

Event Horizon

Brian Massumi

From *The Art of the Accident*
edited by Joke Brouwer
(Rotterdam : Dutch Architecture Institute/V2, 1998), pp.154-168

System. Routine. At a certain conjuncture, the unfolding of the physical system's line of actions interrupts. The system momentarily suspends itself. It has not become inactive. It is in ferment. It has gone "critical." This "chaotic" interlude is not the simple absence of order. It is in fact a super-ordered state. In chaos theory, it is conceived as the co-presence of all of the possible paths the system may take: their physical inclusion in one another.

Criticality is when what are normally mutually exclusive alternatives pack into the materiality of the system. The system is no longer acting and outwardly reacting according to physical laws unfolding in linear fashion. It is churning, running over its own possible states. It has folded in on itself, becoming materially self-referential, animated not by external relations of cause-effect but by an intensive interrelating of versions of itself. The system is a knot of mutually implicated alternative transformations of itself, in material resonance. Which transformation actually occurs, what the next outward connection will be, cannot be predicted by extrapolating from physical laws. The suspended system is in too heightened a state of transformability. It is hypermutable. Hyperconnectible, by virtue of having disconnected itself. The system hesitates, works through the problem of its critical self-referentiality, and "chooses" an unfolding.

When scientists use words like "choice" they are of course not implying that the system humanly reflects, applying instrumental reason to choose from a set of pre-established possibilities arrayed before it and liable to mutual substitution. But it is no exaggeration to call the system's intensive animation thought, defined as "the reality of an excess over the actual." Its possible futures are present, in the system, in its matter. In effect: incipient effect (resonance and interference, vibration and turbulence, unfoldable into an array, an order).

Possibility has, in effect, materialized. The matter of the system has entered a state where it does not extrapolate into an abstract possibility, and instead effectively absorbs possibilities, en masse, into its animated matter. Materially present possibility is potential. The system's criticality, of course, is as actual as any other state. What is in excess-over is the self-referentiality of the system's critical condition, its doubling back on itself en masse. What the self-absorbed system infolds is materially co-present in that way: in potential.

Implex: potential in-animates the actual conjunction (it is not separable from it). Excess: potential doubles the actual conjunction (it is not reducible to it). Potential is the implicate double of the actual.

Call a form of thought that is materially self-referential as opposed to reflective; that absorbs possibility rather than extrapolating it; that does not imply a distance between successive states of a system, mediated by an intervening action, but rather their immediate proximity to each other, their inclusion in one another; that

therefore embodies a super-order of superposition rather than arraying an order of substitution; that materializes an unpredictable futurity rather than abstracting alternate outcomes from itself and from each other; that infolds before extending; that chooses unsubordinated to the established regularities of linear causality - call that kind of thought operative reason. Not the purposive analysis-toward-action of instrumental reason: a hesitant self-definition in suspension. Not an extending out of matter into thought-substitution, nor a doubling of perception by thought: a folding of thought into matter, at a point of indistinguishability with perception. Matter self-perceiving, doubling itself with its variations.

Instrumental reason makes thoughtfully, actfully explicit what is materially implied by the criticality of operative reason. Instrumental reason is operative reason's unfolding, its extension. Instrumental reason doubles perception with possibility: thought-out futurities in extrinsic relation to each other; mutually exclusive paths standing outside and against each other. Untangled by routine. Only thought, unimplicated. Arrayed in an extensive system whose alternate paths are separate and set. In a word, well-trodden. Already only thought, and now anticipating. Reflecting a re-think, in a next act, an anticipated next step. Retrospective-projective, before-after, looping. Possibility is potential extended, in action reflective of, simply repeating, thought. Simplex.

Potential extended: prosthesis of potential. The possible is the out-folded, out-worn double of the doubling that is potential, the simplex thought-shadow it retrospectively projects, in anticipatory action. Potential's intense, implex-excess (complex) vagueness recognized; thought-reflectively repeated. The possible pales to lucidity next to the felt turbulence of the critical. It is the pallor of potential. As a Bergsonian reading of the critical point, or bifurcation point, might have it. The critical point may be an interregnum between two different orders, two different systemic organizations with their characteristic paths of actions and reactions. Or, it may constitute a threshold between disorder and order, an entropically disordered past and a future of systemic organization. The most celebrated example of the latter case is the Bénard instability, which occurs when turbulent patterns of diffusion in a heated liquid spontaneously order into convection cells. The ordering is not predictable in terms of heat diffusion alone. In fact, according to the theory of heat diffusion it is so improbable that, in principle, it must be considered practically impossible (Prigogine and Stengers 1984, pp. 142-43). Yet it happens. Theorists of such "dissipative structures" explain that the self-organizing of liquid into a convection system is triggered because the instability of the situation suddenly makes the liquid "sensitive" to gravity (Prigogine and Stengers 1984, pp. 163-5; Prigogine and Stengers 1988: 59-60). Gravity suddenly registers, and resonates. It infolds. Gravity is no longer an independent variable framing the system. It is a variation of the system. Its registering is one with the event of the system's self-variation. No longer a law of nature: an in-system event-trigger. It is this in-fold sensing, this in-sensing, of a force that up to that point was not pertinent to the system and had been "ignored" that triggers the self-ordering transformation. Operative reason is a notice of force, a call to attention of matter to force, in a self-referential in-acting of the event of its own practical impossibility. Attention: in-tension.

