

# **The Economics of Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451***

## **Introduction**

This paper reflects on Ray Bradbury's 1953 dystopian science fiction novel *Fahrenheit 451* from an economic perspective. To be sure, there is little in the novel that gives hint to how the economy is organized or how resources are allocated between competing uses in the novel's futuristic world. Nor are there many salient examples of standard economic principles such as the law of demand, elasticity, market equilibrium or the other topics in neo-classical economic analysis. Yet there is much discussion in the novel of happiness. The novel's protagonist chooses to make a radical break with society after he comes to recognize his own unhappiness. In neo-classical economic terms, new information changes tastes, which in turn changes behavior. Case closed. What is there to discuss?

However, the more philosophical analysis of both Ludwig von Mises' *Human Action* and John Stuart Mill's *On Utilitarianism* do provide an economic lens from which to assess the novel. Guy Montag, the hero of the novel, acts in

a way consistent with Misesian analysis. To put it another way, Misesian analysis does not render Montag's choices as a "trivial" or "mechanical" maximization problem, but rather as an active, groping and near-entrepreneurial quest for personal fulfillment in a constrained world. The Misesian framework is a way of making Montag's action interesting and meaningful.

In the same vein, John Stuart Mill's reflection on happiness in his essay *On Utilitarianism* offers a normative economic approach to understanding both Montag's search for happiness and the constraints he faces in the search. All this is not a particular critique of neo-classical economics as much as an argument that the framework and rhetoric of Austrian and classical economics is better suited to the task of considering issues in literature than the standard neo-classical approach.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Tyler Cowen (2008) argues that economic models and novels have more similarities than is usually imagined. Both specify a set of initial conditions that are subsequently modified. Both examine the consequences of the subsequent modifications. In the case of the model the consequences flow from the model's internal logic. In the case of the novel the consequences flow from the author's imagination. That the author has an implicit "model" of human behavior in mind is not farfetched! Indeed, literary criticism often attempts to spell out the author's implicit

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The paper proceeds in the following fashion. First, a simplified plot summary is presented. The next two sections will consider the novel from the perspective of *Human Action* and *On Utilitarianism*. A penultimate section focuses on the author, Bradbury, and the final section offers conclusions and insights.

### Plot Summary

The novel is set in a futuristic world that is simultaneously militaristic, prosperous and highly controlled. As mentioned before, there is little hint of the economic system in place. That a prosperous economy is consistent with strictly controlled flows of information is implausible to mainstream economic thinking today. Yet recall the novel was written in the early 1950's, long before the freedom and prosperity nexus was as well understood as it is now. In any case, in Bradbury's vision direct government repression was *not* the reason freedom of inquiry was destroyed. Rather, government manipulation of media and entertainment so dulled the senses of the population that tyranny was a natural byproduct.

Allusion is made to two nuclear wars in the 1990's that the society won. It is reported that the domestic population is well fed and well entertained while other parts of the world are impoverished (p. 73). Information and media channels are totally controlled by the state and dedicated to its praise and (quite crucially for Bradbury's thesis) to the entertainment of the population. Quick-paced entertainments are heavily subsidized and encouraged so as to preclude more con-

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model of the world. Correspondingly, models are at their core "imaginative stories" about the nature of the world.

templative activities. The signature of the society is the total criminalization of books. If an individual is found to possess books he or she is arrested, the fire department is contacted, and the books are publicly burned. The title *Fahrenheit 451* is the temperature at which paper combusts. As homes and buildings have been fireproofed the only job of the fire department is to burn books as "custodians of our peace of mind" (p. 59).

The plot is rather thin. Guy Montag is a 30 year old fireman. Through a series of events he becomes a book-loving dissident. He meets an almost 17 year old girl, Clarisse McClellan, who is from a family of dissidents. Through conversations with her he becomes unhappy and begins to show an intellectual interest in the very books he has spent the last decade burning. His wife, Mildred, is shallow, totally engrossed in the society's pursuit of banal pleasures, and completely appalled by her husband's newfound inquisitiveness.

