to be expected to be

in on the joke and skeptical about his schemes ever coming to pass.

In Did I Ever Tell You How Lucky You Are? (1973), in his accounts of incredibly (literally)

specialized jobs, Seuss also provides a wonderful example of shirking and monitoring costs.

Out west, near Hawtch-Hawtch,

there's a Howtch-Hawtcher Bee-Watcher.

His job is to watch…

is to keep both his eyes on the lazy town bee,

A bee that is watched will work harder, you see. (p.26)

But when it turns out the bee is not working much harder, someone says:

Our old bee-watching man

just isn’t bee watching as hard as he can.

He ought to be watched by another Hawtch-Hawtcher! (p. 27)

Taking things to their logical Seussian conclusion:

And today all the Hawtchers who live in Hawtch-Hawtch

are watching our Watch-Watcher-Watchering-Watch,

Watch-Watching the Watcher who’s watching that bee. (p. 29)

Other specialized jobs – real and imaginary – based on different personal characteristics,

abilities, and training, are featured in other Seuss books, including the cops and cupcake cooks (p.

26) in Oh Say Can You Say? (1979); the remarkable teachers, principal, and staff at the

Diffendoofer school, including Mrs. Bonkers, who defies specialization by teaching

“EVERYTHING” (p. 8) in Hooray for Diffendoofer Day! (1998); the different kinds of fish in

One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish(1960) – “Not one of them is like another. Don’t ask us

why. Go ask your mother.” (p. 13); and the factory and product distribution jobs created when

the Onceler begins to mass produce Thneeds in The Lorax (1971). The Onceler benefits from

economies of scale (p. 39), with increased specialization leading to the invention of new machines

that do increasingly specialized tasks, just as described in Adam Smith’s Wealth of Nations.

As noted earlier, making choices, including occupational choices, is a central theme in Oh the

Places You’ll Go (1990). Human capital issues are also discussed there, and even more explicitly

in I Can Read with My Eyes Shut! (1970):

The more that you read,

the more things you will know.

The more that you learn

the more places you’ll go.

You might learn

a way to earn

a few dollars.

Or how to make doughnuts….

or kangaroo collars. (pp. 27-29)

**Discrimination**

Preference models of discrimination feature prominently in several Seuss books, but

especially in the title story in The Sneetches and Other Stories (1961):

Now, the Star-Belly Sneetches

Had bellies with stars.

The Plain-Belly Sneetches

Had none upon thars.

Those stars weren’t so big. They were really so small.

You might think such a thing wouldn’t matter at all.

But, because they had stars, all the Star-Belly Sneetches

Would brag, “We’re the best kind of Sneetch on the beaches.

…When the Star-Belly children went out to play ball,

Could a Plain-Belly get in the game…? Not at all. (pp. 3-5)

Sylvester McMonkey McBean invents a machine to put stars on the Plain-Belly Sneetches, and

sells the stars for $3 each. From a public policy standpoint this might represent one of the most

cost-effective solutions to discrimination imaginable, but it leads to consternation among the

“natural” star-bellies: “Good grief!” groaned the ones who had stars at the first./ “We’re still the

best Sneetches and they are the worst./ But, now, how in the world will we know…?” (p. 13).

McBean tells them star bellies are no longer in, and he can remove stars (natural or manufactured)

for a fee, too. Through most of the story this is a repeated game with no learning, as the

Sneetches keep paying to put stars on and then take them off until McBean has every cent of their

money and drives away saying “They never will learn. No. You can’t teach a Sneetch!” (p. 22)

But finally, facing this extreme budget constraint, the Sneetches change:

But McBean was quite wrong. I’m quite happy to say

That the Sneetches got really quite smart on that day,

The day they decided that Sneetches are Sneetches

And no kind of Sneetch is the best on the beaches.

That day, all the Sneetches forgot about stars

And whether they had one, or not, upon thars. (p. 23)

Other characters in Seuss books experience discrimination, too, including the sentient pair

of green pants in the last story in the Sneetches volume, “What Was I Scared of?” (1961); Gerald

McBoing Boing (1950); the Zooks in The Butter Battle Book (1984) – whose terrible crime is to

eat their bread butter side down, but who also condemn the Yooks for not doing the same; and

Horton the elephant, who is caged in Horton Hears a Who (1954) for being the first and for some

time the only creature who can hear the Whos, and so is considered demented and dangerous.

