Perspective

A newsletter for widening your point of view

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Issue 7

Richard Bach, in his book *Illusions*, states a handy aphorism: **Perspective – use it or lose it**. This periodical shares amongst recreation and tourism management professionals, such as yourself, several tools and concepts which will help exercise your perspective. This issue considers a smorgasbord of items. I think the most important is taking a leaf from James Oberg's approach to understanding life – keep an open mind, but not so open that your brains fall out.

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Vitamin G

Heading down to the café to share some 'social intelligence' is, according to anthropologist Pascal Boyer, a form of participation in, "perhaps the most fundamental [of] human activities, as important to survival and reproduction as most other cognitive capacities and emotional dispositions."[1] Perhaps describing gossip as Vitamin G[2] is therefore not so silly.

Boyer states that humans exist in a 'cognitive niche', partly as a result of our living in a well-perceived 'informational milieu'. We devote immense mental capacity to maintaining our position in this niche by gathering and processing data about the people around us.

Five social skills are important, and for each we apparently have specialised behind-the-scenes mental processing systems in place. They are: *social intelligence* (knowing many individuals' characteristics and their relationships – more than just a memory game); *social exchange* (knowing what quality of wine to bring to a dinner party – a very complicated exchange calculator); *evaluating trust* (intuitively reading body and spoken language); *coalition dynamics* (the whole game of forming groups to achieve common goals); and perhaps the linchpin, *a taste for gossip*.

Research by anthropologists indicates that gossip is practised everywhere, enjoyed everywhere and despised everywhere, and there is an art to it. Good gossip (social intelligence, remember) focuses on one or more topics: people's status, their resources and their sexual activities (as does any TV drama). Getting off those topics makes gossip less interesting in any society.

While the information is relished, and often useful, why is the art of gossip frowned upon? Gossip is information about other people, especially information that they would not normally want broadcast. Naturally, we're not so keen on other people gossiping about us (to retain a strategic advantage). We also wish to appear trustworthy (I'm not one to gossip, but ….). We desire ourselves to be seen as a person who will not betray secrets or spread information beyond the circle of our real friends.

It's hard being human. It is a comfort then that Boyer states, "our ambivalence does not mean that contempt for gossip is hypocritical."

I'm not one to gossip, but I have a relevant specialised mental inference system that would otherwise go to waste. ❖

[1] Boyer, Pascal (2001). *Religion Explained*. Basic Books. p123

[2] Dave Bamford, pers comm. Oddly enough, the real Vitamin G (riboflavin or Vitamin B2) aids in growth and reproduction and promotes healthy skin, nails, and hair.

Proving the pudding

The exception proves the rule is a saying that has always perplexed me. As an aphorism it appears to make no sense, but it is trotted out regularly. Think about it. How can a rule be proven by an exception? By rights, an exception to a rule should do the opposite.

Bill Bryson solves the riddle[3]. The saying includes what is called a *fossil* word; in this case, 'prove'. A fossil word is preserved in a contemporary saying, although the word itself may no longer be in use or has a changed meaning. For example, *neck* once described a parcel of land, hence the expression 'neck of the woods'.

Prove previously meant 'to test' and is now fossilised in such sayings as 'the proof of the pudding is in the eating'.

So, an exception *tests* the rule. Which is actually an oxymoron. An *outlier* would test a rule. An exception, according to the Chambers dictionary, is something which is taken or left out or is excluded. How something which is excluded can be considered to be relevant to a specific rule is beyond me, unless the rule expressly applies to excluded items. In which case, the exception would be the target and not a test. ❖

Relativity (special)

I suspect a lot more people own Stephen Hawking's book, *A Brief History of Time,* than have read it, myself included. Anything by the physicist Paul Davies is, however, a must-read[4] (if you're into that sort of thing). There's nothing like feeling smug about thinking you might actually understand Einstein's special theory of relativity. You'll recall that the special theory was about the nature of time and the speed of light, and the general theory of relativity was about gravity (space-time). I have no real idea about the latter, but I reckon this is the special theory in a nutshell.

Once there was two theories. One – from Newton and Galileo – that motion is relative. If I'm running at the same speed as you, our relative motion is nil and we can have a conversation. In an airliner at altitude, you don't notice the motion till you hit an updraft and your motion relative to the plane changes. This basic 'principle of relativity' was central to physics before Einstein. The other theory was to do with electrodynamics – the theory of which ascribed a fixed value to the speed of light and other electromagnetic waves, with no room for variation.

[3] Bryson, Bill (1999). *Mother Tongue.* Penguin. p73

[4] Davies, Paul (1996). *About Time.* Touchstone.

Clearly these two theories were incompatible. If I ran as fast as a light pulse, one theory suggests we could chat, and the other states that I'd still see the pulse receding at its fixed speed (although in fact, we'd just both arrive at our destination pretty much instantaneously).

Einstein sorted this out by realising that both theories were right, but that our understanding of time was not. Time is not a constant, but is relative to speed[5] (and gravity, but that's another theory).

A light year is a funny thing. We perceive a photon of light as taking a fixed period of time to travel a particular distance. The photon, from its point of view, takes no time at all to go from point A to B (or to point F or Z).