Guy's immediate work supervisor, Fire Chief Beatty, is a disaffected intellectual who is familiar with the content of many of the books he burns and absolutely dedicated to their destruction. Beatty's cynical monologue which attempts to convince Guy of the social necessity and desirability of book burning is a central passage of the novel (pp. 54-63). Beatty eventually entraps and arrests Guy, who in turn becomes a criminal as he kills the Captain to escape arrest.

Beatty's counterpoint is the 60+ year old retired Professor Faber, who forty years ago worked at one of the last liberal arts colleges. Having made a living speculating on the stock market (?) he becomes Montag's mentor and co-conspirator. Faber's monologue to Montag is another central passage (pp. 80-91).

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After killing Beatty, Guy flees to the countryside undetected. He manages to join up with a group of intellectuals, each of who memorize certain books. A war starts simultaneously with Montag's escape and destroys the urban area from which he escapes.

There are many inconsistencies in the framework. The story is neither a detailed or well-conceived model of a totalitarian society nor an accurate blueprint of how such a society would emerge. Bradbury's speculation of an entertaining but mind-dulling government-run media being a linchpin in maintaining a totalitarian society is an interesting and provocative theme. The story can also be seen as one man's discovery of intellectual life in a society that both overtly and covertly discourages such endeavors.

### ***Fahrenheit 451* from *Human Action's* Perspective**

Guy's actions can be "shoe-horned" into a neo-classical microeconomics. Consider a society with two sets of goods: vector  $\mathbf{X}_1, \mathbf{X}_2 \dots \mathbf{X}_n$  which are a set of basic goods and "fast paced pleasures" with prices  $\mathbf{p}_1, \mathbf{p}_2 \dots \mathbf{p}_n$ ; and vector  $\mathbf{J}_1, \mathbf{J}_2 \dots \mathbf{J}_n$  which are a set of "contemplative intellectual pleasures" with prices  $\mathbf{h}_1, \mathbf{h}_2 \dots \mathbf{h}_n$ . Montag has a utility function  $U = U(\mathbf{X}_1, \mathbf{X}_2 \dots \mathbf{X}_n; \mathbf{J}_1, \mathbf{J}_2 \dots \mathbf{J}_n)$  and an income of  $\mathbf{Y}_m$ . Montag maximizes his utility function subject to his income constraint. Montag's *preferences* are such that in his initial state he exclusively consumes from the  $\mathbf{X}$  vector of goods. Upon interactions with Clarisse, Montag's preferences change so that his desired consumption bundle now includes items from the  $\mathbf{J}$  vector of goods as well.

Tyler Cowen's (2008) insight is quite

appropriate: "*Utility maximization may describe the behavior of (literary) characters ex post, but it does not help us understand or predict their behavior very much.*" One could offer a more specific functional form for Montag's utility function and examine the changes in parameter values necessary to generate the described results, but the spirit of Cowen's remark still holds: formal utility theory is a rather sterile way of expressing behavioral changes.

Now compare this to the basic framework outlined by Ludwig von Mises in *Human Action*:

Acting man is eager to substitute a more satisfactory state of affairs for a less satisfactory state. His mind imagines conditions which suit him better .... The incentive that impels a man to act is always some uneasiness .... But to make a man act, uneasiness and the image of a more satisfactory state alone are not sufficient. A third condition is required: the expectation that purposeful behavior has the power to remove or at least to alleviate the felt uneasiness. In the absence of this condition no action is feasible. Man must yield to the inevitable. He must submit to destiny.

Mises is outlining a framework and a *process* by which action takes place. This framework is simply a richer format for explaining the behavior of a literary character, as we shall see with Guy Montag.

*Fahrenheit 451* describes Guy's journey from happiness to uneasiness, to imagining a better state and finally to a plan of action that attempts to overcome his dissatisfaction. Each of these Misesian steps can be found in Guy's major actions in the novel.

Guy's journey begins as he sets a room full of books on fire. Bradbury de-

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scribes how he feels about his job: "He knew that when he returned to the firehouse, he might wink at himself, a minstrel man, burnt-corked, in the mirror. Later, going to sleep, he would feel the fiery smiles still gripped by his face muscles, in the dark. It never went away, that smile, as long as he remembered" (p. 2). He is satisfied with his job, and he does not seem willing to change anything about his life. Yet on his way home that night a series of events begins that eventually cause his behavior to change.

