

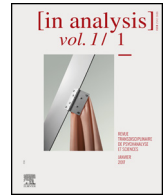


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Debate

Uncertainty and possibility

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ABSTRACT

Context. – The only certain thing about life is that we will eventually die, yet future uncertainty still troubles us. If only we could be more certain about our future, we could at least plan, prepare ourselves, and perhaps even change things to weed out aspects of the future we do not like and select those we do.
Objective. – This debate aims to raise the question of facing the future as a realm not of uncertainty but of possibility, noting that life is a process we undergo.

Method. – In lifting the curse of uncertainty and in restoring a sense of possibility, this debate highlights the importance of recasting the relation between doing and undergoing. To do so, we must think differently about generations, not as sliced into layers but as wound together in an intergenerational braid.

Results. – Life is held in tension between submission and mastery, aspiration and prehension, anticipation and perception, exposure and attunement. It is often supposed that life is lived within generations but does not flow between them. According to this view, what passes between generations, described as a heritage or inheritance, is a legacy of information and resources, which provides the capital from which successor generations can build lives in their turn.

Conclusion. – We show instead that the true possibility of life lies in the way each generation leans over the following one, bringing them together in a collaboration marked by both affectivity and care.

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Part I

It is often said these days, in a tone of some regret, that we face an uncertain future. If only we could be more certain, if only we knew what fate awaits us, then we could plan ahead, prepare ourselves, perhaps even change things to weed out aspects of the future we don't like, and choose those we do. We could subject the future to a kind of artificial selection. In pining for certainty, however, we should perhaps be careful what we wish for! After all, the one certainty we all face is that every one of us will eventually die. Yet even if death inevitably comes to everyone, at least we die in the knowledge that generations will follow, facing their own uncertainties just as we did. Whereas certainty augurs the dead-end, uncertainty opens up the field for life to carry on. For it is a defining property of life that it continually overreaches itself. Far from running from beginning to end, every ending, in life, issues into new beginning. As an elder from among the Wemindji Cree, indigenous hunters of northern Canada, told their ethnographer

Colin Scott, life is 'continuous birth' (Scott, 1989, p. 195). It is pure excess.

The curse of uncertainty is to present this excess as a deficit. To say that the future is uncertain is to suggest that life is not yet fully destined, that there is still work to be done to determine where it will finally lead. The word conveys a sense of incompleteness, of unfinished business, of having not yet gained the full measure of the world that would yield to total predictive confidence. There are still gaps in our knowledge, missing pieces that remain to be inserted. Nowadays we look to what we call 'the Science' to complete the picture. The Science should not of course be confused with what practising scientists actually do. Indeed, scientists would be among the first to protest that that they can never be certain about anything. Rather, the Science is an institutional apparatus, founded in ritual and rhetoric, that confers authority and legitimacy on governments which, even with the best of intentions (though often with the worst), claim to follow it. If the Science's predictions look grim, as they do today, it can propose mitigations to avoid complete catastrophe. Yet it admits to no future beyond the predictive horizons of the present.

Perhaps that is why today's younger generations are less inclined to see the future as a landscape extending indefinitely into the distance, than as a plateau bearing down upon them. No

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previous generation has been so starkly presented with the prospect of the end of history, even of life itself. The future, to them, seems all too certain. Nor is any relief to be found in a stance of denial, through regression from certainty to uncertainty. Yet what the deficit model presents as uncertainty takes on a quite different hue in the light of excess. Then, uncertainty reappears as possibility. For the Science, radical possibility is hard to pin down. As the philosopher Henri Bergson put it, the domain of life is characterised by 'incommensurability between what goes before and what follows'. Science, Bergson argued, is simply unable to cope with this idea of 'the absolute originality and unforeseeability of forms'. It can work only on what repeats (Bergson, 1922, pp. 30–31). And in the language of repetition, Science can only think possibility on a scale of risk or probability. On this scale, what cannot be determined is left to chance. Indeed, the opposition between chance and determination is deeply etched into modern thought. It is an opposition, however, that drains life of its creative impulse, reducing freedom to random variation within a phase space.