**Environmental Issues**

Seuss treats pollution, externalities, property rights and enforcement, and endangered

species in several books, and all of these topics are important in The Lorax (1971). Mass

production of Thneeds from Trufulla trees eventually leads to the near extinction of the trees, with

only one seed left for the remorseful Onceler to pass on to future generations. During the period

of rapid increases in production pollution becomes a serious problem, causing the Lorax to send

away the Swomee-Swans that develop sore throats and can not sing, and the Humming-fish who

lived in the pond where the Thneed factory dumped its wastes. With this ability to control

animals the Lorax seems to represent a kind of Mother Nature figure; and eventually he

disappears, too, supposedly only to return if the Trufulla trees and the rest of the environment are

restored to the kind of Eden/Utopia that existed before the Onceler came. At only one point in

The Lorax is there a discussion about property rights to the Trufulla trees – the Lorax says the

trees are his, but the Onceler says he has rights to use them, too, suggesting they are part of the

environmental commons, like the water and air. Even if the Lorax did have legal ownership the

property rights are clearly not enforced, and so a tragedy of the commons problem unfolds.

Environmental issues and comments play less central roles but appear in several other

Seuss books. The young fisherman in McElligot’s Pool (1947) is told “When people have junk/

Here’s the place that they throw it.” (p. 3) Once again the question of property rights is left

ambiguous: Seuss’ illustrations show the pool surrounded by barbed wire, but we never learn if a

McElligot really owns the pool or is just someone the pool was named for. What is clear, once

again, is that even if the pool is privately owned the property rights are not enforced.

As noted above, in Horton Hatches the Egg (1941) property or parental rights to the

hatching egg become a key issue, settled in this case by Seuss’ reliance on artistic license rather

than legal precedents or enforcement. The Cat in the Hat (1957) seems to violate property rights

in what is clearly a private home through most of the story, but restores everything in the nick of

time. On the other hand, the Nutches in On Beyond Zebra (1955) must be eternally vigilant in

protecting their nesting sites. (p. 18)

The Grinch (1957) initially hates Christmas in part because of what he considers to be a negative externality – the “The NOISE! NOISE! NOISE! NOISE!” (p. 6) of the Who children playing with their Christmas toys, and worse than that the noise from the entire village singing carols (p. 11). His change of heart also leads to a Coasian solution of the externality issue, as the Grinch is invited to join the Whos’ feast and singing.

Public Goods, Other Economic Functions of Government, Public Choice, and Unintended Consequences

National defense is seen as an important role for government in The King’s Stilts (1939),

as discussed above, and in the context of a foolish arms race in The Butter Battle Book (1984).

Clearly the different historical circumstances facing the United States at the publication dates for

these books, 45 years apart, played a large role in how Geisel presented the topic. He interviewed

a marine general at length while preparing to write the Butter Battle Book, which was written with

the explicit goal of demonstrating the futility of nuclear war.

Externalities in Seuss are almost always illustrated using environmental and pollution

issues, as discussed above. But Seuss almost always leaves solutions to environmental problems

at the level of individual actions, rather than government policy.

It is not clear whether the school depicted in the posthumously published Hooray for

Diffendoofer Day! (1998) is a public or private school, but the standardized high-stakes tests

students must take clearly suggest government regulations. The freedom teachers are given at the

school is exceptional for either a public or private school, and the principal and teachers are

unusually entrepreneurial.

Poverty and income redistribution are rarely raised as direct issues in the Seuss books,

although Ali Sard in Did I Ever Tell You How Lucky You Are? (1973) is paid the “piffulous pay

of two Dooklas a day” by his uncle. Ali “can’t live” on that pay alone so he moonlights and

paints flagpoles on Sundays. (pp. 15-16)

Maintaining competition is never presented as a role of government in the Seuss books,

but the idea that government policies are often the source of resource misallocations frequently is.

