

Three notes on contingency today Stress, science -- and consolation from the past?

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In the context of philosophical arguments and discussions, rather than in everyday conversations, the word “contingency”¹ refers to the status of future events or circumstances that may but must not happen. It is thus necessarily evokes a viewpoint that links present to future and marks, in the future, the status of a horizon between necessity and impossibility. This explains why sociologists frequently use the phrase “double contingency” in order to describe the initial situation of persons participating in an interaction. They will always have some expectations about each other’s behavior that can not be certain (in the sense of being “necessary” expectations) whereas some others behaviors that they are able to imagine can be excluded from their expectations as “impossible.” If we say in such contexts that events circumstances, or behaviors are “random,” then we refer to our inability, at least indirectly, of explaining why they came to happen – but we sometimes also want to say, as an implicitly ontological claim, that reasons to explain why they became real do not exist.

In recent times this very conception of a horizon of “contingency” has shaped an increasingly dominant individual view of our everyday life. We normally do experience and often refer to the everyday where our actions and our behavior are taking place as a “field of contingency,” that is as a horizon provoking choice

¹ Being a native speaker of German and despite the definitions of “Contingency” in most authoritative dictionaries of English language, I cannot convince myself that German “Kontingenz” and English “Contingency” are fully synonymous. “Contingency” always seems to include the connotation of being “contingent upon,” which leads our attention to the circumstances that may explain the happening of an event or the existence of a phenomenon, whereas “Kontingenz” is free of a similar connection (which in German would be “abhängig sein von”). This said, I will use the word “contingency” as if it was fully synonymous with “Kontingenz” indeed.

between necessity and impossibility. More than ever before perhaps this “in between” dimension has been enshrined and obsessively protected against all outside interferences as the place of our individual freedom. In other words: it has become the latest version of our sphere of privacy where, on the one hand, we do not want to think too much of what is “impossible” for us and where, on the other hand, we do not want to be reminded too much of what is “necessary” in the sense of being duty or even fate and destiny. Within “our own” field of contingency as a space of private freedom, we want to constantly choose, decide, and perhaps revise what we chose, and we thus strongly resent any type of surveillance or documentation of our choices (hence the loud protest against all attempts to anonymously store traces of our behavior and then trade them as market-relevant data). The claim of independence from all kinds of institutions, above all from State institutions and their demands, may indeed be more intense than ever before, while our expectations about individual needs being covered by the same institutions are constantly growing.

As a collateral effect of the tendency to shelter our private life, as a field of contingency, against all hints of “necessity” (that is: duty or fate) or “impossibility” (that is: limits of our choices), we have inadvertently entered a coalition with contemporary (mainly electronic / data-processing) technology whose achievements and conquests are progressively transforming the poles of necessity and impossibility into an ever broader horizon of contingency. More metaphorically speaking: as the poles of impossibility and necessity are melting under the impact of electronic technology, our everyday as a field of contingency is fast approaching the form of a universe of contingency.

A few illustrations, starting with the necessity pole: the sex into which (the genitals with which) we were born have always been considered fate or destiny, with the devastating existential and social consequences, well known to all of us, for humans who were born into a sex with which they could not psychically identify. Transsexual surgery now holds the promise for a progressive

substitution of fate by choice. On the impossibility side of our everyday as a field of contingency, and presupposing that predicates used for (above all) monotheistic Gods have always been examples of the human talent to imagine forms of existence that do not seem attainable for us, on the impossibility side of our everyday, it is obvious how the expansion and development of the internet has given the traditionally divine conditions of individual omnipresence and individual omniscience a new status as dimensions of human life available on a global level. In addition, the divine condition and the human dream of eternal (physical) life has become an increasingly realistic target for medical research over the past years.

Of course we should celebrate such ongoing transformations of necessity and impossibility into objects of choice, that is the transformation of our field of contingency into a universe of contingency, as a substantial increase of human freedom. At the same time, however, we cannot overlook how this growth of freedom and choice produces an unprecedented level of individual stress and insecurity. Even the planning of our weekends, within a perceived infinity of leisure choices offered by the web and always ready for “immediate reservation,” has become a daunting task – in a never ending seven day rhythm. The daily communication in our families and at our workplaces is now part of a potentially global hyper-communication in front of laptops and with i-phones in our hands. Nothing indeed can appear necessary today (even in the sense of “casual” or “natural”), while hardly anything seems to be absolutely impossible either.

