

THE THEORY OF CONFLICT AND THE CONCEPT OF PROBABILITY

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In this essay some efforts will be made to explore the relationship between conflict and probability. Inevitably, something has to be said by way of introduction about these two key concepts - they are subject to a high number of interpretations, so some exploration of these concepts is a necessary condition if they are to be related to each other. However, the explorations will be simple and preliminary, an effort not to do more in that direction than what is needed to arrive at some more interesting inter-connections.

To start with probability : it is the "degree of rational belief"⁽¹⁾ rather than "idealized relative frequency"⁽²⁾ that is most interesting for the present purpose. As a matter of fact, the word "rational" is not even necessary. Nor are we concerned with measurement of subjective probability; it is actually the very idea of uncertainty that is important. That excludes two possibilities : the certainty that something will happen and the certainty that something will not happen.

In the whole range of uncertainty there is one particular point or interval that deserves some specific mention : the idea of "perfect uncertainty". We shall not identify it with "equi-probability"; that gives to the symmetric rather than the asymmetric a much too fundamental position in epistemology.⁽³⁾ But the concept "perfect uncertainty" is a very tricky one. Thus, imagine that one is driving at full speed on the wrong side of a highway; what the outcome will be is not certain, it is "uncertain". But does that mean that the driver can tell himself "50% I survive, 50% I die; hence I stand a fair chance of survival" ? Of course not, that would be a very optimistic bet indeed. But why is this "of course not" ? Because we do possess some knowledge about what happens on highways - cars have a tendency to use them and the highways in turn have a tendency to be used ; when used cars have a tendency to drive on the correct side of the road and given this collisions may easily be produced if one insists

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on using the wrong lane. The highway may by some coincidence be empty that particular hour and/or only be used by cars that by some other coincidence all of them might decide to use the wrong lane - but the chances are slim. Why ? - Presumably because we have been watching or participating in highway life and for that reason have built into us some kind of knowledge. Outcomes are not equi-probable; there is a bias. Somehow the notion of "perfect uncertainty" should be evaluated relative to that bias - it does not mean that outcomes are equally likely; it must mean something else out of which the case of equi-probability is a special case.

Maybe the key to this lies in the word "subjective" and "belief"; and not in the word "rational", at least not if narrowly interpreted. For why do people engage in some many actions about which outsiders might say that they certainly do not stand a fair chance of succeeding, even surviving ? To take a political example of a very contemporary nature : why do South African whites in general, and their nationalist leadership in particular, persist in white supremacist rule ? Why don't they see the "handwriting on the wall", firmly written, usually by black hands, - your time is out. Is it because they think "50% we are out, 50% we will still be in" ? Maybe it is fair to say that they do not think this, but they wish it to be true - in other words that the wish is the master of the thought to the extent that the situation is interpreted in terms of fair chances. How people persuade themselves in such cases is probably relatively simple : in general, in similar situations, ours would have been a hopeless case; but in our case, given our special situation, capacities, intentions, what is generally true no longer holds. In other words, there will be a tendency to reinterpret the situations to de-objectify them, to particularize rather than universalize, to build one's own little sample of one case drawn from one's own little universe. A human right, and need, indeed ! - but not "rational".

And this may also be the case with a dare devil driver on the wrong side of the road : "what holds for ordinary people does not hold for me". And it may be the case for the criminal : he may be in the possession of perfect statistics about detection and conviction probabilities, yet feel that " this applies to ordinary people, not to me". In other words, our argument is that subjective probability can be interpreted as really subjective probability, not contaminated by precise or vague notions of relative frequencies, or some theory as to how the dice are loaded, even when they have not been thrown yet.

It may be objected that people are not that simple: they may have their wishes, but at the same time they may also have their empirically or theoretically inspired thoughts - indeed, wishes, data and theories do not come in three separate compartments. With this one should agree completely, and rather talk about separate types of consciousness. A person may at one layer know (in the relative frequency sense) that his chances are very slim, at another layer wish (in the subjective belief sense) that the chances are fair - one does not exclude the other. The psychology of their relationship is a complex one, and need not concern us here, except for one thing: if the chances "objectively" speaking are slim, and the moment of truth is appearing, this will probably have an impact on the person psychodynamically that may cause the objective probability estimate to recede even further into the background and the subjective belief or faith to dominate the scene, thus inspiring the dare devils' courage. This is, it seems, the reason why people do the kinds of things they do in wars: diving their planes into enemy fire in order to drop a bomb or two, dashing out of the trenches in the face of mortal enemy fire, and so on. "It does not apply to me, it cannot apply to me, at least not here, at least not now!".