Guy stumbles upon a teenage girl who lives in a house next to his, and she fascinates him. Unlike his wife, Clarisse is imaginative, does not watch television or participate in the other mass entertainments common in the society. Before going home she startles Guy by asking, "Are you happy?" On that same night he finds his wife overdosed on sleeping pills. He solicits and obtains successful emergency medical treatment for Mildred, who sleeps through the rest of the night. He is attracted to Clarisse's house, where she and her family are in conversation, notices the family's "laughter ... relaxed and hearty," and longs to be part of their socialization but he returns to his house. Lying in bed after these events he says aloud, "I don't know anything anymore." The reader readily discerns his initial sense of unease and its source.

Guy talks to Clarisse at least two more times, and his fascination with the girl increases as does his sense of alienation from his world. Guy's unhappiness swells after he engages in an unusual book raid. Unlike other raids, where the recalcitrant book owner had fled or been arrested and carted off, in this instance the book owner is still at her residence. They tell the woman to leave, but she refuses. Beatty tells Guy to set the blaze

anyway, and he does, killing the old woman. Guy is upset and perplexed. Why would anyone kill themselves for a collection of books? Guy also manages to slip a few books under his uniform.

When Guy comes home he realizes he does not love his wife and he would not cry if she died. This realization drags Guy down even further. Guy's unease is at its peak when he exclaims to himself: "How do you get so empty? ... Who takes it out of you?" (p. 44).

The woman's love for books sparks Guy's imagination. If she were a normal person and books made her happy, then books may be able to help Guy too. He tells Mildred, "She was as rational as you and I, more so perhaps, and we burnt her" (p. 51).

A few pages later Guy announces his unease and proposes a solution to Mildred: "... I don't know what it is. I'm so damned unhappy, I'm so mad, and I don't know why ... and don't know what. *I might even start reading books*" (pp. 64-65, emphasis added). Guy now has both Misesian prerequisites to action: uneasiness and the image of a better state, and a plan for purposeful behavior to alleviate the unease.

The story then unfolds the details of Guy's actions: he begins reading forbidden books, seeks a professor with whom to learn from, and plots a revolution of sorts. All of the actions stem from Guy's uneasiness and the expectation that those actions might alleviate it.

Mises' basic principles of human action describe Guy's behavior, and can be applied to any main character in almost any novel. This framework gives wide berth to different action in novels as he

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specifically recognizes that “no man is in a position to decree what should make a fellow man happier.” Unhappiness and its general cure are universal, but the specific cure is not. What makes Guy happy is not the same as what makes Beatty happy. Nor do Bradbury’s stories and characters follow the same specifics as those of Dickens.<sup>2</sup>

*Fahrenheit 451* chronicles Guy’s consistent and conscious behavior. Guy’s actions could be described as a change in preferences leading to a change in action, but such analysis is shallow. His mistakes and failed ideas are not readily examined. On the other hand, the Misesian notions of unease, visioning something better, and developing and redeveloping plans of action, are a much richer rhetorical language with which to analyze a character in a novel. Protagonist’s actions are not only consistent with Mises’ theory; they are thoroughly explained by Mises’ language.

### ***Fahrenheit 451* from J. S. Mill’s Perspective**

John Stuart Mill’s 1861 essay *On Utilitarianism* is more a spirited defense of utilitarian ethics than a formal exposition of utilitarian theory. However, like Mises’ *Human Action*, it provides an interesting lens from which to assess Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451*.

Utilitarianism is succinctly summarized in Bentham’s famous dictum, “na-

ture has placed mankind under governance of two sovereign masters; pleasure and pain.” An immediate critique of this framework is that it characterizes humans as gluttonous machines simply motivated by carnal pleasure. Utilitarianism is, in its critics’ view, a “doctrine worthy only of swine.”

Mill dismisses this as a “shallow mistake.” He argues that humans are capable of pleasures not available to “swine,” and that “human beings have faculties more elevated than animal appetites,” asserting that “some kinds of pleasures are more desirable and valuable than others” (p. 279). Mill goes on to argue that, if “equally acquainted with both,” humans have “a most marked preference” for those pleasures which “employ their higher faculties.”