The unavoidable stress caused by living in a universe of contingency facilitated by contemporary technology, a level of stress for which neither our minds nor our bodies have ever been prepared, may well explain the two most frequently mentioned pathologies within contemporary everyday culture, i.e. the (in)famous burn-out syndrome (despite decreasing amounts of obligatory working time) and the widespread longing for simple values, for figures to believe in, and for orientations “to hold on to.” They all seem to be a matrix and a fertile ground for

what present political commentators identify and criticize as a new wave of “fundamentalism.” Whoever inhabits a still obsessively protected private sphere of incessant choice under the condition of growing internal complexity, is now under the temptation of longing for a public sphere of simple and highly transparent structures. This does not only provoke political messages with a connotation of being “clear” and “elementary” but, more interestingly, some new and at the same time archaic-looking forms of sociability.

The most appealing forms of sociability today no longer exclusively rely on shared interests (like political parties and labor unions used to do), with solidarity and mutual support. What makes them different from the tradition and at the same time fascinating for many of us is the joint desire of bringing the human body back into interaction and community. I am thinking of open-air concerts and religious events with broad participation (like solemn high masses read by the Pope on his travels all over the world where, quite often, the majority of people gathered know little or nothing about the Eucharist as core of the ongoing ritual); or of the spectators at sports events, of the groups coming together for public viewing (who are far from being unanimously interested in the competition to be seen), or of long-distance running events with mass participation. As modern Sociology has always worked under the (mostly silent) premise of the human body belonging to the outside of human sociability, we lack well-defined concepts for the analysis of such phenomena. Therefore, I like to go back to one of the earliest concepts that Christian theology has used to describe its community of believers, i.e. the concept of “Christ’s mystical body.”

When I am part of a – secular – “mystical body” in a stadium, at an open-air event, and even at a political manifestation, I can feel free of (the freedom and the stress of) constantly making choices in a universe of contingency. Rather, I become physically linked to an intensity and a flow that are not exclusively mine. This is this perspective, I believe, that can explain how “resonance” has replaced deliberation and consensus as a central medium of politics during the past years.

For what we call “resonance” is the existentially assuring sentiment of growing into one secular mystical body under the impact of an (often) charismatic speaker and her or his (often confused and sometimes dangerous) message. Resonance in this sense, as we gather from many scenarios within the global political situation today, can be ugly and precarious, high-risk and threatening. But we should not only demonize this phenomenon or engage in a ritual self-flagellation for having allowed it to grow, as it is typical of intellectuals who always tend to overestimate their influence and responsibility. Resonance and mystical bodies, after all, may also help us rediscover some essential – and comforting – aspects of human existence that we had lost in our everyday turned into a universe of contingency.

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Life within mystical bodies is of course not the only imaginable redemption from the stress caused by what we so seem to cherish, i.e. our private sphere and everyday world as a universe of contingency. During the late nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century, for example, the public admiration and trust in Natural Science and in the “laws” that it claimed to uncover, fulfilled the function of a horizon for human existence that gave “absolute” certainty about what had to be considered impossible and necessary (or unavoidable). Not randomly had the names and the faces of some early Nobel laureates in the Sciences, the Einsteins, Schrödingers, and Heisenbergs, reached a quasi-transcendental (more than just iconic) status, even among those of their contemporaries who could only reach a vague level of understanding about their research.

Something profound (or at least something culturally decisive) must have changed ever since. Today, my students and I will only remember for a few days after the annual announcements the names of even those Nobel laureates who work at our own University. One could argue, for instance with Martin Heidegger

and based on his essay “The Age of the World Picture,” that Science has altogether failed to develop an existentially relevant influence on our relationship to the material environment because, instead of finding perspectives of convergence between our own physical being and Nature, it has further separated us from Nature by hiding the material world “behind a curtain of mathematical equations.” This might also explain why Engineering, as a less intellectually aristocratic but more hands-on approach to Nature, has long left Science behind in terms of its everyday perception and impact in the public sphere.

