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The Accident as the Brokenness of History

Introduction

Aristotle understood the word “accident” as an attribute of a class or a thing that is not *essential*. The word comes from Latin *accidentum* meaning “something that happens by chance”¹. In everyday modern life on the other hand, we normally understand and experience accidents as an unexpected and undesirable event that can cause harm in some form, which consequently makes the word negatively charged. Further, we give the name “catastrophe” to huge accidents, that is, accidents that affect a large number of people and have huge consequences. Catastrophes can in turn be differentiated in to two main groups: *man-made catastrophes* and *natural catastrophes*. Accidents belong to the first group because they are always the consequence of human acting performed by one or more individuals. From our point of view and according to our theory of acting, an accident is always an intentional act and therefore an *unconscious act*. For us any act is unconscious and the difference between normal acts and accidents is that an accident for us is a “broken act”, which is an act that is being directed to achieve a result or a purpose but failed to achieve it. The existence of a broken act indicates what we will call *parapraxis*. This can be compared with the corresponding Freudian concept of parapraxis which is the consequence of a conflict between unconscious and conscious intention. For Freud parapraxis is an error in speech, or in acting. It can be understood as a kind of “stumble with an invisible obstacle” outside the range of consciousness. That is because to be conscious for Freud is the same as “to see”, and to be unconscious means to “stumble blindly” forward. However, Freud left the question about the relationship between unconsciousness and acting unsolved. For us *intentionality is identical with human acting* and the unconscious has no other possible place than in the relationship between the body and the everyday world of culture. For us there are two essential states of the mind: the *straightforward experience* and the *reflective experience*, terms introduced by Don Ihde:

If I begin now to take note of my experience, deliberately trying to find the most straightforward experience possible, I may well make a certain discovery. In most of my straightforward experiences, I am certainly not primarily, or even self-consciously, attentive to what is going to the matter at hand. Thus, if I am chopping wood for the evening fire in Vermont, I am so involved with splitting the wood, that I do not notice much of what goes on around me, nor do I think self-consciously about how it is that I am splitting the wood. In fact, if I do turn critical and self-conscious, while my ax is

¹ Online Etymology Dictionary: <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php>

raised to swing, I may miss the log entirely. But after the fact, I may note in this simple report that I can distinguish and easily move between what appears to be two variations within experience. Straightforward experience, I could and did characterize: it was actional, involved, immersed in the project of the moment, narrowly focused and concentrated. My thinking about that experience, also an experience in the general sense (reflective experience), was a reflection or a thematizing of the straightforward experience. These two modes of experience are familiar and easily alternate in the on-going affairs of the day.²

I have illustrated this dichotomy of the mind with help from a metaphorical reference borrowed from Arthur Danto who in his book *Analytical Philosophy of Acting* from 1973 presented an analogy based on the work of Michelangelo. In the year 1520, the pope Leo X (Giovanni di Lorenzo de' Medici 1513–23) consulted Michelangelo to build a chapel for the Medici family. The pope also wanted Michelangelo to place the tomb of his younger brother *Giuliano* and his nephew *Lorenzo* in the chapel. The genius Michelangelo managed to capture the opposition between acting and thinking in the tombs of these two men. On one hand, the athletic *Giuliano*, a man of acting and on the other hand *Lorenzo* – *Il Pensieroso* who seems to be lost in deep thoughts, unaware of his surroundings. In our book *Broken Technologies*, we tried to show that it is possible to describe the difference between the straightforward experience and the reflective experience with the help of probabilities. Straightforwardness is the consequence of certainty and on the contrary, reflectivity is the consequence of uncertainty. Another way to express the same is to say that straightforwardness is the consequence of order and reflectivity is the consequence of information.³ In that sense, the Freudian *Unconscious is a very rich informational state of the mind in which order is impossible*.

According to our interpretation of human acting, the essence of a conscious act is *order*. In other words, we understand “order” as inversely proportional to information; that means that if we know that an act produces x bits, it generates an order of $1/x$ bits. By the same reason if an artifact embeds x bits of informational value, it embeds $1/x$ bits of organizational value.

² Ihde, Don. *Experimental Phenomenology. An Introduction*. State University of New York; 1986, p. 45.

³ Flores Morador, Fernando. *Broken Technologies. The Humanist as Engineer*. Version 1.1. University of Lund, 2009; p. 131.