Let us now make use of these reflexions in order to come a step closer to conflict. Imagine that human beings were somehow different, that we were condemned to perfect certainty. In other words, we would know in advance the consequences of our action; the future would be as clear to us as the past. There would be no uncertainty, we would not only know the consequences of our choices, but also know our choices - meaning that they would no longer be choices. For anybody who belongs to the managerial (governmental and non-governmental, national or international) "elites" of our overdeveloped societies it is well known what that means: it means that your calendar is so filled up one year in advance, that there is hardly any empty space where you can even write down the possibility of a week-end outing with your family, leaving alone don't it. The future is as predictable as future trains, the calendar has become like a railway itinerary - referring now to Swiss trains, not, for instance to Southern Italian local trains or to British trains, steered by a strike-conditioned on-again-off-again pattern. An other comparison would be with prison life: utterly predictable, practically speaking all important choices have already been made for the prisoner, the spectrum of consequences is a narrow one, and fairly quickly known to the inmate.

Much can be said about this type of condition, let us only spell out some aspects. Thus, words like "boredom", "apathy" and the famous "wish for new experience" (Thomas) will easily come to one's mind. But the implications are

deeper than this sense of being programmed, or having been reduced to an automaton with no options left. There is also the perspective that the life-lines, the trajectories along which one will travel through future life end at one point, with death. There is a tremendous qualitative difference between knowing in the abstract that sooner or later we shall all die and knowing concretely the when, where, how and why; to have it written into the diary of some future date, so to speak. In face of that certainty, specified with details - would we still go on living? In a sense the question is wrong because it is assumed that our knowledge is absolute and correct; if suicide were in our future we would already know it. Quite possibly it might not induce despair, but even relieve us of anxieties tied to uncertainties. It might be a happy automaton, but nonetheless an automaton.

However, in a sense equally importantly : would not human beings equipped with perfect certainty about the future also mean the end to human history? How could human beings under such conditions create history, meaning by that social transformation, transcendencies, new patterns of life? Could it be built into the certainty of the future that they would, in 22 years (the magic year 2000 that all future studies are now focussing on) lead different lives⁽⁴⁾? Would certainty about what is going to happen make them engage in the type of action that is a condition for something new to happen? Can human beings be programmed to transcend themselves? Or, will at least a great portion of what we refer to as "transcendence" necessarily have to come out of praxis, an accumulation of social experience by venturing into the unknown?

We shall now try to show by some examples that not only is uncertainty a necessary condition for what one might refer to as the historicity of human beings, it may also be said to be necessary condition for human life itself. And to do this we shall now make use of the concept of conflict.

The definition we shall use of conflict is as follows : it is the situation that obtains when one or more actors are pursuing incompatible goals. Thus, there are four key concepts : actors, pursuit, incompatibility and goals. Some remarks about all four:

As to actors: there may be only one actor and the conflict is an intra-actor conflict, or a so-called dilemma - e.g. relating to the person's distribution of activities through time and space (shall I spend my Saturday morning working or enjoying myself?) The actors may be individual or collective, the latter may be organized with hard nuclei called "states" (that in turn have even harder nuclei called "governments"), or they may be very loosely tied together in associations and organizations. But they all have one thing in common : there

is a certain amount of crystallization, an awareness of goals, a mapping of strategies.

As to pursuit: the actors act, there is activity, there are efforts to do something - preferably to arrive at not only one goal state but also the others that might be competitive with it. Something is standing in the way, otherwise there would be no conflict and that thing standing in the way is by definition also the pursuit of a goal, by oneself or by others.

As to incompatibility: this is a tricky concept, subject to many sub-divisions and interpretations. Some of the same distinctions as for the theory of probability enters here : between objective incompatibility and subjective incompatibility. On the one hand, if the actor or actors believe that certain goals are incompatible they might give up in advance, contenting themselves with one of the goals at the expense of the other (or some compromise, half-way consummation of either). But they might also push on, beyond their subjective beliefs, and encounter some hard resistances that might look to them like more objective obstacles. Conversely : they might bump into these obstacles before any subjective beliefs, based on experience, have been formed. Moreover, incompatibilities may obviously be more or less absolute. The hardest one to deal with may be logical rather than empirical. If A and B both want to dominate the other, there is perfect agreement between the two of them as to what is meant by domination and they want exactly the same type of domination in the same type of situation, then it is hard to see how both can obtain their goals : "A dominates B" and "B dominates A" seem to exclude each other rather neatly. This, however, is not the case with "A rules Milano" and "B rules Milano" - they might rule together, in a biconsular fashion. (More problematic if the goal states are "A rules Milano alone" and "B rules Milano alone" - unless they would be willing to say that "alone" only means that when they rule, e.g. every second day, then they rule alone.)