And yet Science has also become more powerful today in fulfilling those functions that were formerly decisive for its role as a source of existential assurance. Largely due, again, to the data processing capacities of the most recent generations of computers, it is now able to transform, in many different contexts, what used to be considered randomness into almost certainty and almost necessity. Think of short-, mid-, and long-term weather forecasts today, think of prognostics regarding global climate change, and even of our ability to anticipate change in macro-economic situations. Not to speak of the impressively developed competence that can explain, retrospectively and in detail, the origin and the development of events of Nature that we are not yet able predict as, for example, earthquakes and tsunamis.

But why does Science, in spite of such a truly amazing increase of knowledge, no longer manage to fulfill its former function as a compensation and a balance for the destabilizing existential impact of our everyday turned into a universe of contingency, as it had so impressively done during the decades after 1900? There are multiple answers. In the first place and quite obviously, the great scientists of our present hardly ever conceive of themselves as public intellectuals, as most protagonists of the Einstein generation had quite actively done. Difficult to say whether this change has occurred due to growing specialization and complexity or, simply, due to a lack of effort among

contemporary scientists. One way or the other, lay persons today hardly ever get a glimpse of insight regarding the discoveries or theories for which the Nobel is being awarded.

More dramatically, scientists (and engineers working on the borders of Science) have become increasingly engaged in painting future situations of a potentially apocalyptic impact, instead of further expanding the vision of a quiet, complex, and somehow dignified (almost Dantian) universe, accessible to the efforts of human understanding, as it used to be current until the mid-twentieth century. By contrast, scientific research today obliges the historians and philosophers of our time to open their narratives and their visions to the dimension of the “anthropocene,” that is to a dimension of time lasting from the emergence of Homo Sapiens Sapiens until his and her vanishing from the planet Earth, due to the negative ecological influence of human presence. Or think of the concept of “Singularity” and the prediction of people working in the development of Artificial Intelligence according to which we are no longer far away from the appearance of an algorithm-based intelligence that is superior to human intelligence, with the risk of that superior intelligence wanting to terminate humankind.

Looking back “historically” from our worries of the early third millennium, we can realize that some smooth balance between contingency (freedom of choice) and certainty (destiny) had existed, largely unnoticed and therefore not enough appreciated, during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, during the age of both the most ecstatic pathos of individual freedom and of the most unconditional belief in the Truth-providing role of Natural Science. As a premise of epistemology, social change, and individual life, its two opposite dimensions and centers of energy, private Liberty and the objectivity of Evolution, hardly ever caused an impression of contradiction or tension. I do not believe, however, that the possibility is open for us to restore or to find back to that balance. All we can do at this point is to sketch its emergence, historically, which may produce an unintentional discursive effect of irony, as the emergence of the balance in

question may well have been part of the emergence of what historians today call the “historical worldview.”

Now this reconstruction will make us aware of an intellectual reaction to contingency (and freedom) quite different from the (now lost) balance that had come with the historical world-view. It was a reaction practiced, without any political program or major institutional impact, by some late eighteenth century thinkers and artists, a reaction that has remained present as a peripheral possibility and potential, without ever being actively repressed. In concluding, I will refer to Denis Diderot’s anti-novel “Jacques le Fataliste et son Maître” as an illustration of that position and of its possible inspirational value (not more!) for our present-day situation.

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If we try to tell and understand the emergence of the historical world view, as it had firmly established itself by 1830 as an approach to the Past that appeared to be truthful without any alternative, if we try to historicize the historical world view by its own – historical – rules, we inevitably find ourselves referred to an obsession with contingency that began to manifest itself since the third quarter of the eighteenth century. During those decades and seemingly without any strong systematic reason, it became habitual among intellectuals (“philosophes” in French as the dominant language of their time) to observe themselves in all acts of world-observation. This shift had two major consequences for their epistemological practices, shifts that can be amply documented in contemporary texts.