This is sometimes done with governments that are monarchies, as in Bartholomew and the

Oobleck (1948), The 500 Hats of Bartholomew Cubbins (1938), Yertle the Turtle (1958), and the

“King Looie Katz” story in I Can Lick 30 Tigers Today! and Other Stories (1969). But

democracy is no panacea in Seuss, either. Most notably, in Thidwick the Big-Hearted Moose

(1948) a host of literally free riders start living on Thidwick’s antlers, causing the moose

numerous problems, considerable discomfort, and eventually threatening his survival. Thidwick

wants to migrate south, across a lake, because winter and moose-hunting season are coming:

He stepped in the water. Then, oh! What a fuss!

“STOP!” screamed his guests. “You can’t do this to us!

These horns are our home and you’ve no right to take

Our home to the far distant side of the lake!”

“Be fair!” Thidwick begged, with a lump in his throat….

“We’re fair,” said the bug.

“We’ll decide this by vote.

All those in favor of going, say ‘AYE,’

All those in favor of staying, say ‘NAY’.”

“AYE!” shouted Thidwick,

But when he was done…

“Nay!” they all yelled.

He lost ’leven to one. (pp. 20-22)

The other moose tell Thidwick to get rid of the pests, but when he refuses because they are his

guests the rest of the moose abandon him to his fate. Fortunately, just as Thidwick is about to be

shot by hunters from the Harvard Club, because by this time the weight from all of the creatures

living on and in his antlers is so heavy he can barely walk and can not escape, his antlers molt.

Thidwick swims away while the pests are shot by the hunters and stuffed as trophies, displayed

on a wall at the Club still sitting in the antlers.

Free riding problems are also prominently featured in Horton Hears a Who (1954). There

Horton and the mayor of Whoville finally manage to get the last holdout to join in the collective

action of making enough noise to prove to the skeptical creatures that live in the “normal” world

that Whos really do exist. In sum, Seuss shows examples of functional and dysfunctional

monarchies and democracies. Neither system is shown as perfect, and effective government is

difficult to maintain even in the functional examples of both systems that are depicted. Seuss also

shows unintended consequences resulting from both public and private decisions, as with the

Oobleck in Bartholomew and the Oobleck (1948) and “The Glunk that Got Thunk” story (1969).

**Game Theory**

“The Zax” short story in The Sneetches and Other Stories (1961) depicts a stalemate

version of a game of chicken, when two players refuse to turn aside and “never budge” in their

vehicles. They stand there facing each other for years but:

Of course the world didn’t stand still. The world grew.

In a couple of years, the new highway came through

And they built it right over those two stubborn Zax

And left them there, standing un-budged in their tracks. (p. 35)

“The Big Brag” story from Yertle the Turtle and Other Stories (1958) shows a rabbit and

a bear engaging in cheap talk in a game of Liar’s Poker, arguing which of them has the best long-

range sensors – the bear’s smelling or the rabbit’s hearing. There is a clear last-mover advantage

in the game because the first liar doesn’t have a chance. But it isn’t clear there will ever be a last

mover, because neither liar will give up. Then a worm pops up and claims to look all around the

world to see that the bear and the rabbit are “The two biggest fools that have ever been seen!

…Who seem to have nothing better to do/ Than sit here and argue who’s better than who.” (p. 70)

Credible statements and threats are often an issue in Seuss, perhaps because he specializes

in telling and drawing incredible tales. As noted earlier, The Butter Battle Book (1984) illustrates

a deterrence game with escalation because the two countries never learn even in a repeated game.

In The Cat in the Hat Comes Back (1958) the Cat must deal with reputation effects because the

children and fish clearly remember their first encounter. In And to Think That I Saw It on

Mulberry Street! (1937) Marco embellishes the things he sees walking to school, but then doesn’t

know where to begin when his father asks him what he saw because he knows his father will not

believe most – if any – of his claims.