As to goals : these are states of affairs wished for, desired, "cathected" what actors are striving for, at any given point in time and space. They are not the final state of affairs, they may be just intermediary stops on the road. Goals differ in many ways, one of them - and an important one - being the extent to which they can be gradually consumed (like an apple) or the consummation is an all or nothing affair (some of the examples above).

It should be noted that what has now been to some extent defined is a special case of a much broader category that could be referred to as "social contradictions". This would then define a spectrum where "conflict" would be on one end, and on the other end would be parties rather than actors, with interests rather than goals, ritualistically performing their social

roles where the incompatibilities are not brought out into the open precisely because the parties are not conscious and crystallized enough to become actors and the interests have not, through a process of conscientization been transformed into goals. The contradiction is there in a more latent sense, in the social reality as between parents and children - the parents wanting the children to be pettable, responsive rather than responsible, protected rather than protecting, able to reciprocate the tenderness bestowed upon them by the parents; whereas it might be in the children's interest as soon as possible to conquer platforms in adult life, such as the right to work (not the right to be exploited, though). The transformation from contradictions in general to crystallized conflicts is an important chapter in conflict theory.

One thesis might now be formulated as follows : human history is the history of contradictions that crystallize into conflicts, are acted out, resolved in various ways thereby transforming social reality, in this new reality new contradictions start building up, crystallize into conflicts that in turn are acted out, and so on and so forth. The process goes from infinity to infinity, it has no beginning and no end, it is inextricably linked to human life itself. But the condition for this to happen is that actors act, and one condition for them to act - it will be argued - is that they do not possess perfect certainty about the outcomes of the action. In fact, the absence of perfect certainty might possibly be said to be a characteristic of action as opposed to (ritualistic) behaviour.

In a sense the point is very simple. Take as an example the type of struggle that women all over the world are engaged in today, at various levels of consciousness and crystallization/mobilization. Take the point of departure as it has developed in the industrialized, western, capitalist countries : the family as a feudal/conservative enclave in a capitalist/liberal social formation in which the men participate fully, the women (and the children and the aged) only marginally, being more treated like serfs in those feudal enclaves by "their" men. To say that they are treated as slaves is nonsense : they are not bought and sold, but they are tied to the setting, unfree to move, very limited rights of ownership or disposition of anything, legally inferior, etc.. The fight for the right to divorce is the fight for the right to move from the fief, and (from a man's angle) the right to cut the obligations to maintain that particular fief. The family, like the feudal unit in earlier periods is a set over reciprocal rights and duties, both ways, so there is always a double edge to all the arguments in this context - this is a reason why there is a complementarity, indeed a dialectic to the liberation of women and the liberation of men. For all this to happen women have to become

conscious, they have to mobilize, they have to fight with the various means at their disposal - an obvious one being to go on strike - to refuse to be the helpers preparing the men for participation in macro-society, to groom him when he comes home, wounded from real or imagined battles to participate in "his success".

No doubt we are right now in the transformation phase of contradiction to clear crystallized conflict. But that immediately raises the agonizing question : what is the goal state ? Is it the equal participation of women on a 50% basis, in all positions in capitalist/liberal social formations, whether the capitalism is of the private or state varieties ? If 50% women in CIA and KGB a goal worth fighting for ? - Is the effort to throw doubt on this goal a clever male strategy to keep women in their place, as serfs ? As the conflict proceeds through various types of conflict dynamics such positions will increasingly be conquered, the goal comes closer. The fight has been guided by a vision, a dream - words like "equality" and "social justice" have dominated that dream. As one comes closer the dream fades, the goal recedes; as one mountain is being scaled it not only appears less golden than it looked at a distance, other mountains appear on the horizon behind the first one. On such mountains other goals may be written : "equal participation", yes, but in a different social formation - perhaps - after all - more similar to the family than to the enormous macro-societies that have emerged since the Middle Ages. No doubt as one moves closer to that mountain it will also appear less golden and there will also appear new mountains on the horizon behind that one again, and so on and so forth.