Operative reason concerns the intensity of sensation more directly than the outwearing of perception. The difference being: sensation is immanent perception (event in-triggering); and perception is sensation acted out (extended into an already only-thought array reflected and pre-reflected in action).

2. HABIT AND HIATUS

The system is you. Reabsorbing possibility, yielding (to) potential. Your life is one long dissipation. The "certain conjuncture" at which criticality is reached is each and every sensation. At every step you ground and orient yourself, using gravity to propel you along your habit-ridden line of daily actions. Mid-step, you are suspended: between falling and walking, ground and air, left, right, and straight. Hiatus. Without duration, measureless, less a pose or repose than a pure passing, from one equilibrium-saving footfall to the next, through a ever-shifting center of gravity that has no more extension, is no more actual, than any other mathematical point. But that is no less real for being virtual (governing as it does your potential bodily movement).

Physical laws, says C.S. Peirce, are habits of matter (pp. 223-224; 277-279). Gravity is a habit of mass. Always already felt. As already felt, each and every sensation is a law unto itself. Laws: a law of association arraying before (and after) it a set of familiar next steps, possible follow-up thought-perceptions, personal or conventional; and laws of usage of many kinds (next-step possible actions, more likely conventional than personal). Symbol and function. Not yet only thought. Still in action, bound up with perception. In situation. In mix. So familiar, so automatic, as to be ignored. Every sensation is a gravitational pull, grounding and orienting your nextness in pre-arrays of symbol and function. The ambulant germ of the possible: habit.

At the same time, each and every sensation is a virtual center where lines of action conveying pre-arrayed thought constrict into a point of pure passing: hiatus.

Mid-step, in passing, something registers and resonates. It hits you where your equilibrium shifts. The virtual point that is the spatial center of gravity is also the durationless, measureless time of impact. Here and now (always already given) before you know it (not already thought-out in action-perception). Where habit meets event.

Arbitrarily restrict the term "sensation" to the impact at virtual center. Call habituating sensation "situation."

Sensations call habit to eventful attention. They impinge with force. They impact. They arrive, and insist (on the practical impossibility of their own systemic envelopment). Sensation is the transformational call-back to feeling of the so-automatic as to be ignored.

Renewal of feeling, feeling of the new, only felt: shock. Shock is the model of sensation, as it happens. Sensation is the advent of the event of potential, from the virtual center of movement, materially called to in-tension.

If habit is a repetitive-reflective loop (between pre-thought action-perception and the only thought), then in hiatus of the event the loop falls in. It tightens into a churning circuit. Habit circuits in and out, as it happens. It falls into the center governing potential. And no sooner folds back out toward the realm of possibility. In-step, mid-step. Possibility into potential, equilibrated reflection into critical self-referencing, repetition into renewal. And back again. Habit and hiatus.

3. YOUR FREEDOM AND YOUR FLATNESS

Mid-step, on the way to work, your tired eye catches a sidelong glimmer of spring sun. The beam enters your brain obliquely and instantly suffuses, imbuing the volume of your flesh with the change of season. Riding the beam, a sweet waft of an early bloom accents the familiar petrochemical bouquet of the city in motion. You are transported. The touch of the light tinges you with a fragrance of escape. Then a sudden screech of brakes returns you. Your fatigue has been shaken. It is not in the spot you returned to. It lies ahead, at work, and behind, at home. The thought of it, not here, thrills. The thought of walking back into it ... All the life unlived. You can do without. Leave it. Start over. A sudden resolve takes hold. You turn from the path. Midstep over the curb your awakened eyes do not even obliquely see the oncoming laundry truck.

The synaesthetic sensation of pungent volume-filling light-motion hits you with escape. The sensation envelops what you feel to be your freedom, a veer. Which in the next step envelops your fate, your flatness. The way in which your flatness is enveloped in your freedom is different from the way in which your freedom is enveloped in the sensation, which is different again from the way the well-trodden paths of habit are embedded in the situation. The path to work and back, as well as tried-and-true relative escapes (such as calling in sick for the day), are already-thought out possibilities constitutive of the situation. They are worn by the inattentive body as it makes its rounds (already-thought-out-worn). On the other hand, the radical escape of a veer from the tried-and-true is unthinkable in the terms laid down by the situation. It hits in a moment of distraction, directly entering the flesh with unexpected impact, demanding attention. Only afterwards is it consciously recognized, as concluded by the now attentive body from its material effects. Once recognized, a logical path from the situation of departure to the escape can be easily reconstituted, and subsequently accessed more easily, less intensely, more or less distractedly. A new possibility. But the reconstitution is exactly that: a retrospective construct. The new possibility of the radical veer

follows its accomplishment. It is added to the situation after the situation has been taken leave of. Nothing in the situation as such could have suggested it. Possibility is retroactively situated unsituation.