It is quite apparent that most residents of the world of *Fahrenheit 451* are not indulging their “higher faculties.” As noted above, in Guy Montag’s first interaction with his wife in the novel he finds her passed out from a drug overdose. He calls the paramedics, who treat her in a mechanical and impersonal fashion, as drug overdoses are a common ailment in the society. Mildred wakes up the next morning quite unaware of having been treated and ready for more excitement.

The world of *Fahrenheit 451* is one filled with active “amusements” profusely offered to its residents. Although written in the early 1950’s when television was just been introduced to the Western public, Bradbury correctly forecasts its omnipresence in the future society. The Montag’s are proud owners of a three-wall television system, in which three of their walls project television broadcasts (precursor of big screen TV). Television has become “interactive,” so the home

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<sup>2</sup>Guy’s quest is multi-faceted. Guy does not attempt to alleviate his uneasiness in only one way, but in all sorts of ways. He reads when he never did before, he seeks a teacher, and he proposes to undermine the system of firemen by planting books in their homes.

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viewer actually plays roles in scripted TV scenes and communes with “TV aunts and uncles.” Mildred desperately wants a fourth TV wall, costing \$2000 (which Guy reports as a third of his annual pay).

Other common modes of pleasure generation also warrant attention. There are “thimble” or “shell” radios plugged into the ear of the listener. These radios are portable, operate as a cell phone and as an entertainment center, and seem pervasive in the society (iPhones?). School activities are reported as a frenzy of pre-packaged information presented by mechanical film teachers with student questioning actively discouraged. There are also mentions of Fun Parks. These parks apparently offer the clients the opportunity to engage in destructive activity like breaking window panes, wrecking cars, or driving daredevil cars (video games?). And finally, an overwhelming emphasis is placed on sports participation and organization. As chief fireman Beatty says in his monologue at the Montag house: “More sports for everyone, group spirit, fun, and you don’t have to think, eh? Organize and organize and super-organize super-super sports” (p. 57). Beatty summarizes: “... bring on your clubs and parties, your acrobats and magicians, your daredevils, jet cars, motorcycle helicopters, your sex and heroin, more of everything to do with automatic reflex.”

There is no emphasis on or evidence of humans pursuing the pleasures from the “higher faculties” to which Mill refers (with the clear exception of Clarisse’s family and those who secretly own illegal books). Happiness as excitement or “titillation,” to use Beatty’s word (p. 59) is at the core of Bradbury’s dystopia. This vision of happiness is explicitly rejected by utilitarian Mill: “If by happiness be meant a continuity of highly pleasurable

excitement, it is evident this is impossible” (p. 284). Mill describes a happy life as having times of excitement and rapture, but also having times of reflection and repose, coupled with “many and varied pleasures” for both body and mind along with reasonable expectations about what can be accomplished and experienced in life: “... it is only those in whom the need of excitement is a disease that find tranquility which follows excitement dull and insipid” (p. 285).

In Mill there is a contradiction. If the pleasures of the “higher faculties” are so superior to those that appeal to the baser instincts, why do more refined pleasures seem dominated by the less refined pleasures? Mill attempts to resolve this contradiction by arguing that the “capacity for nobler feelings is in most natures a very tender plant, easily killed, not only by hostile influences, but by mere want of sustenance” (p. 281). He goes on to state: “Men lose their higher aspirations as they lose their intellectual tastes, because they have neither the time or opportunity for indulging them; and they addict themselves to inferior pleasures, not because they deliberately prefer them, but because they are the only ones to which they have access, or the only ones which they are capable of enjoying” (p. 282).

The state-imposed social structure of *Fahrenheit 451* certainly does limit access to sources of cultivation of these higher aspirations, and not only through the obvious mechanism of book burning. The state makes readily available the “quick paced pleasures” that are in Mill’s thinking the inferior pleasures. Both the carrot and the stick are evident.

Moreover, leisure—the necessity Mill recognizes for the cultivation of the higher pleasures—is corrupted. It is interest-

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ing that Professor Faber's dialogue with Guy lists leisure as an essential element to Guy's quest for meaning (a rather clear example of Mill's higher aspirations). Guy responds that "we have plenty of off-hours," to which the Professor responds "off-hours, yes, but time to think?" He then outlines how the fast-paced electronically-induced pleasures of the dystopian society preclude reflective thinking.