Fairness issues are often studied by economists, and Seuss addresses fairness issues in

many of his books, including The 500 Hats of Bartholomew Cubbing (1938), Horton Hatches the

Egg (1940), Thidwick the Big-Hearted Moose (1948), I Had Trouble in Getting to Solla Sollew

(1965), and The “Gertrude McFuzz” story in Yertle the Turtle and Other Stories (1958).

**International Trade**

In Seuss’s world of mostly imaginary creatures and products it is not always clear when

national boundaries are crossed. But in Scrambled Eggs Super (1953) young Peter T. Hooper is

shown searching for, buying, and importing many different kinds of unusual eggs, some from as

far away as Fa-Zoal, which is “ten miles or so just beyond the North Pole. “ (p. 24) As in much

real world international trade, including most international trade involving U.S. buyers and

sellers, Peter’s motivation for the imported eggs is based on a demand for product diversity. With

the special ingredients he buys from all over the world, and because Peter is – as he tells his sister

– the best cook there is, he makes a special omelet that tastes just like “Scrambled eggs Super-

Dee-Dooper-dee-Booper, Special de luxe, a-la-Peter T. Hooper” (p. 52).

**Entrepreneurship and Risk**

Seuss often writes and draws stories of people engaged in entrepreneurial schemes and

endeavors, sometimes literally involving acts of creative destruction. His characters are not likely

to be restrained by concerns of either financial or physical risk – especially if they can get

someone else to bear those costs, as Morris McGurk hopes to do with old Mr. Sneelock in If I Ran

the Circus (1956). But more often the Seuss characters simply exhibit what Adam Smith (1976

[1776], p. 123) described, in considerably more sedate terms, as “the natural confidence which

every man has more or less, not only in his own abilities, but in his own good fortune.”

Sometimes the Seuss characters’ expectations are whittled down by experience, as in “I Can Lick

30 Tigers Today!” There, in stages, 30 tigers are soon cut down to none. In other stories the

Seuss' heroes remain incorrigibly optimistic, as in McElligot’s Pool (1947). But in that story it is

important to note that the boy is probably not fishing as an occupation, but just for recreation – in

which case economists have no basis to criticize his quite possibly unrealistic claims that he

might catch a huge ocean fish even in the tiny inland pool because the pool might be linked to the

sea by underground rivers. After all, some real fishermen are known to fish without bait on

occasion when they don’t want the leisure of their fishing to be disturbed even by fish.

In Seuss’ last and most explicit writing for young readers about how much they can do

and the importance of building their lives around their hopes and dreams, Oh, the Places You’ll

Go (1990), he warns of inevitable hard times and bumps in the road. But the bottom and final

line of Seuss’s advice is to never give up and always keep hoping, dreaming, and trying. Giving

up, or just waiting for someone else or some outside event to make things better, is presented as

the greatest and most pernicious kind of waste and inefficiency:

You can get so confused

that you’ll start in to race

down long wiggled roads at a break-necking pace

and grind on for miles across weirdish wild space,

headed, I fear, toward a most useless place.

The Waiting Place….

…for people just waiting.

Waiting for a train to go

or a bus to come, or a plane to go

or the mail to come, or the rain to go

or the phone to ring, or the snow to snow

or waiting around for a Yes or No

or waiting for their hair to grow.

Everyone is just waiting. (pp. 23-24)

After telling his readers again that times can be hard and decisions difficult, Seuss is

reassuring and optimistic, and encourages them to make good choices and pursue their goals:

On and on you will hike.

And I know you’ll hike far

and face up to your problems

whatever they are.

…remember that Life’s

a Great Balancing Act.

And will you succeed?

Yes! You will, indeed!

(98 and ¾ percent guaranteed.)

KID, YOU’LL MOVE MOUNTAINS!” (pp. 39-41)

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NOTES

1 This section is drawn primarily from Morgan and Morgan (1995).

2 Geisel’s first wife, Helen, took several economics courses at Wellesley College, earning high grades

(Morgan and Morgan, 1995, p 57). She was an active partner in developing and editing the Seuss books,

occasionally writing key lines of text. She also wrote her own children’s books.

3 In early drafts of the story, Seuss wrote Mayzie as a devoted and conscientious mother, who was worried about Horton crushing her egg when he asked her to let him tend it.