In the first place, an observer observing herself in the act of world observation will fast realize that the results of her observation (her respective experiences) will depend on the different points of view accessible to her, and as there always

exists a potential infinity of such points of view, it follows that there will also be a potential infinity of representations (experiences) for each object of reference – a situation to which many intellectuals and artists reacted with great existential concern. In other words: it was this very change through which world observation first became a horizon of contingency – with all of psychic and cultural consequences. At the same time and with more historical specificity, a self-observing observer must also see, against the grain of the Cartesian dominance of mind and reason, that her experience is a product not only of the mind, but of the mind together with the bodily senses. Thus the question arose how mind-based and sense-based components of world-experience were possibly related.

Both questions triggered concerns and debates that dominated the intellectual scene of the late eighteenth century. In our retrospective it is quite easy to see how two powerful – not to say drastic – reactions that came up and found strong institutional support after 1800, became foundational for what was to be mainstream Western thought during the nineteenth and early twentieth century, although these reactions were at first not programmatically conceived of as “solutions.” The second problem, the problem regarding the relation between sensual perception and mind-based experience in our world observation, was clearly bracketed in the work of the most influential thinkers of those years (I think of Hegel above all) and thus in the thinking of their students and readers. What, by contrast, absorbed the problem of contingency, poly-perspectivism, and multiple forms of experience for each object of reference, was the transition from a mirror-like, one-to-one pattern of world representation to a narrative principle of world representation, as we can trace it in the early nineteenth century.

From that time on, a person being asked what was France, would show a tendency to answer with a history; descriptions of phenomena of Nature began to show rudimentary traces of evolutionism; and in his “Phenomenology of the Spirit” the young philosopher Hegel chose the sequence of an individual human life as form for his systematic conceptualization of the “Spirit.” How could this

shift to narrative patterns (Michel Foucault referred to it as “historization des êtres”) be a solution for the challenge of poly-perspectivism and contingency? The answer is that narrative forms of discourse – independently of the intentions of those who operate them – have the elementary capacity of integrating multiple views regarding one and the same object of reference and of arranging them as a sequence. By 1830, this pattern had become the common matrix in Western culture for different branches of thought that occupied the decisive institutional spaces in Education, Politics, Law, and even in Economy; it became the basis for Philosophy of History and for Evolutionism in the Sciences, for utopian forms of early Socialism and even for the practice of Capitalism.

On the level of official institutional discourses it provided a view of the world and its changes as being necessary – with sufficient distance between the institutions involved to never be experienced as tensions or contradictions. There was no actual political need at all, say, for the rising movement towards national independence in Italy (“Risorgimento”), for the thrive of the Prussian State towards dominance in what would become Germany, for Napoléon’s III “Second Empire,” and for the first social movements inspired by Karl Marx’ philosophy, to ever coordinate their claims of “necessity.” At the same time, and this was the long-standing “balance” I have been referring to, the historical worldview seems to have been distant enough from all individual forms of experiencing life, to leave them intact as a sphere of choice and independence that would not contradict the claims and concessions of “Liberty” so typical for nineteenth century citizens. From a strictly philosophical angle, one obvious contradiction did exist: how could individual action be a behavior of freedom under the premise of “historical necessity”? This problem, however, was rather discussed in seminars of academic Philosophy than in everyday situations leading to practical decisions. Without any doubt, Philosophy and even more clearly Science had provided a framework that successfully replaced Religion as a comforting and reassuring horizon of individual life.

As I already said, it was not before the late twentieth century that this balance, mainly due to the transformation of private life from a field of contingency into a universe of contingency, lost its stability and thus its original function. In this situation which is our situation, it may be worthwhile to return to the historical moment during the third quarter of the eighteenth century when contingency had first become an epistemological problem -- and to an intellectual reaction that, instead of occupying central institutional spaces in Western culture, has always remained peripheral, without being actually repressed or eliminated. I am referring to figures like the French author Denis Diderot and Georg Christoph Lichtenberg, the German philosopher of Nature, but also to Francisco Goya and to Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart who, without knowing of each other and far from constituting a "school," showed similar structures of thought in their texts and in their aesthetic practice.

