Perspective

A newsletter for widening your point of view

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Issue 8

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 being good, being green and being plausibly wrong.

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Be good (gaming theory)

Having young children is fair encouragement to take at least a passing interest in gaming theory. Not Cleudo, but something which gives an understanding of, in the words of Matt Ridley, why people are nice to each other.[1] Gaming theory is often put in context by describing the prisoner's dilemma:

Two criminals are arrested. Both are offered the chance to rat on the other, and so receive a lesser sentence. If they each keep quiet, however, *both* will get a lesser sentence. Not knowing the other's choice, which is the best to take? If prisoner A cooperates (stays silent) they run the risk of being dobbed-in by prisoner B. If prisoner A defects (rats) they are at least sure of punishing prisoner B for talking, and possibly getting a reduced sentence if prisoner B cooperates. In a moral vacuum, the best option is always to defect. So both do.

Ridley suggests that tropical rainforests are the result of the prisoner's dilemma. If all those tall trees could agree on a maximum height they would save a huge investment in massive trunks. They all started short, but someone defected. Never trust a kapok.

The prisoner's dilemma suggests that cooperation is illogical. Yet, more often than not, we *do* trust each other. Are we illogical creatures? Gaming theory provides a solution. That is, cooperation, at least from a purely mathematical viewpoint, is a Good Thing.

The problem with the prisoner's dilemma, as it was first analysed, is that it was played only once. In such a situation, both prisoners will defect. In reality, we deal with moral and pecuniary dilemmas on a daily basis within a community of colleagues, acquaintances and gossips. Ridley quotes several tests which showed that if two people play the prisoner's dilemma a finite number of times, they tend to cooperate until near the end of game when they try to gain a few quick wins at the expense of their opponent. If there is no end in sight to the competition, everyone tends to be very nice to each other, indefinitely.

In the 1950s, two examiners of the prisoner's dilemma noted that people did tend to cooperate when playing the game, even though the 'double defection' of both prisoners was the 'only rationally defensible strategy'. Evidently, they assumed that the players were not 'strategically sophisticated enough' to realise that they weren't behaving 'logically'.

Enter the computer age, and mathematicians noted that their unemotional, logical electronic tools also tended to cooperate when presented with the dilemma. In the late 1970s, political scientist Robert Axelrod set up a computer tournament to identify the best electronic strategy for playing the prisoner's dilemma. Various individuals submitted programmes and the winner was 'Tit-for-tat'. Its strategy was simple – begin by cooperating and then do whatever the opponent did last time: cooperate, but retaliate in kind if the opponent defects, then return to cooperating. Tit-for-tat's success was put down to its combination of being nice, retaliatory, forgiving and clear: 'Its niceness prevents it from getting into unnecessary trouble. Its retaliation discourages the other side from persisting whenever defection is tried. Its forgiveness helps restore mutual cooperation. And its clarity makes it intelligible to the other player, thereby eliciting long-term cooperation.'

The chap who developed Tit-for-tat was a political scientist with an interest in nuclear confrontation. It's not entirely clear to me how one apologises after a retaliatory nuclear war.

The sum is: aim for mutual cooperation at all times, but don't get taken for a ride. Ridley points out a caveat for Tit-for-tat as a strategy. It works in stable, repetitive relationships. The more casual and opportunistic the individual encounters, the less likely it is that the strategy will result in building cooperation. Which is why Ridley spends some time discussing the virtue of domestic and international trade. His book, by the way, is called *The Origins of Virtue*. It's a great read.

He recounts perhaps the most startling example of repetitive encounters building cooperation, on the Western Front during World War I. Battalions faced each other over open land for many months in a stalemate. The front was subsequently 'plagued' by unofficial truces between German and Allied units. The fighters were being illogical and instead of trying to kill each other, had played the prisoner's dilemma as humans do when within long-term relationships. They cooperated. Unofficial systems of communication evolved to ensure peace by agreeing terms and apologising for infringements. Raids and artillery barrages were used to punish the other side for defection. Of course, in a war, this is apparently not a Good Thing. Can't have peace breaking out, what! The generals learnt to spot these truces and moved units from place to place so they had less of a chance of establishing a relationship with the enemy.

A final message? I really like this one: '*Tell your children to be good, not because it is costly and superior, but because in the long run it pays*.' Not survival of the fittest, but survival of the nicest. ❖

[1] Ridley, M. (1997). *The Origins of Virtue.* Penguin

Not easy being green

'There are surprisingly few cases of green pigments in the animal world'. This might be news to the kea and the kakariki. Andrew Parker's book, *Seven Deadly Colours,*[2] discusses how and why animals adopt various hues.

To be coloured, one might use pigments – pretty much like paints. These absorb light of varying wavelengths, and so heat up, and reflect a specific band which is perceived as a colour. We and many other animals do this, and rely on various chemicals. Iridescent butterflies and peacocks use tiny, three dimensional nano-structures and crystals. These reflect and refract light in specific directions. Many creatures feature bioluminescence – they glow in the dark.

One more – and this is pretty cool; some animals use movement to generate colour. An orange, black and white striped snake, when it darts forward, suddenly turns green – to the observer at least. That's a pretty nifty trick if you wish to escape consumption. Not only are you getting out of the way, but you are also suddenly matching the grass. Type 'Benham's top' into Google and you'll get the background on how this works, as well as a trick to play at home (no snakes required).

