

### III-28. Tragic versus Tragedy

Do the right things, not because of any rewards, but rather to prevent any regrets.

- Advice to a young Samurai

Things that matter most are often unplanned. Consequences that come to haunt later are often unintended. Even the best laid plans fail, actions have unintended consequences, and decisions go awry. In unknown complex worlds, to err is human. Errors are essentially random. They crop up here and there, now and then. Errors are necessary part of doing the business of living. If errors work out in favor we call ourselves fortunate. Brushes with disasters to see another day are called miracles.

Errors are not mistakes unless they assert repeatedly. Unfavorable chaotic outcomes of deliberate actions are characterized as mistakes. Chaotic consequences are acknowledged as the tragic. Some mistakes are predictable and their tragic consequences can often be avoided. Can our own mistakes be used to our own advantage? When do errors become mistakes?

When do tragic mistakes turn into a tragedy? Tragic and unexpected consequences are part and parcel of chaotic human experience. Tragedies seem to last for ever. Tragedies are made up of unintended and uncontrollable consequences. Inability and inaction to do something to do about such consequences when there was opportunity is the central irony of a tragedy.

Tragedies follow a trend towards undesirable and adverse outcomes. Tragedy emerges as certain mistakes and tragic outcomes reinforce each other towards increasingly severe consequences. Tragedy emerges if we do not mend ways: mid-

course corrections to curb actions, control underlying momentum, modify behaviors behind the mistakes. Such experiences morph into a tragedy when the action consequence cycle becomes uncontrollable. At this point one can not seem to stop even when one knows that that is the most desirable course. Often one begins to accept tragic outcomes long before tragedy is inevitable. It is not just the stuff for epics. Even in ordinary lives, run-away tragic events take epic proportions.

**Motives guide perceptions to goals**

A parable goes like this. Consider the thoughts and reactions of six people looking at a tree laden with ripe fruit. Depending on the need, interest and motives (*lessa*) their thoughts may range from picking the ripe fruit on the ground to chopping down the whole tree without concern for the future of all those who depend on the tree. Clearly, at least one of these is a scenario for tragedy.

**What is a prudent course into an unknown future?** Reactions are instinctively guided to minimize regrets and maximize utility. Attention to and actions with feedback are guided by motives, and perception of the goals. Chances of success increase if decisions adhere to the reality on ground. Beyond that prudence is about avoiding irreversible actions that destroy value including violence against feelings, thoughts and ideas. Such acts not only decrease potential resources, and resulting behaviors are a hallmark of tragedy.

**Live and Let Live, and Thrive.** Wed of life is far too complex to be constructed in the context of an individual or a species. The men-centered constructs, such God created man in its own image, threatened sustainability of many. It continues to have tragic consequences for large parts of biodiversity let alone diversity of

ideas, practices, thoughts, cultures, and gene pools. Such practices accentuated by over consumption have now brought us to the brink of the potentially disastrous consequences of Global warming. In the web of life the well being of one depends on the well being of all, and the vice versa.

**Prescriptions for personal behaviors:** Consider the following prescriptions suggested 3000 years ago for personal behaviors.

Avoid:

1. Destroying humans and other life forms
2. Wishfulness that amounts to violence against reality
3. Stealing what belongs to others
4. Meaningless relationships that distract from the meaningful
5. Possessions that begin to possess the possessor.

These are the prescriptions for dealings and interactions that create confidence in social order. In the game-theory sense such behaviors of individuals in a web are likely to evolve into a meaningful social contract. According to John Forbes Nash (Nobel Prize winner for Economics in 1993), such a cooperative situation has greater utility than that delivered by the Adam Smith type of raw capitalistic scenario in which every person maximizes his own gain.

In dealings with other people, a meaningful dialog for a rational course of action can be initiated only if the parties facing each other do not feel threatened for survival. Nonviolence is a rational basis as shown by Gandhi and understood even by the British. As is well known now, Gandhi's search for truth by nonviolent means is now generally considered to be a preferred method for international conflict resolution. *Saty-agrahis*, the Gandhian volunteers, lived in their communities according to their principles, i.e. to be the living examples of: Talk a talk on which they could walk. In recognition of the insight about

rational behavior through nonviolence and truth, it is interesting that while Einstein epitomizes rational knowledge and Gandhi epitomizes rational conduct, the conditions leading to the rise and fall of Hitler epitomize the irrationality of the prevalent international political relations. Such tragedies of belief based principles and practices are not just the subject of epics. They provide a context for what can go wrong and how easily.

**Omniscience as *malady of interpreters*.** Behavior changes are brought about in stages through consequence evaluation. Behaviors are sustained through continuing practice as a part of utility maximization. Institutional beliefs often distort behaviors with other motives. Resulting behaviors are chaotic as they become *malady of the interpreters*. As for being right, yes even a broken clock is right twice a day. Probably for such reasons you need to perform three miracles during the lifetime to be ordained as a Catholic saint. Clearly, it is much easier to be omniscient if people forget what else you said before and did not work.

As an acknowledgement of our own limitations, we seek prescription of worship of something more than human, even if it violates reality. It is also true for all objects of desire and influence whether it for knowledge (omniscience), power (omnipotent), possessions (infinite and limitless grace) or beauty (diva or *devi*). Like perpetual motion machines and other demonic devices such idealized contraptions of thought are also unreal. As objects of our desires they become Platonic platitudes where the thoughts cannot be put even in words. Self-referential words are invented for such idealizations. Tragedy is that such words that lack constraints of reality also distort reason.

In closing, no man is an island. We rely on knowledge, technology, tools, and devices from the past. Possibly, far more powerful are the influences that shape our attitudes and approaches towards creating value and meaning. Such goals are intricately tied to criteria and processes for verification of the facts, objectives, inferences, who to trust, and also by our abilities to examine validity of evidence, assertions and arguments. It is shared search. Tragedy strikes when we try to cut it short with authority of ad hoc and universals.

# Against Gods and Humbug

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