What would it take, then, to face the future as a realm not of uncertainty but of possibility? Young people, with their lives ahead of them, are often encouraged to think of the life-course as a process of 'fulfilling their potential', that is, as a movement of progressive closure, in which all possible paths are gradually narrowed down to the one actually taken – which itself, at life's end, reaches its ultimate conclusion. As the anthropologist Clifford Geertz put it, in a now classic formulation, 'one of the most significant facts about us may finally be that we all begin with the natural equipment to live a thousand kinds of life but end in the end having lived only one' (Geertz, 1973, p. 45). With one's potential fulfilled, there is nowhere further to go. But what if, instead of heading towards destinations unknown, we were to push out from places already reached, along a path of renewal that knows no end? Could this be what the Pintupi, an Aboriginal people of Western Australia, meant when they told their ethnographer, Fred Myers, that life is a 'one-possibility thing' (Myers, 1986, p. 53)? This calls for some reflection.

For the Pintupi, the contours of life are those of the country in which they dwell, a country created by the ancestral beings as they moved around in the formative era known as the Dreaming. Every existing creature, as the incarnation of the ancestral power from which its vitality is derived, effectively finds itself on the inside of an eternal moment of world-creation. And where the ancestors led, life is bound to follow. But this is not a movement from A to B, from a starting-point to a destination. It rather carries on. Life is a one-possibility thing, for the Pintupi, because possibility can only ever be one. The idea that people could initially be presented with multiple possibilities, like a menu of options from which to choose, only to be narrowed down as life proceeds, would make no sense to them. For Pintupi people, as they roam their desert landscape, are not fulfilling their potential but ever replenishing it. They may indeed have more power towards the end of life than at the beginning. How, then, can we express this difference between possibilities and possibility, between fulfilment and replenishment?

Part II

One way might be to call on a distinction between doing and undergoing, which was central to the philosophy of John Dewey, especially his essay of 1934 on *Art as Experience* (Dewey, 1987). In life, as Dewey acknowledged, we do all kinds of things. We do first this, and then that, and as with this and that, there is a degree of certainty in the ends to be achieved. Yes, we know what we are doing! Every deed is an intentional act, like shooting an arrow at a

target. Yet in everything we do, there is an experience we undergo. We are modified in body and mind, perhaps even transformed, by the doing of it. And the question, for Dewey, was to figure out the relation between the two – between the doing and the undergoing (*ibid.*, p. 50). Do we put undergoing inside doing, sandwiched between the original intention and its final consummation? Is undergoing something that happens to us inside the act? If undergoing were thus contained within doing, Dewey thought, there could be no continuity from one deed to the next. Life would fragment into a scatter of disconnected episodes. Blink, and they're gone.

What happens in reality, quite to the contrary, is that undergoing always overflows doing, to the extent that whatever you do takes into itself something of the experience of what you did before, and is in turn carried over into what you do next. With every doing, as Dewey put it in a later lecture on *Experience and Education*, you are 'a somewhat different person' (Dewey, 2015, p. 35). In short, undergoing lies precisely in the excess by which life overtakes the destinations thrown up in its wake. We could describe every act of doing, as shown in Fig. 1, by a transverse connection between an intention (I) and an objective (O). But the life of undergoing carries on, in a direction orthogonal to these transverse links. In the figure, this is represented by the continuous wavy line (P). Here, P stands for possibility. Possibilities cut across, but life, as a 'one-possibility thing', is longitudinal. It goes on through. And a life tracked along this line is continually overtaking itself. It is a life of becoming rather than being, yielding up not to objective consequences – for these are but discards left along the way – but to further possibility, not just for itself but for all other lives with which it tangles, including, as we shall see, its generational offspring.

Crucially, while every transverse connection denotes a line of intention, the longitudinal trail of possibility is a line of attention. Now there are two sides to attention: exposure and attunement. I take the idea of attunement from the ecological approach to perception pioneered by James Gibson (1986). For Gibson, perception is about noticing things in our surroundings that may help or hinder in the furtherance of our own activity. In a

