

The Power of Chance

The uncanny role of luck in our lives

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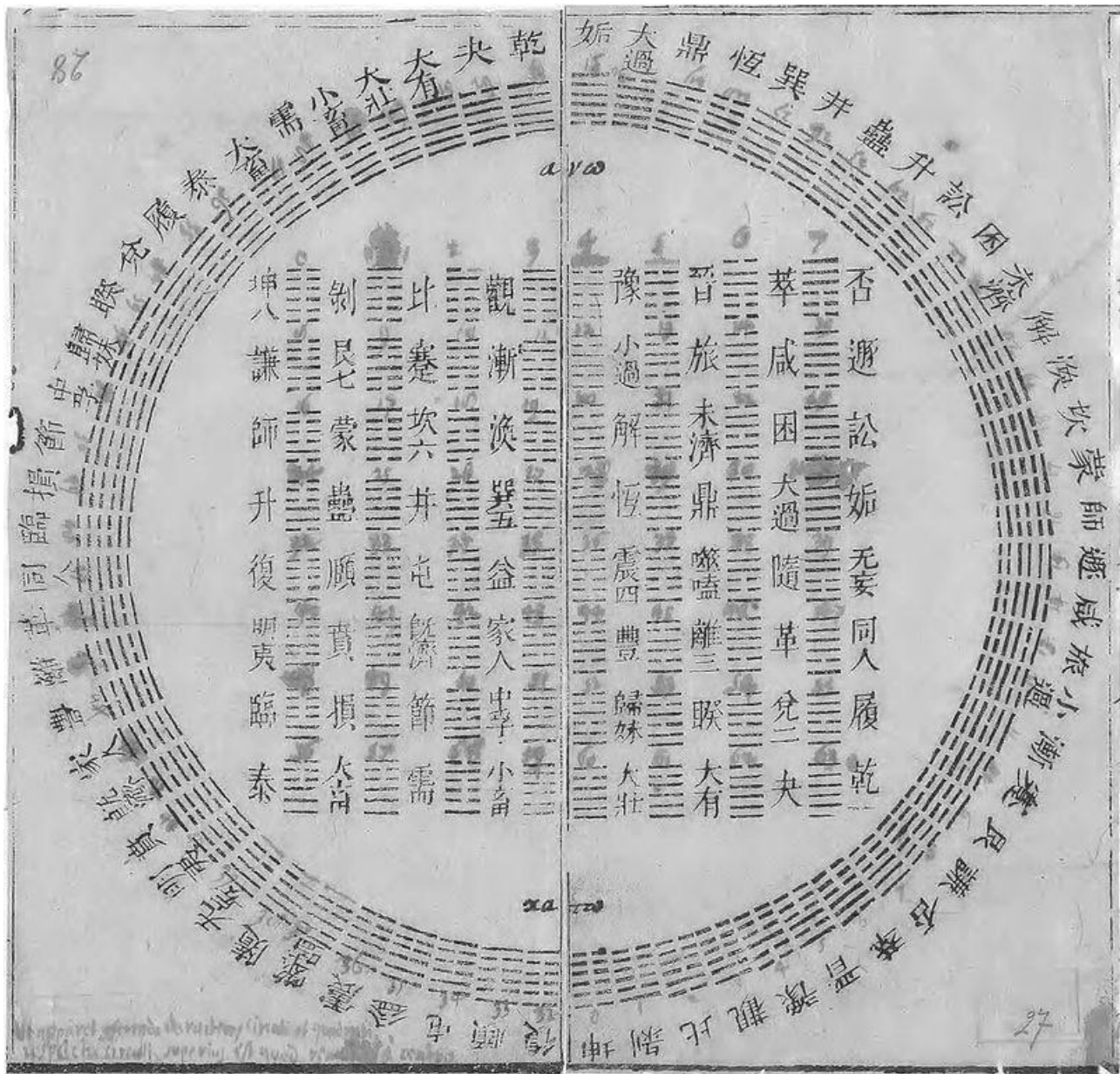


Diagram of the 64 I Ching hexagrams, owned by Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, 1701 ([public domain](#))

Introduction: Origins

Many, if not most, events may be a matter of luck, occurring almost by accident. The fact that you exist involves an incredibly complex singularity of chance events: your parents fornicated on a specific

date at a specific time, and from one egg and one in millions of sperm, there was manifested a certain specific zygote; nine months passed and you were born, emerging fully formed, although not yet autonomous, and quite angry about having no idea what was happening. Lucky for you, the earth had previously emerged seemingly from nothingness over a period of billions of years, as the solar system coalesced out of dust and gas, orbiting in oblivion around the black hole at the center of the Milky Way galaxy, where the earth happened, by sheer accident, to begin orbiting the sun at a surpassingly fortuitous distance, allowing for life to emerge in the liquid water that came to encircle the globe, followed by millions of years of evolution. The odds of *you* coming into existence are unrepeatable and nigh impossible. According to science, our existence is altogether implausible, yet here we are.