Before being retrospectively possibilized, the veer out of the situation was embodied, unthinkable, in the situation. Potential: unsituation sensibly and unthinkable impacting on the situation. Potential is the out of the situation materialized in situation as an unpredictable but logically recuperable event, felt before being thought out. Sensation envelops potential as a degree of freedom of the situation: its own outside, critically doubling in on it, in-veering from it. Possibility is retroactively enveloped as the thinkably out-worn double of that double.

The crush of the truck is an event of a different kind: a post-veer arrival, rather than a departure. The sequence of events leading to it can also be retrospectively reconstituted. But that path will never enter the logic of the situation or of situations like it. Senseless splattering of flesh. The only response to the bloody truth of it is disbelief. Accident. Pure, senseless contingency. If only you had turned and looked. If only the tenant of the first-floor apartment had waited a week to plant those flowers. If only the truck driver hadn't been speeding ... It was fated. Fated, but not by those facts, or any possible logic of the situation. It was fated by the sensation. The impact of the sensation was the strike of fate, catalyzing an irrecoverable event. The accident, chance catalysis, pure contingency, unfolded from fateful freedom: this is the virtual. But on arrival, as actualized, the virtual is ex-centric: the center of gravity collapsed. Potential movement arrayed on the pavement. Possibility not only worn-out, but wasted, utterly exhausted. The out of all situation. "Impassivity" of the event (Deleuze, pp. 5, 96, 100 (translated as "impassibility")).

If shock is the model of sensation as it happens, and sensation is the trigger of life potential, it is death that is the model of the virtual (Deleuze, pp. 151-53). Which is not to say that the virtual is always so parabolically deadly. Only that death is the most suggestive figure for the actualization of the virtual (of the reality of the inactual). Every chance, every contingency, every senseless out of every situation, is a little virtuality, a modest death, a rupture, an interval of being. After which life continues, still. Possibility and potential re-engage. Situation clamps back down. Next steps array themselves. Habitual paths stretch before and behind. Rounds. Return. Recapture. With something having shifted, something having changed. The new. Circuit of transformation.

Possibility, potential, virtuality: sequencing, veering, rupture; linearity, hiatus of intensity, impassive interval; the predictable, unpredictability, the senseless; the only thought, the thinkable, the unthinkable; the already felt, the felt, the insensate; the possible, the possibilizable, the impossibly real; the possible, the "practically impossible," the impossible in principle; the instrumental, the operative, and the contingent; same, change, chance.

The possible, the potential, and the virtual can be figured as mutually enveloping, in a complex play of doublings, veerings, arrivals and returns. Ins-outs. It is the virtual that doubly describes the limits of the fold: a shifting center so central as to be inactual; an ex-centering fog of contingency encompassing life in an

impenetrably vague ring of eventfulness. The virtual doubly describes the unity of a life, between limits: measureless depth and insubstantial surface, together. Inside-outside limit: immanent limit. Immanent to bodily change, enveloped in potential, outside possibility and predictability. The event horizon.

The unity, or event horizon, of a life is the immanent unsituation of its matter, its body. In situation, by contrast, a life is incrementally pulled out of itself, into habit. It is put to work: death by attrition. Another limitation, this time of the situation, in and of it. This intrinsic, as opposed to immanent, limit is slowly disintegrative rather than crushingly unifying. Accident versus attrition. Ex-centric collapse of the center of gravity versus entropic run-down (infinite dissipation uncountered by critical conditions). Singularity against the most general habit of matter.

Think of the center of gravity as a contraction of the ring of vagueness that is the event-horizon. And think of the ring as an expansion of the center from which the center has been excised. Think of them together, as a simultaneous contraction and expansion, as a center that is its own excision, a pure passing that is pure arrival. Think of them together as a black hole (in actuality, in possibility, and in potential). The "singularity" of a life is a better word than "unity." In cosmology, a black hole is a "singularity" where a point in the universe falls outside it, into "infinite curvature." By dint of material excess. A situated point ins itself out, rejoining the farthest edge of the universe, burrowing into depths of the universe at the same time as circumscribing its surface, describing a universal no-time no-place where no laws tread, where excess matter is impassive energy, where everything that passes arrives for never and more. That cosmic feeling. The universe sensing itself, touching its limits. In the most critical of conditions, rehearsing the "big crunch" at the other end of the bang.

NOTES

Bergson, Henri. "The Possible and the Real. In *Creative Mind*," trans. Mabelle L. Audison. New York: Philosophical Library, 1946.

Deleuze, Gilles. "The Logic of Sense." Trans. Mark Lester with Charles Stivale. Ed. Constantin Boundas. New York: Columbia University Press, 1990.

Peirce, C.S. "Design and Chance; A Guess at the Riddle." In *The Essential Peirce*, vol. 1. Ed. Nathan Houser and Christian Kloesel. Indianapolis: University of Indiana Press, 1992.

Prigogine, Ilya and Isabelle Stengers. "Order Out of Chaos." New York: Bantam, 1984.

Prigogine, Ilya and Isabelle Stengers. "Entre le temps et l'éternité." Paris: Fayard, 1988.