Mill notes that "many, in all ages, have broken down in an ineffectual attempt to combine both [inferior pleasures and superior pleasures]" (p. 282). It is interesting that in Bradbury's novel such attempts were part of the history of how book burning was established. In Beatty's dialogue he notes that in the twentieth century great literary works were popularized and thus denigrated: "classics [were] cut to fifteen minute radio shows, then cut again to fill a two minute book column" (p. 54). This along with a proclivity not to offend any minority<sup>3</sup> made popular writing a "nice blend of vanilla tapioca," so that "books stopped selling" (p. 57). "It didn't come from the Government down. There was no dictum, no declaration, no censorship, to start with, no. Technology, mass exploitation and minority pressure carried the trick, Thank God" (p. 58).

This theme is also voiced by Faber: "It isn't as simple as picking up a book

you laid down a half a century ago. Remember the firemen are rarely necessary. The public stopped reading of its own accord .... People are having fun" (p. 87). Faber also lectures Guy in a spirited defense of books, learning, inquiry and education. It is not books *per se*, but what they stand for, he argues. Books bring texture and telling detail to life; this in turn must be reflected upon at leisure; which must be followed by the "right to carry out" what we have learned from the preceding two (pp. 83-85).

Mill's superior pleasures require cultivation, but social arrangements make this problematic in Bradbury's dystopia. Yet it is the absence of this cultivation that makes Bradbury's world a dystopia.

### Ray Bradbury

Ray Bradbury was about thirty years old when he wrote "The Fireman" in 1950. Three years later the short story became *Fahrenheit 451*. An adaptation of the novel was filmed in 1966 starring Oskar Werner and Julie Christie. The novel has been used in countless high schools across the country, and it is Bradbury's most well known work.

Bradbury was born in 1920 in Illinois. He graduated from high school at fourteen, but never went to college. Instead, he went to Los Angeles to pursue a career in writing. Nine years later he published his first work, *Dark Carnival*. Since then he has published over five hundred works, and he is still writing today, according to his website. (He has published ten books since he turned eighty in 2000.)

In the fifties, Bradbury saw how television would affect society, and *Fahrenheit 451* was an outcome of that vision.

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<sup>3</sup>Bradbury anticipates quite presciently modern-day "political correctness." From Beatty's monologue: "Don't step on the toes of dog-lovers, cat-lovers, doctors, lawyers, merchants, chiefs, Mormons, Baptists, Unitarians, second-generation Chinese, Swedes, Italians, Germans, Texans, Brooklynites, Irishmen, people from Oregon or Mexico ..." (p. 57).

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His vision was not political. Recently, Bradbury was angry when he learned of Michael Moore's allusion to *Fahrenheit 451* in *Fahrenheit 9/11*. He told Chris Matthews that Moore stole the title, and complained that his book was being politicized. He claimed that the book is a social commentary on television, and not a political polemic.

Bradbury does not formally claim a political party or an ideological position, but others certainly claim him. The website [www.intellectualconservative.com](http://www.intellectualconservative.com) uses him as an example of an intellectual who has conservative principles. However, the conventional analysis of *Fahrenheit 451* as a novel against government censorship was not Bradbury's intention. He claims in an afterword to a recent edition of the novel that the novel was about television destroying reading (p. 184). Bradbury certainly does not call himself a conservative in the interview, but he also makes it clear that his novel was not a platform for a progressive agenda.

### Insights and Conclusions

The claim of this paper is that the rhetoric and framework of Ludwig von Mises and John Stuart Mill is better suited for analyzing philosophical issues in novels than neo-classical economics. We analyzed *Fahrenheit 451* through using Mises and Mill and compared it to neo-classical economic analysis. We claim the neo-classical framework views Montag's story as essentially trivial while both Mises and Mill offer a richer context for understanding Montag's actions or the action of any protagonist in any novel.

We hope this insight will lead to economics students and scholars to explore

other works of literature from Misesian (and other) perspectives. Far from being intellectual adversaries, economic reasoning and literature can complement one another in the pursuit of wisdom and truth.

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