Explaining Our Origins

We should not be surprised, therefore, that religions and philosophies, for thousands of years, have contrived to explain our origins using theology, mysticism, magic, or science. The account I've given above is, of course, a scientifically informed account based on huge swaths of relatively recently accumulated knowledge, ostensibly based, at this point, on established fact. It would be indiscreet to take this knowledge for granted. Compared to the thousands of years of the history of the human species, we are incredibly privileged to have this knowledge at our disposal. And it shows no signs of going away or diminishing, but rather of increasing *ad nauseam*.

The natural sciences allow us to peer into the unknown in unprecedented ways: biology leads to innovations in medicine, physics and chemistry lead to innovations in technology, psychology allows us to understand the human brain. The human mind and outer space represent two contrary, yet analogous, "final frontiers" within the natural sciences: psychology represents the microcosm, astronomy and astrophysics represent the macrocosm. Elon Musk wants to send humans to Mars. But if we're not careful, the dual "final frontiers" of space travel and psychology may come to hold a

merely utilitarian place in the human ecosystem, much as the automobile, trains, and airplanes have come to represent both a blessing and a curse: we can travel anywhere on earth for a small sum, and pollute the planet out of existence at the same time!

Human beings have not always had modern science, medicine, and technology to explain existence, treat disease and prolong life expectancy, transport us from one place to another, or to distract ourselves until we fall into a bored stupor. With the approaching advent of interplanetary space travel, the fate of humanity seems more and more to be in the hands of scientists and physicists. Elon Musk is the wealthiest person on earth. His goals are probably not out of reach. Yet he, too, is subject to the fact that he was born on planet earth, which used to be gas and dust floating in empty space.

Amor Fati

The fact is that without the entire history of human endeavor, none of what exists today, including me or you, *could* exist. In the words of the poet T. S. Eliot at the beginning of his *Four Quartets*:

*Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past.*

The same is true of the natural sciences. Without the contributions of revolutionary figures such as Aristotle, Leonardo da Vinci, and Francis Bacon — the latter of whom first wrote about the scientific method — we could not have developed modern science, modern medicine, or modern technology.

This indebtedness perhaps represents one important angle on Friedrich Nietzsche's concept, in *The Gay Science*, of *amor fati* ("love of fate"):

I want to learn more and more to see as beautiful what is necessary in things; then I shall be one of those who makes things beautiful. Amor fati: let that be my love henceforth! I do not want to wage war against what is ugly. I do not want to accuse; I do not

even want to accuse those who accuse. Looking away shall be my only negation. And all in all and on the whole: some day I wish to be only a Yes-sayer. (The Gay Science, §276)

For Nietzsche, fate has the element of inevitability, and not to love fate would be to rebel against necessity, a futile comportment in relation to an indifferent matter. Assuming one's ultimate role in all its singularity involves "Yes-saying," the affirmation of existence and the opportunity to participate in existence.

I Ching

Naturally, many religions throughout human history have taken an interest in luck and chance. The *I Ching*, one of the Five Classics of Confucianism and also a major text in Taoism, represents perhaps one of the most important, as well as ancient, examples of a religious text that takes special interest in chance. In fact, chance takes on a primary role in the text. In the *I Ching*, there are 64 hexagrams — combinations of six horizontal lines, either solid or broken — each of which has an accompanying explanation and ethical wisdom. Although the entries of all 64 hexagrams arguably have practical application and universality, the idea of the *I Ching* is that *which* hexagrams are chosen and which passages read, depends on a divination process dependent on chance. Not unlike modern-day tarot, the idea behind the *I Ching* is that chance represents a primary force in the world, and that by studying and practicing *I Ching* one may take part in the influence and processes of chance; chance is no accident, but is fateful and decisive.

Taoism

Taoism is one of the several world religions that reveres the *I Ching* as a major text. Other important texts within Taoism include the *Tao Te Ching* (6th century BCE) and the *Chuang Tzu* (written during the Warring States period, which lasted from 476–221 BCE). The *Tao Te Ching* is attributed to Lao Tzu ("Old Master"), a mythical sage.

A central concept within the *Tao Te Ching* is *wu wei* (無為), which means "without action" or "effortless action," which is related to *wei*

wu wei (為無為), “action without action.” These concepts refer to what might be tempting for westerners to refer to as “efficacious” or “efficient” action, although in fact western notions of efficiency may often contradict the spirit of “effortless” action in Taoism. Western notions of efficiency may be understood as having an element of utilitarianism, while in Taoism the concept of *wu wei* is more nearly associated with virtue and even ethics.