Back to the green animals. I've seen plenty, and never thought that being green was difficult. Parker has a great story of how a green Australian tree frog was named the 'blue tree frog' to illustrate his point. In the late 1700s one of these poor animals was collected and preserved in rum for several years before it was properly named and described. On removal from the rum, the frog was blue, and it was assumed to be its natural colour. We know colours fade, but should green fade to blue?

It turns out that the frog has two 'colour factories' to make it appear green. An upper layer of skin cells produce blue via the same mechanism that makes the sky blue – the scattering of wavelengths by dust particles of a specific size ('Tyndall scattering'). No pigment is required – the frog just has a layer of transparent but 'dusty' cells. A lower layer of the frog's skin houses cells containing pigment, and in this case it is yellow. The mixing of blue and yellow make the frog appear green when it's not been drowned in alcohol. The rum affected only the yellow pigment, not the 'dusty' cells.

Now, consider budgies – what three colours do we see most often? Green, blue and yellow. Very few birds produce blue pigment and also rely on Tyndall scattering within the surface structure of their feathers, and yellow or olive pigment, to make green. You can breed for blue – no need to reach for the rum.

I've seen a yellow kea in a drawer at the Canterbury Museum, but never a blue one. Teetotallers perhaps. ❖

Plausible tosh

Literary critics can be nasty. Academic literary critics doubly so. The *Times Higher Education Supplement* (THES), which my wife shares with me, has the most cutting reviews of pseudo-academic missives imaginable. The great thing is that they feature both the snobbery of the critic who reckons they could do better, and the arrogance of the academic who knows that they are always right.

I don't mean that. It just sounded good.

I was quite keen on reading two particular books until I read their reviews in the *THES*: *The Tipping Point* by Malcolm Gladwell[3] and *The Wisdom of Crowds* by James Surowiecki.[4] Both appeared to have done a very good job of promoting themselves and both seemed based on plausible arguments.

I did read *The Wisdom of Crowds* just to check whether it could possibly be as bad as the reviewer, Winston Fletcher, suggested: 'Nothing in James Surowiecki's *The Wisdom of Crowds* so becomes it as its opening. His introduction is informative, provocative and enthralling. From then on, it's almost all downhill.'[5]

Sadly correct. Surowiecki's premise is that if you want to know something, ask a lot of people. Say you wish to win a game of 'guess the weight of the pig' at a fair: get all your friends to make an estimate, and submit their average. You've a good chance of winning. The rest of the book appears to suggest that businesses should run more focus groups and public surveys, for the wrong reasons.

The best line is the reviewer's: 'Maybe if this book had been written by a crowd of authors, it would have been wiser and the errors would have cancelled each other out.'

The term 'tipping point' seems fixed in our contemporary lexicography. The so-titled book is described by reviewer, Winston Fletcher again, as 'plausible tosh', although it has 'spurious attractions'.[6] The thesis is that tipping points occur when individuals with specific personality traits contribute to the momentum behind an event. They are: connectors (know a lot of people); mavens (know a lot of facts); and salesman (know lots of ways of convincing people to behave as desired).

The problem with the thesis is that it starts with an outcome – such as the sudden popularity of Hush Puppies – and works backwards to prove the idea. The question is, how often do connectors, mavens and salesmen get together and achieve nothing? Or events that changed the face of history featured none of these three contributors?

Interestingly, both books started as short articles in *The New Yorker* magazine. You've got to know when to stop. ❖

For Your Interest

The major news is the shifting of our office (and home) from Christchurch to Nelson in late December this year. The company's work is nationally focused and the location of the office seems irrelevant – so long as we're near a good airport. Despite Origin Pacific's demise, Nelson still has that. It also has a very good sailing ground, and remains in the South Island, which is the northern limit of my wife's natural habitat. Although the lack of a boat, besides a kayak, is a rather obvious flaw in the plan, we'll work on that. Late in the year I will send out new contact details. The e-mail and the mobile number will remain unchanged.

Work has focused heavily on the resource consent process, and we've been developing recreation assessments of effect for a handful of hydroelectric schemes, a wind farm, several subdivisions and a mussel farm or two. Working with Boffa Miskell and Peter Rough Landscape Architects is always a pleasure. I have also enjoyed work with Kay Booth assessing the recreation and tourism benefits of the Clutha River Mata-Au Parkway concept (see http://www.cmrp.org.nz), and revisited the art park programme at Macraes Gold Mine in Otago with Andrew Purves. A few other tourism projects have kept us busy, as well as some open space visitor surveys and observational analyses. For the Port Hills Park Trust Board I've had great fun working with a campaign team to acquire a large chunk of public open space on the Port Hills (watch this space). The best thing has been the amazing array of people I've had the real pleasure of meeting over the past 12 or so months.

[2] Parker, A. (2005). *Seven Deadly Colours*. The Free Press
[3] Gladwell, M. (2000). *The Tipping Point: how little things can make a big difference*. Back Bay
[4] Surowiecki, J. (2004). *The Wisdom of Crowds*. Doubleday
[5] Fletcher, W. (2000). *When three hit a sticky wicket*. THES, 29 September 2000
[6] Fletcher, W. (2004). *Delusions of the masses*. THES, 23 July 2004