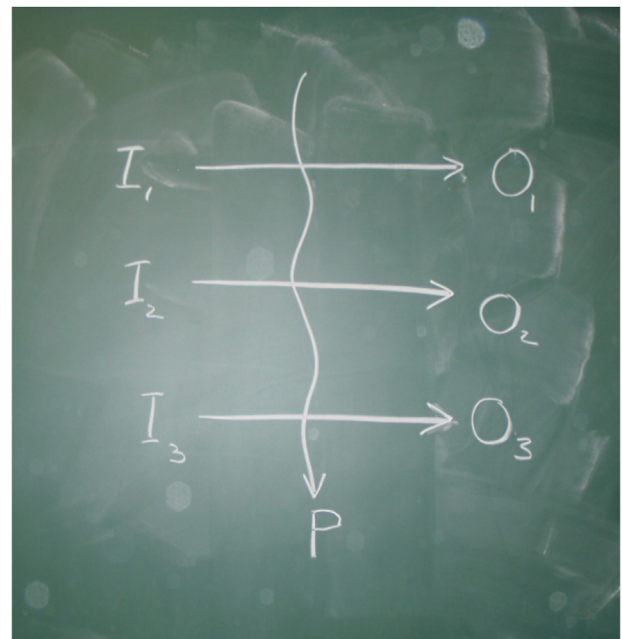


Fig. 1. Possibility and possibilities. Transverse arrows connect successive intentions (I) with their planned objectives (O). Through all of them runs the longitudinal arrow of life itself, a 'one-possibility thing' (P).

word, it is about picking up information that specifies what these things afford. And it can be learned. 'One can keep on learning to perceive', Gibson writes, 'for as long as life goes on' (p. 245). In the practice of a craft, for example, skill lies in becoming sensitised to subtle variations in the material that a novice might miss. The carpenter attends to the grain of the wood, the smith to the ductility of iron. The skilled practitioner's perceptual system, in Gibson's terms, becomes 'attuned to information of a certain sort'. This fine-tuning of perception amounts, he says, to an 'education of attention' (*ibid.*, p. 254). Yet in this, the momentum is entirely on the side of the perceiver. It is as if the things to be perceived were already there, laid out in the environment, merely awaiting the practitioner's attention.

But what if everything is not already there? The world, after all, is not set in stone but restless and fluid, bustling with life. Think of the fluxes of the weather, the ever-changing skies, the turn of the tides, the run of the river, the movements of animals and the growth of plants. Immersed in these fluxes, it is the perceiver who must wait upon the world, attending to it in the sense of abiding with it and doing its bidding. This is attention on the side of exposure. As the philosopher of education Jan Masschelein (2010) explains, exposure (from the Latin *ex-positio*) literally means to be pulled out of position. To be or become attentive, writes Masschelein, 'is to expose oneself' (p. 46). In this condition, one can no longer take anything for granted. The sense of understanding – of having solid ground beneath one's feet – is shaken, leaving one vulnerable and hyper-alert, wide-eyed in astonishment rather than narrowly focused on a target. For Masschelein, it is precisely in these moments of exposure that education occurs. It is not so much an understanding as an undergoing, that at once strips away the veneer of certainty with which we find comfort and security, and opens to pure possibility.

Yet if there are two sides to attention, of exposure and attunement, of waiting on the world and tuning to a world-in-waiting, then what is the relation between the two? Surely, to embark on any activity means placing one's existence on the line. The safe course would be to stay put. No-one can live like that, however. To live we have to get moving, to push the boat out into the current of a world-in-formation. Thus, all undergoing begins in exposure. But as it proceeds, skills of perception and action, born of practice and experience, begin to kick in. We can see this in one of the most ubiquitous of all human activities, namely, walking on two feet. Every step entails a moment of jeopardy. Falling forwards on one foot, you tumble into the void, only to regain your balance as the other foot comes to land on the ground ahead. Here, the bodily skill of footwork comes to the rescue, just before it is too late. What begins in the vulnerability of exposure ends in the mastery of attunement, providing in turn the ground from which the walker can once again submit to the hazard of exposure, in an alternation that continues for as long as the walk goes on.

Part III

This alternation, I believe, is fundamental to all life. Crucially, just as life is a one-possibility thing, it is also unidirectional. In real life, submission leads and mastery follows; never the reverse (Ingold, 2015, pp. 138–142). Where submission casts off into a world in becoming, setting us loose to fall, mastery restores our grip so that we can keep on going. The first is a moment of aspiration; the second a moment of prehension. Out in front, an aspirant anticipation feels its way forward, improvising a passage through an as yet unformed world, while bringing up the rear is a prehensible perception already accustomed to the ways of the world and skilled in observing and responding to its affordances. And as submission gives way to mastery, aspiration to prehension,

anticipation to perception, and exposure to attunement, there is what we could call a moment of inflection. I draw this sense of inflection from the writings of philosopher Erin Manning (2016, pp. 117–118). Inflection is not a movement in itself but a variation in the way movement moves, coming at the point where a tentative opening matures, from within what Manning calls 'the cleave of the event' (p. 6), into a firm sense of direction. It marks the turn from undergoing into doing, at which the line of possibility discloses distinct and realisable possibilities.