What makes us do all this ? Think of the workers who started early last century or the women who started early this century ; think of the odds against them ! Any kind of knowledge based on relative frequencies would tell them very clearly what the position of workers and women was ; the positivistic attitude carried by the relative frequency interpretation of probability gives to the past a very loud voice, to the future only the promise of stochastic convergence towards the idealized relative frequency, the "probability". A very meager promise indeed, not much material for a dream - except for those who belong to the privileged groups, the elites, largely staffed by mamus (middle-aged men with university education). Think of the odds that are against other groups in the same position when they will start the same fight, marching on the same long road : the old-age home inmates, the pensioners and retired people in general, the children, the very young, the non-intellectuals in an intellectualizing society. If their guidelines were based on knowledge extracted from the past alone inaction would be the

rational consequence and those who would want this type of consequence to be drawn would naturally favour that type of theory. Correspondingly, if they are guided by complete certainty about the future the dreams would fade, the mountains would not seem worth scaling, and even though pushing the stones up new mountains rather than the same mountain as poor old Sisyphus had to do is somewhat more inspiring - there is at least some novelty to the stone pushing - in the longer run it is exasperating to see the stone roll down into the valley again, particularly when one is high enough up to see no limit to the number of mountains ahead. Inaction or the equivilant of this automaton robot action, would be the likely consequence - soulless, uninspired ritualism ; usually referred to as fatalism. There would be no pursuit; no crystallization, no transcendence.

To be human, somehow, seems to have something to do with living in a spectrum between the positivist and the fatalist options. Actually, they are two different ways of saying the same : it is all written up in a big book, there is little we can do, except knowing what is written in that book and then try to live according to that knowledge. It is not up to us to change the text of the book. What positivism promised was that we could get to read the book, even to write it if we promised to let nature (including human society) dictate what we write by respecting what positively exists, what is. The doctrine would be that from "what is, is possible" it follows "what is not is impossible". However, the only thing that follows would be that "what is impossible, is not", which is something different. For there is the potential, the possible, yet not existing.(5)

To this it may be objected that women have known all the time that some women have made it, they have even been queens. In other words, there has been that empirical exception that could serve as a guiding light. The relative frequencies have opened for the possibility of some hope, there has been some uncertainty. But take then the case of children. The present author is absolutely convinced that children have potentials unheard of, under-utilized, even totally unused in the social formations best known to us today. Thus, in a society where by some kind of technology basic needs would be guaranteed satisfied and by some kind of cosmology not more than basic needs satisfaction would be asked for, materially speaking, everybody might be much more interested in playful activity. Would it not be likely that in such societies the children might be the teachers and adults the pupils - particularly adults who had been deformed through participation in highly unplayful social formations ? And how ever this would be, is it not also preposterous to assume that children that are systematically kept away from work (today under the pretext of protecting them from exploitation) would not if they were given a chance of creative (not ritualistic) work activity also develop much more quickly potentials that

adults pride themselves of seeing as the prerogative of adults ? When they actually are well protected interests ?

Neither positivism, nor fatalism are the basic epistemologies that explain why humans sometimes transcend : because we are blessed by uncertainty. That uncertainty can be agonizing everybody knows ; anybody who has passed some of his life in prison can testify that certainty can be even more agonizing. The kinds of things prisoners do in order to inject an element of uncertainty in otherwise completely predictable environments (such as eating forks and knives, playing with their bodies, even with death, in order to gain some new experience, such as an operation) provide ample testimony to this.⁽⁶⁾ And here we are even helped by two uncertainties at the same time : the uncertainty as to whether we will win the fight against the heavy odds, and the uncertainty about the nature of the goal once we are there : the difference between the mountain as viewed from a distance and the mountain as concrete experience. Our gift in rejecting positivist and fatalist orientations, our talent in persuading ourselves the chances are not that bad, even of manoeuvring our perceptions into a corner of perfect uncertainty telling ourselves that past experience does apply in this case, nor the gloomy predictions of those who claim they have explored the social and historical landscape in front of our own forward positions. Thus, if the Third world countries today should really take seriously everything they are told by people from the First world countries about the gloom of overdevelopment, about the social ills of industrial society they might prefer to do nothing at all, thereby lapsing into non-historical, stationary states. This does not mean that they will blindly follow into all the traps and corners the First world has painted itself into. It only means that a vision of higher material level of living serves as a first guideline as a basis for one social intuition that inspires action ; that action itself to be questioned as one comes closer. In general there is little reason to worry that actors of any kind will repeat exactly the mistakes of actors they claim they imitate precisely because of the human talent and indeed need to inject uncertainty in their own action. To imitate, to pursue the trajectory of somebody ahead of oneself is tantamount to fatalism, it means giving away the gift of uncertainty. And in so doing the daring ventures into the unknown out of which new social formations, i.e. transcendence, may ensue will not take place. To make a photocopy is not the same as writing an article - that is why it is wrong to condemn people to photocopying all their time : the certainty of the action kills the transcendence known as personal growth. ⁽⁷⁾