Barry A. Turner and Nick F. Pidgeon (T & P) wrote about the relationship between information and beliefs in his book *Man-made Disasters* from 1978.⁴ According to T & P, it is necessary to distinguish a *communication channel* from an *observation channel*.⁵ In a communication channel the system is closed and the values between expectations and changes of information are absolute. In an observation channel on the other hand, the system is open and if the amount of information changes a redefinition of the system is required. From our point of view, this difference reveals another expression of the above introduced analysis of the “divided mind”: on one hand, an *intentional state of mind* (the communicative channel related to order) and on the other hand a *cognitive state of mind* (the observational channel related to information). Even if in any case the simplification can be risky, the dichotomy helps us to understand how intentionality is related to information and intentionality. Changes in order are unexpected outcomes and are experienced as informative “surprises”. According to our point of view, changes in information determines changes in the degrees of beliefs and therefore to the connected capacity to act. We act when the odds of succeeding to realize our intentions are very high, or what is the same, when order is very high and the state of mind is that of an unconscious identification with the task; otherwise we wait. “Waiting” at the other hand, is the suspension of acting and a very conscious state of mind. The query aspect of the scenario of an accident is that the high amount of information can paralyze and make preventive acting impossible. We drive the thesis that uncertainty leads to *apathy* and certainty to *acting*. Our distinction is relevant for our analysis of accidents, because an accident is always the consequence of the brokenness of some praxis occasioned by apathy. Preventive acting destined to avoid accidents, can only be successful when the general conditions of acting are given. These conditions exist if the relationship between the system of beliefs and the protocol is absolutely congruent. According to our philosophy of acting, technologies are working “properly” when an absolute congruency between the system of beliefs and the protocol is present. If this congruence is partial or inexistent we say that technologies are “broken”. Consequently, to “prevent an accident” means to fully anticipate parapraxis following the question of congruence in each level of intentionality. T & P distinguishes three mayor types of events in which uncertainty increases:

The kinds of event which may provoke a higher order of surprise can be separated into three groups - which we may label as anomalies, serendipities and catastrophes. All three types of event share the common property that the news of their occurrence does not reduce uncertainty, or at least, does not do so immediately.⁶

⁴ Barry A. Turner and Nick F. Pidgeon. *Man-made Disasters*. 2nd ed. Butterworth-Heinemann. First published by Wykeham Publications 1978 Second edition 1997; ISBN: 0750620870.

⁵ Turner refers to C. Cherry's *On Human Communication: A review, a Survey and a Criticism*. London. Chapman and Hall; 1957.

⁶ Op.cit. p. 127.

As T & P understands “anomalies”, “pieces of information which are clearly not irrelevant to the concerns of those who receive them, but which cannot be assimilated into the existing world-view, so that their implications for understanding and for decision-making cannot be fully assessed at the time of their acquisition.”⁷ Anomalies are “disturbing” the worldview but not stressing the actors to perform correcting acting. Anomalies are catalogued and saved waiting for a future solution. The other two main groups of “surprises” are the serendipity and the catastrophe, the first is an unexpected favorable event and the second an unexpected unfavorable event. Both of them are attributed to “random factors”.

In both types of cases, major pieces of information are discovered in unexpected areas, with implications for the accepted view of the world, and the acting-related assumptions flowing from it, so that a revision of explanations previously accepted as satisfactory becomes necessary. In both cases, the consequences draw attention to the discrepancy between the view of the world enshrined in the relevant sets of premises upon which decisions are based, and the additional external factors which now have to be recognized.⁸

For T & P the surprising content of extreme changes in the previous world-view has to do with the discovering of “major pieces of information in unexpected areas”. However, these surprises have to be taken already as “anomalies” because any anomaly is the manifestation of some case of incongruence. If any correction of the events can be performed to avoid accidents, these corrections will be possible as long as the anomalies of the events do not paralyze acting drowning it into pure information. In other words, the methods developed to achieve the security of any system, imply a permanent reinforcing of the system of beliefs and of its coherence with praxis through a congruent protocol. The “new information found in unexpected areas” may be enough to paralyze acting; in that case other routines (maybe security protocols) have to be implemented to create the condition of engagement. In any organizational (informational) system, congruence (order) changes continuously (because of entropy). The simple “pass of time” makes these changes; in the sense that the social conditions of the system are changing with time. Let us now introduce a table with a more systematic approach to the problem of accidents and errors:

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

Type of brokenness	Example	
Order-broken and/or protocol broken.	Tentative programming: Prototypes, Beta-versions. The system of beliefs and/or is not clearly established.	Prototype or trial product of a computer program. The ideas of the task and how to solve them are not presented unambiguously. At the centre is the relationship between a Beta-version and an Alfa-version of a program. It is a kind of self-reflexion in programming language.
Ontical broken	Deficient balance between the system of beliefs and the protocol.	A program which is insufficient for the intended task or the contrary, a program which is too complex for a task.
Ontological broken	Incongruence between the system of beliefs and the protocol. No congruence between program and hardware.	A program which is less powerful (or the contrary, more powerful) than the hardware can bear. At the centre it is the relationship between the programmer and the machine as surrogate (virtual) body of the self.
Time- broken	Obsolete System of beliefs and/or protocols.	An outdated program that needs to be surrounded by an outdated environment. At the centre it is an obsolete environment.
Value broken	Amateur system of beliefs and/or protocols (programming).	Programming which is intended to work in a non-professional environment. The program shows mixed types of errors.

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