The terms 'aspiration' and 'anticipation', introduced above, call for some further explanation. Literally, to aspire is to draw breath. It is an active, animated 'taking in'. And to take in, as Dewey observes, 'we must summon energy and pitch it in a responsive key' (1987, p. 9). With this summoning and pitching, aspiration calls upon the past in order to cast it forward into the future, along a path of attention. Brimming with as yet undirected potential, with possibility, aspiration anticipates the future, but does not predict it. Prediction, as we have seen, belongs to the logic of certainty and uncertainty. Depending on the level of certainty, things may be predicted with greater or lesser confidence, or judged to be more or less probable. But anticipation belongs to the register of possibility. It is the temporal overshoot of a life that always wants to run ahead of itself. According to the philosopher Jacques Derrida, to anticipate is 'to take the initiative, to be out in front, to take (*capere*) in advance (*ante*)' (Derrida, 1993, p. 4). Far from predetermining the final forms of things, or fixing their ultimate destinations, anticipation opens a path and improvises a passage. It is a seeing into the future, not the projection of a future state in the present; it is to look where you are going, not to fix an end point (Ingold, 2013, p. 69).

All life, then, is held in tension between submission and mastery, aspiration and prehension, anticipation and perception, exposure and attunement. In every case, the first leads, and the second follows. What leads is an *aspiration that wells up in attention*. What follows is a *precisely directed and skilfully executed manoeuvre*. As a one-possibility thing, moreover, this life begins nowhere, and ends nowhere, but carries on for all time – for an 'everywhen' that, in Australian Aboriginal cosmology, is identified with the Dreaming. Yet we know that every mortal being will certainly die. How, then, can the infinitude of life be reconciled with the finitude of individual life cycles? To answer this question, we have to think again about generations. For there is a deeply held belief in many minds today – above all in those taught to follow the Science – that life is lived within generations, but does not flow between them. What passes between generations, often described as a heritage or inheritance, is a legacy of information and resources, which provides the capital from which successor generations can build lives in their turn. The information may be genetic or cultural, the resources material or immaterial (such as knowledge). Their sole common denominator is that they are available for transmission independently of their lifetime expression or achievement.

It is easy to see, in this view, a reflection of the idea that life is lived in the fulfilment of potential. This leads, as we have observed, to a dead end. With all potential exhausted, there is no life to be continued in coming generations; only the discards left along the way remain to be passed on. Each generation, occupying its own slice of time, seems fated to replace its predecessor, and to be replaced in its turn, rather like layers in a stack. Indeed, this kind of stratigraphic thinking is deeply seared in modern sensibilities, leading to an easy equation of generational layers with layers of sedimentation in the history of the earth, of deposits in the occupation of a site, of documents in an archive, and even of consciousness in the human mind. It is a way of thinking that feeds directly into a rhetoric of extinction that wonders whether the coming generation, or any after that, might be the last – be it for our



Fig. 2. Five generations, as stacked layers (left) and as a woven braid (right).

own or any other species. It is the reason why we feel ourselves facing a future blighted by uncertainty. To lift the curse of uncertainty, and to restore a sense of possibility, we need to imagine generations differently.

This is shown in Fig. 2. We have seen that as a one-possibility thing, life is lived not transversally but longitudinally. Let us, then, compare every particular life to one strand of an intergenerational braid. The strand is only so long, but the braid can continue indefinitely, for even as old strands give out, new ones are paid in. Nothing, here, is inherited, nor does a break in the chain of

transmission herald extinction. Rather, it is in the overlap of generations that the life process is carried on. As Bergson put it so vividly, just as the individual feels the swell of the past ‘leaning over the present that is about to join it’ (1922, p. 5), so with life in general, we see ‘each generation leaning over the generation that shall follow’ (p. 135). This leaning over is a gesture of care, even of love. Herein, for Bergson, lies the true mystery of life – to which we would add, its true possibility. How much are our fears of the end of history, of biodiversity loss and final extinction a function of the way we have sliced up the generations, setting them over and against one another, denying both the productivity of their collaboration and the affectivity of their care? We need to bring them together again.

Disclosure of interest

The author declares that he has no competing interest.

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