To conclude: we have been extolling the virtues of uncertainty. Clearly, like anything human, the record sheet of uncertainty is not only positive, nor is it as uncomplicated as it is portrayed above. For one thing, it follows from what has been said that crime cannot be eradicated through increasing detection and conviction probabilities : human beings are not made that way. We are capable of transforming certainties into uncertainties, perhaps even more so the more "rational" judgment should inspire very literal interpretations of the past as guidelines for the future. People may abstain from, or not engage in , crime for other reasons : they may simply not want it, get what they want by other means or - possibly the most important anti-mechanism - not be imaginative or daring enough. (Incidentally, if crime is for the daring and the imaginative they may be particularly skilfull in transforming knowledge into belief, doing the opposite of what the more stolid and solid bureaucrats and researchers who theorize about them might have done).

This **also** applies to the concept of incompatibility: not only is uncertainty as to the outcome a necessary condition for risk-taking in situations of contradiction and conflict; uncertainty about the incompatibility is also important. Take the "incompatibility" between work and enjoyment : for he who has work the outcome of which has an element of uncertainty work may be a source of enjoyment, but also of pain, agony; it is only when the work is surrounded by certainties in all directions that - at least after a while - it becomes almost certain that it is incompatible with enjoyment.

In this there is also a reason why the regimes in Eastern Europe do not seem to work very well : there is that dream of the surprise-free society. Planning is reduction of uncertainty and there is no argument here that there is no scope for planning : there are uncertainties we can do without (eg. relating to earth-quakes; they could be transformed into certainties that they will not occur without that certainty causing much harm). But the perfectly planned, benevolent society is in for greater surprises than the malevolent society ridden with uncertainties : people will create uncertainties, although, admittedly, many of them may be ⁱⁿ the spiritual rather than in the material sphere (a reason why people nevertheless seek the agony of uncertainty of salvation in materially guaranteed countries).

In short : do not take uncertainties away from us humans. They can be overdone, but they are the material out of which human and social development are made.

* Paper prepared for a Festschrift in honor of Professor John Cohen, University of Manchester. The indebtedness to his work is clear from the article, both to the many articles from his hand, and to the particularly instructive introduction to his type of thinking as found in Cohen and Christensen, Information and Choice, Oliver and Boyd, Edinburgh, 1970.

(1) Carnap's expression is as rational and Carnap himself seems to be, as judged from his books. People like Carnap are probably poor guides to how most of humanity experiences phenomena like "probability" - at least they should conduct much experimental research in order to have their judgments checked with some touch of reality.

(2) Von Mises in his important work did the job of giving the study of probability its positivist touch - but it is remarkable how the notion of probability, like God, democracy, liberty and what not, even socialism, seems to survive all efforts at defining them.

(3) Laplace, borrowing from the general ars conjectandi tradition, was probably much too much influenced by dice, and by the idea that true, honest dice are not biased; when there is deviation from equiprobability something dishonest or wrong is at work.

(4) See as an example the otherwise excellent book edited by Peter Hall, Europe 2000, Duckworth, London 1977 - which predicts and prescribes future states, but not the action leading to them. What kind of attitude will the book engender in the reader? A feeling that this is probably going to happen anyhow, hence no action is needed? A desire to work out for him- and herself the missing links, the actions required? The question is whether people want to work out actions if the consequences are too well known in advance - a basic problem for all concerned with future studies.

(5) For a development of this theme, see Johan Galtung, Methodology and Ideology, Ejlers, Copenhagen, 1977, chapter 2 on "Empiricism, Criticism, Constructivism".

(6) See Johan Galtung, Fengselssamfunnet (The Prison Community), Oslo 1957, for an analysis of what prisoners do in one particular prison to decrease certainty. Also, indeed, see John Cohen, "Uncertainty and Risk-Taking in Crime", Bull. Br. psychol. Soc. (1970), pp. 293-96

(7) For the general theory of conflict underlying some of the reflections in this article, see Theories of Conflict, forthcoming - a work originally started upon the encouragement of John Cohen, and so far only twelve years behind schedule; a good example of uncertainty at work. But the gratitude to John Cohen for having asked me to undertake this task is as great as ever and like the man who always says "it is twelve o'clock" the person who, like me, says "forthcoming" may also eventually be proven right.