

AGENCY AND THE FUTURE

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Pretty much everyone agrees that we cannot change the past. But most of us are convinced that we can change the future.

When one speaks of changing the future, one does not (should not) mean changing it from what it will actually be. The science-fiction prospect of travelling backwards in time to avert disapproved actualities is simply too far-fetched. Rather one (presumably) means “changing it from what it would otherwise be if one did not act on the matter.”

Actually, in the context of agency, there are four futures or—more cautiously formulated—four different ways to looking at the future. They are:

- the future as it will evolve if the agent does not intervene.
- the future as the agent *thinks* it will evolve if he does not intervene.
- the future as it will evolve if the agent does intervene.
- the future as the agent *thinks* it will evolve if he does intervene.

The object of rational planning is to endeavor to realize the optimal result of having the actual future be identical with that which is envisioned as desirable. However, the imperfection of human knowledge being what it is, there is no way to produce a totally failproof guarantee that this will be so.

The realities being what they are, we have no guarantee that the actual future will ever be just as we envisioned it. Slippage is always possible here. So how are we to manage rational planning for the future?

We do, however, have observational access to past futures. And just this affords us with the resources for planning. For the basis of planning is experience.

One thing that we learn from experience is that different ranges of phenomena are variously stable. In parts of the globe the temperature is

volatile, in parts it is uniform. In some cultures life follows a fixed pattern, in others it is in constant flux. But conditions are not always and everywhere benign in this respect.

Experience teaches that our knowledge of the future is spotty. Predicative foresight of the future is only possible with stable phenomena—in matters where the future is like the past. As David Hume rightly insisted, the predicative presupposition that the future is like the past afflicts all of our claims about the future. And we can never have unconditional guarantees here.

All purposive action is future-oriented. It aims at bringing about a condition of things which, in the agent’s judgment, would otherwise not—or *probably* not—obtain. But things being what they are, the agent inevitably acts on the face of potentially mistaken views about the future. A rational agent cannot but acknowledge the possibility of error in the judgment of future events. For it is simply a fact of life that our knowledge of the future is imperfect—that the prospect of being mistaken here is an unavoidable aspect of the human condition.

It is always today; tomorrow never comes. We inevitably live in the present. The future is never a present reality to us, all we ever actually have in hand is the *envisioned* future. Imagination is our only window that is presently open to the future. As far as we are concerned, the future is a thought construct, every bit as unreal as centaurs and unicorns. No-one has ever observed the future.

Aristotle was the first theorist to address explicitly the problem of the future. In *On Interpretation* he noted that the future can be open in respect of its occurrences so that (for example) it is as yet indeterminate which side will prevail in the sea battle projected for tomorrow. Whether this indeterminacy is ontological in that the actual outcome remains undecided or whether it is merely epistemological in that in being unknown and unknowable is an issue debated by philosophers to the present day. Like the future itself, its determination appears to be an open question.

The prime task of scientific inquiry is to give us a better grasp of the future. This automatically makes the discovery of nature's laws into one of the pivotal aims of the enterprise, seeing that, by definition, these laws are always and everywhere the same. Scientific progress always carries advances in predictability in its wake. But the whole course of its history teaches that this affects the course of human affairs to only a very limited extent. The fog of uncertainty in which we make our life's journey never lifts to all that great an extent.

The most stable feature of the world is the inevitability of change. The Greek poet Simonides spoke wisely of the all-devouring truth of time.

And just herein lies the basis for the inherent recalcitrance and uncertainty of human agency. We must live our lives and conduct our affairs with a view to a future whose realities lie largely outside our ken and control. All human endeavor is subject to riskiness and uncertainty. To live is to give hostages to fortune.