In the first place, none of them ever bracketed the question regarding the relationship between world appropriation through the mind and world-appropriation through the senses. For Diderot it rather triggered an almost life-long, obsessive reflection that became part of what we have come to call eighteenth century "Materialism." Now if Karl Marx, a good fifty years later, would use this word to refer to the complex social conditions of human work, Diderot wanted to find out, as a "materialist," how each of the different senses of the human body made specific contributions to our understanding of the world and its objects. At the same time, he saw matter as containing a profound impulse of agency towards any kind of transformations that we can observe.

More importantly, from our point of view, Diderot never concentrated on "History" and the supposed regularities (or "laws") according to which it was supposed to change the world – which also meant that he did not participate in the absorption or neutralization of the problem of contingency through narrativization, as it would soon become central for the historical worldview. His worldview thus presupposed, not only for individual life, contingency as its one and basic

condition – and his predominant practice of finding orientation was through individual judgment. This became particularly evident in his writing about contemporary painting and sculpture for which he quite provocatively abandoned all values and rules inherited from classical Antiquity, in order to rely exclusively on his own intuitions and preferences. While Diderot seems to have enjoyed his independence and in fact never complained about the absence of any “higher” orientation, we can recognize a certain affinity between his epistemological situation and our own contemporary intellectual and existential challenges coming from a universe of contingency.

Beyond this intellectual practice, as it is also manifest in his many philosophical treatises and in the entries that he contributed to the monumental “Encyclopédie,” as one of its two editors, Diderot dedicated a complex and yet enjoyable novel (often identified as an “anti-novel”) to the problem of contingency. I am referring to his text posthumously published under the title “Jacques le Fataliste et son Maître” whose main narrative axis is the traveling conversation between an aristocrat who wants to persuade himself of the existence of individual freedom and his servant Jacques who never stops to invoke destiny as a “book” where every present and future event is already “written” and thus decided beforehand. Their dialogue is doubled by the interaction between a text-implicit Reader who constantly wants to know more about the protagonists and their circumstances and a text-implicit Narrator who quite cynically insists on being the absolutely independent inventor and origin of everything that the book can possibly convey.

Over the course of “Jacques le Fataliste’s” several hundred pages, it becomes clear that none of these both strange and fascinating protagonists coherently holds on to what would follow from his position: the Narrator all of a sudden confesses that the main orientation for him, instead of his own imagination, is the truth of what he is telling whereas, at the very end, we read that he was simply relying on text fragments left behind by the English novelist Laurence Sterne;

Jacques' Master is not only occasionally tempted by Fatalism as a philosophical position but the least able to control his own situations and future, while Jacques is the least willing to accept his everyday challenges and the entire trajectory of his life as inevitable. But all of this does not mean that Diderot was leaning towards a one-sided recommendation in favor of contingency, freedom, and judgment.

Rather we know that, as a materialist, he believed in the possibility of explaining all events and occurrences as necessary – but was fully aware that this discourse, if at all, could only be an a-posteriori option. In view of the future, he saw no way, even for a “Fataliste,” to avoid contingency and choice. Of course there is nothing philosophically earthshaking for us in the co-presence of these two fundamental perspectives. It largely corresponds to our own contemporary situation in the universe of contingency -- with Natural Science at the horizon, more competent than ever before in providing all retrospective explanations that we can possibly desire or imagine. What I want to insist upon is the simultaneity of the two approaches in Diderot's thought who once, in a rather casual philosophical remark, wrote that “either everything is random -- or nothing.” To accept this epistemological co-presence, as an existential condition, may indeed be, if not a “solution” at least an exist consolation for us, in the confrontation with the most dramatic challenges of our time.

We may try, individually and collectively, our best to minimize the effects of global warming, and we may develop the most plausible strategies to keep under humanly acceptable control the development of artificial intelligence. But in moments of depression and despair, I think it is preferable to assume (and to accept) that a possible end of humankind might be part of a larger evolutionary process that has always determined our behavior – rather than collectively accusing ourselves for actions whose impact we could not have possibly known while they happened. Serenity is certainly more livable than self-moralization -- and perhaps even more reasonable.