The first chapter of the *Tao Te Ching* seems to echo the spirit of renouncing desire in Buddhism:

Free from desire, you realize the mystery.

Caught in desire, you see only the manifestations. (Tao Te Ching, 1)

The role of chance is less apparently central to the *Tao Te Ching* than it is crucial in the *I Ching*, but the mystical component of Taoism may help us to understand its place within the sphere of Taoism. In the *Chuang Tzu*, everything in existence is closely connected simply by virtue of its existence:

Master Dongguo asked Zhuangzi, “This thing called the Way — where does it exist?”

Zhuangzi, said, “There’s no place it doesn’t exist.”

“Come,” said Master Dongguo, “you must be more specific!”

“It is in the ant.”

“As low a thing as that?”

“It is in the panic grass.”

“But that’s lower still!”

“It is in the tiles and shards.”

“How can it be so low?”

“It is in the piss and shit!”

Master Dongguo made no reply. (Zhuangzi, Chapter 22, pp. 346–347)

The Tao is in everything, and because everything is connected and interdependent (not unlike the concept of “emptiness” in Zen Buddhism), it is even in the lowest things. Because everything is interconnected, chance involves the immediate interrelations between everything.

Secular Perspectives

It is tempting to dismiss the perspectives of the past wholesale, particularly religious ones, on the basis of our more recently acquired and ostensibly superior scientific knowledge. And the scientific method would seem to justify this. Why settle for a superstitious explanation for a phenomenon when facts are available? But to understand the past — our origins — is to retain our ties to the past; without the past, there could be no present and no future. Religion acted for centuries as an insulation against the harsh realities of life and the existence of widespread ignorance. People needed an explanation, and sought answers in the unknown, seemingly providing for themselves through sheer invention *ex nihilo*.

Yet religion always provided needed wisdom and ethical lessons. It seems fairly common that people have done away with morality along with religion itself; if the religion was a lie all along, then its ethical prescriptions must also have been based on nothing. So the people turn to nihilism. Yet all along, it seems needful that we should recognize the past and honor it, at the very least, in proportion as it provided for its time. The value of the present moment, too, can be doubted out of existence. Nihilism, it seems, has replaced religion as the universal faith. (Read about my ideas on nihilism, ethics, and the role of thought, in my article "[Not All Ideas Are Good Ideas](#).”)

Religion Reconsidered

Many religions — Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, for instance — place a high value on ethical conduct and gratitude. It is, of course, difficult to argue for the existence of, say, the God of these monotheistic religions. A believer and a nonbeliever could argue all day and get nowhere. But there *is* something to be said for the value of gratitude. One need not even be religious to acknowledge the value of appreciating the opportunity to live — and choose *how* to live — in the moment. The given moment, of course, represents a fateful coalescence of forces, unprecedented and unrepeatable. The freedom to choose certainly plays a decisive role

within religion and externally to it. The choice of Adam and Eve to eat the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil in Eden represents a biblical example. In secular terms, Jean-Paul Sartre formulates that we are “condemned to be free.”

Freedom

What is clear is that many people, if not most, go about their days without thinking much on the sheer implausibility of their existence, or even of the past that led up to the present moment, or of the future, which is shrouded in obscurity, but which we strive to control and turn to our advantage. The future itself represents a kind of quantum unknown, often completely beyond our awareness. The fact is that, with Jean-Paul Sartre, we must accept the occasion for freedom and action and face the unknown, regardless of our level of preparedness.

For Søren Kierkegaard, sometimes considered the father of existentialism, the state of being *free*, of being able to choose, involves a certain risk. His book *The Sickness Unto Death* illuminates the nature of that risk with the formula *despair is sin*. For Kierkegaard, despair is an inauthentic psychological state that results from an improper orientation to the world, to the facts, to God, or to oneself. Jean-Paul Sartre, perhaps with Kierkegaard in the back of his mind, put forward, in his existentialist magnum opus *Being and Nothingness*, the concept of *mauvaise foi*, “bad faith.” Bad faith refers to an inauthentic relationship to oneself, which is occasioned by an inauthentic mindset in the orientation of oneself to one’s environs.

Conclusion

In the end, it is entirely up to us how we choose to spend our time. But the fact remains that we are located at a certain specific point in time — which is constantly flowing from one moment to the next — and at a certain specific place, and we find ourselves perhaps within the company of certain other human beings. Perhaps it is needful that we should approach our engagements and lives with a view to the freedom to do as we like, intentionally, in each

subsequent moment, and not lose sight of where we have come from or where we are going.

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