Consider the muon. These are short-lived sub-atomic particles generated by collisions between cosmic radiation and the nuclei of atoms in the upper atmosphere, 20 kilometres above the ground. Muons live for a few millionths of a second before decaying into electrons. In that same length of time a photon of light can travel a kilometre, and yet these little muons often reach the ground. That's a conundrum. But of course, the muons are travelling at near the speed of light. While any muon will always only exist for a very short time, in our stationary frame of reference a speeding muon exists for a much longer period. In muon time, nothing changes whether it's travelling fast or slow (apart from the distance it can travel). In earth time, the muon appears to persist longer by virtue of its speed – time enough to travel the 20 kilometres to the ground. Faster muons last longer. The reverse theory applies to Nissan Skylines. ❖

Beautiful aliens

What would an extraterrestrial look like? Not that we'll ever meet one. Two authors suggest this significant lack of likelihood.

Scientist Carl Sagan penned a lengthy response to America's apparent wide-spread belief in many aspects of pseudo-science, including alien abductions, titled *The Demon-haunted World*[6]. In this he recites his well-known saying that if, as it was estimated, an alien abduction was occurring every few seconds, "It's surprising more of the neighbours haven't noticed." Sagan maintained an open mind about the potential existence of extraterrestrials, and even instigated the SETI programme, monitoring radio waves emanating from deep space. However, he also quotes space engineer James Oberg who suggested that keeping an open mind is a virtue – but not so open that your brains fall out.

Simon Conway Morris – a Professor of Evolutionary Palaeobiology at Cambridge – takes the discussion a lot further in his book *Life's Solution*[7]. The subtitle for the book encapsulates his argument: *Inevitable humans in a lonely universe*. Morris considers the general inhospitality of galaxies, solar systems and planets to conclude that while there may be life out there it's unlikely to be common or living anywhere near us. As Douglas Adams enjoyed pointing out in *The Hitch Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy:* "Space is big. Really big. You just won't believe how vastly hugely mindbogglingly big it is…. The simple truth is that interstellar distances will not fit into the human imagination."[8]

Morris is actually most interested in convergent evolution, and uses the question of what life on another planet could be like to frame the argument. Essentially, how would an extraterrestrial ecosystem function and would its inhabitants look anything like the denizens of planet earth?

One thesis is that if we ran the evolutionary cycle again on earth the outcome would be entirely different. Every chance occurrence would cause a shift in the pathway followed. Morris, on the other hand, points out some simple consistent evolutionary outcomes. My favourite example is the mole and its fossorial (adapted for digging) companions. Apparently there are 150 genera of these burrowing creatures spread across the continents and a few islands. Almost all have evolved separately (they share no common fossorial ancestor) but replicate much of the same physiology, behaviour and even some genetic aspects. This includes rudimentary eyes, powerful forelimbs, big claws and small testicles in the males (useful when you have to drag them through a tunnel)[9].

The implication is that given the narrow band of suitability for life on any planet, if there are light soils suitable for burrowing, there will most likely be burrowing creatures with big teeth, large forelimbs and poor eyesight. I think the jury would be out on the testicles.

It stands to reason. There is a limited range of habitats – solids (earth), gas (an atmosphere) and liquids (most likely water). Some form of streamlining is often useful. Furry birds are rare (the kiwi comes close, but does not fly). Perhaps that's an alien to the right? ❖

For Your Interest

Diversity and water have been the themes of the past 12 months. A most interesting experience has been assisting Meridian Energy with their response to the Waitaki Water Allocation Board's draft water allocation plan for the Waitaki Catchment. Earlier this century we worked on the Project Aqua assessment of effects for recreation on the Lower Waitaki River. The draft water allocation plan extended to the entire catchment and required additional work to assess the value to recreation of the various waterbodies above the Waitaki Dam, and the likely effects of various flow regimes. Fortunately we had just developed an interesting and useful set of methods for assessing the recreation significance in such settings for an earlier Environment Court hearing regarding a proposed mussel farm on Banks Peninsula. We have used this approach in this and several subsequent projects, including work on five other hydro schemes for four electricity companies.

Several hearings in the Environment Court have provided the ultimate form of peer review for various assessments, and we have cases pending for a mussel farm in the Kaipara Harbour (for Forest and Bird) and a structure in the coastal environment (for the Christchurch Estuary Association). Assessments of effects have been undertaken for a monorail proposal near Te Anau and a large-scale irrigation scheme. Perhaps we have had the most fun working with the Canterbury West Coast Sports Trust on the Canterbury West Coast Regional Physical Activity Plan and a district physical activity plan for the Hauraki and Thames-Coromandel District Councils (both Global Leisure Group projects). Two visitor surveys for beaches for the Christchurch City Council were also very interesting.

We have just embarked on some reserve management planning in the Selwyn District and it appears that various assessments of effects and Environment Court hearings will continue to keep us busy for more than the next few months. The summer recreation survey season is also fast approaching, with one study planned so far.

[5] I explained this to my four-year-old daughter, who replied, "Does it go all night?" Possibly in relation to my explanation.
[6] Sagan, Carl (1996). *The Demon-haunted World. Science as a candle in the dark*. Ballantine Books.
[7] Morris, Simon Conway (2003). *Life's Solution.* Cambridge University Press.
[8] Adams, Douglas (1979). *The Hitch Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. Pan. p62
[9] Morris (2003). p139