

Contingency

Delivered to a student audience in Cambridge, 2002

I have come to the conclusion that one of the key elements of success is contingency, the rather distinguished name by which we dress up and disguise mere chance. A writer can send scripts to numerous publishers without success, and might succeed one day because the editor happens to be in a good mood, having just beaten a parking fine. Once the resources of the publishing house are behind it, the script might succeed, as indeed might have done some of those not as lucky.

Roman writers like Suetonius tell us how eagles and other omens appeared when Otho or Vitellius was born, showing how they were destined for the imperial purple. In fact they might have just been lucky about who died when. In those two cases, each made a briefly successful bid and was killed by another within a year.

More tellingly, in the pre-Cambrian explosion of life, some of whose exotic shapes are preserved in the Burgess Shale, there are 23 completely new phylae (classes of life forms), nearly all of which leave no modern descendents. There are creatures with three legs sticking out of their backs, and all types of weird arrangements. These worked, in the sense that the remains we have were of creatures that lived.

Eerily they call to mind Emdocles, the pre-Socratic philosopher who postulated that creatures had arisen at the water line in all kinds of combinations, such as heads with no necks, two sets of arms and so on. He thought the ones which prospered were the ones best equipped to survive (wow!)

In his book 'Wonderful Life,' Stephen Jay Gould points out that some of these early creatures of the Burgess Shale were probably wiped out in a sudden flood, or a volcano, and were unlucky enough to leave no descendents. Evolution plays a role of course, but you have to be lucky with it. He points to one of the more diminutive fossils which has a stripe along it. This is one of the lucky ones not hit at the wrong time by a falling log. It is the precursor of the class of vertebrates, which includes us. It could just as easily have been one of the others that made it.

Gould calls his book after the Capra movie, which deals with a counter-factual future. This is what might have happened if things had turned out differently. "My brother won the medal of honour for saving those men." "No. He died aged 6 when he fell through the ice and you weren't there to save him."

We behave as though capitalism, like evolution, rewards merit. Indeed, the two have a strikingly similar modus operandi of weeding out the less well equipped. But chance plays a huge role. We highlight the stories of those who persevere in garages and become multi-millionaires. We rarely talk about those who do not. The assumption we make, that the former had something of value but the latter did not, is too easy. Chance plays its part.

No, it does not replace evolution, of organisms or of commercial innovations, but it does supplement it. The broad rule is that something has to happen. Reality is the one which did. Some of the others could have happened. I draw a card from a deck, and it is the five of spades. Remarkable. It was only a 1-in-52 chance, yet it came up. Ah, but every other outcome was equally unlikely. What happened in evolution, in history, in the marketplace, were all unlikely. Something had to happen, and did. We try to make it look as though advantage or merit was the determining factor, and it may have been one of the most important ones.

But the fact is that reality does not bear the characteristics of a seamless flow of superior ability. It looks more like the ragged jumps and starts of a series of accidents and events, through which that flow can be seen, but through which other successes could easily have flowed. We would have been just as convinced of their inevitable success had they happened instead.

We want to live in an ordered and just universe; this may be why we superimpose upon it more rationality and justice than it will bear.

On the other hand, just think how unbearable a truly meritocratic human society would be to those who did not succeed. They would have to blame themselves and their lack of ability, instead of drawing comfort from fickle fate. "I could'a been a contenduh."