

The Inconvenient Path

By

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The concept of infinite worlds goes back to the early Greek philosophers, like Anaximander, Leucippus, Democritus, Epicurus, and Lucretius—who are also considered the first atomists because of their belief that reality is granular, that is, made up of atoms. These early philosophers discovered almost everything modern scientists had to rediscover after nearly a thousand years of intellectual stagnation during the Dark Ages. It wasn't until 1957 that physicist Hugh Everett proposed his many-world interpretation of quantum mechanics; the idea that every quantum event with multiple possible outcomes causes the universe to "branch" into different universes, with each outcome occurring in its own separate world. The hypothesis is more complicated than I understand, and is not universally agreed upon, but many physicists do consider it a likely explanation of what really happens.

I'm a believer in an infinite number of worlds only because, philosophically, the concept of *nothing* leads me to believe that existence must be without end. Nothing, by definition, refers to nothing that exists, not even to entirely empty space. Therefore, existence cannot be confined within any sort of boundaries in which it comes to and end where "nothing" exists beyond it. Nothing cannot exist. But this doesn't mean that it's necessary for there to be parallel universes in other dimensions, although there may be. Rather, because our universe is so incomprehensibly vast, it's mathematically reasonable to believe there are countless worlds within it that are not only similar to ours, but exactly like ours, right down to copies of ourselves who are living our exact same lives, and some versions of us who have made different choices and have very different lives.

In his book, *The Physics of Immortality*, Frank Tipler explains that "a human being of mass 100 kilograms cannot change state more rapidly than about 4×10^{53} times per second."¹ 4×10^{53} with 53 zeroes behind it sounds like a huge number of possibilities available to us every second of our lives, but, as Tipler also says, "it's finite." And on a cosmic scale it's a miniscule number, which means the chances of there being other versions of ourselves peppered throughout the endless Universe are not only possible but probable.

That there are so many possibilities before us every moment of our lives could immobilize us if we give it much thought. How can we possibly determine the best choice out of 4×10^{53} options? Fortunately, we're not able to comprehend most of these options, which makes the choices before us seem rather limited and manageable. Imagining that whatever choice we do make will lead us to branch off into another world altogether is also an overwhelming thought. Making the wrong decision could thrust us into another world without us ever realizing it. I keep wondering what idiotic choice I made to end up in this bizarro reality where Donald Trump is leader of the free world? Where did I go wrong?

And this is the main point I want to make; that we can never know for sure where our choices will lead us because we can't comprehend all the possible states before us. Maybe

someday, sooner than we imagine, a quantum computer will be able to do so but right now it's not humanly possible. We may make what we think are the best decisions possible, yet, as the chaos theorists suggest, we might, like the simple flap of butterfly's wing in Brazil begin a chain reaction that someday leads to a tornado in Texas.

Many of us have lived the best lives we can up to this point, having done our best to be kind to others, to live by and promote the values we most cherish, seeking justice for the oppressed, caring for those in need, protecting our environment, advocating for nuclear disarmament and a more peaceful and inclusive world, doing our best to seek and understand and accept what is true—and yet here we are, in this world, where there is injustice, and cruelty, and poverty, and war, and global warming. Where, along our journey, did we branch off in the wrong direction?

Sometimes we can retrace our steps, as individuals and collectively, to figure out where we went wrong so that we can learn from our mistakes and make course corrections. But sometimes we never look back. We just keep trudging forward on the wrong path, believing we're doing the right thing, making the same errors in judgement, unable to face the past let alone turn around. And that's the point; in life, we have to make decisions, we have to proceed. When we come to a fork in the road, we have to take it, even though we can't entirely see where our choices will ultimately lead us. A fork in the road may not be the best analogy because, in reality, there are many paths before us, more than we can possibly grasp. We can only do our best to determine which path looks best, but, ultimately, we must make a leap of faith into our uncertain future.

That's step number one: when you come to a fork in the road, take it! Base your next leap of faith on your best educated guess, but don't allow the uncertainty of your choices paralyze you to the point that you remain stuck in the same place. Life is growth and if we stop growing, we're as good as dead. Choose a path and go for it. It may seem like your choices are very limited, but, as noted, there are countless possibilities before us, some foreseen and some unforeseen. Some of the unforeseen consequences of our choices may end up being the most rewarding of them all. So, take the leap. Go for it! The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step, but you'll never get anywhere if you don't take it.

Step number two: Turn around if necessary. Humans, like all creatures, are creatures of habit. We tend to stay the course no matter how unproductive or even wrong it turns out to be. This is the fundamental reason global warming isn't being adequately addressed today, because there are too many people who want to continue doing what they've always done no matter how apparent it has become that the path they've chosen is leading to a dead end. Our ideas and beliefs about the world are real paths etched into our brains through repetition—neural pathways. This is why even our thinking becomes habitual and why we can't kick our bad thinking habits, because we're addicted to them and the false feelings of certainty and meaning they give us. Yet, if our paths, including our neural pathways, are

leading us toward a dead end, we ought to simply turn around before coming to a crashing halt.

That's much easier said than done. There are ideas around today, for example, that are thousands of years old and are obviously false and untrue, especially ancient religious beliefs that remain central to the lives of most people in our modern world. They are worn out ideas still being worn into our brains. Yet we have the tendency to cling to even the newest beliefs once we claim them as our own, and have trouble admitting they are wrong, even when it becomes obvious that they are. We would rather deny the truth, reject reality, attack those who prove us wrong—like those living in Plato's cave do to the man who has stumbled back into their dark world to lead them into the light. It takes fortitude to admit we are wrong and need to turn around, maybe to even go back to the beginning and start anew, with the added benefit of having grown and learned from our past.

Step number three: Simply change course by choosing a new direction. Many years ago, during the wedding reception of a friend, some of his other friends began teasing him about what a mess he'd gotten himself into and all the henpecking and other marital cliches he had coming. As a modern man with a modern solution, I interjected, "Don't worry. If it doesn't work out, you can always get a divorce." The voices of his other friends came to an abrupt hush. It felt as if I'd spoken taboo amongst a group of primitives who thought I had cursed my friend's marriage by uttering "divorce" on his wedding day.

Admittedly, there was a time not too long ago when there was much stigma around being divorced, but this is no longer true and hasn't been for some time. Today, I congratulate those who get married and those who get divorced. Divorce is among the most difficult choices anyone can make. Couples who have spent years together, and who often still love each other, find that they have grown apart and choose to go their separate ways. They branch off into new directions, creating new pathways. As a minister, I know this is one of the most difficult choices anyone can make, no matter how difficult their marriages have become. But so far, when I say "congratulations" to the newly divorced, they smile broadly and thank me.

Changing directions when the path we're on is no longer working is always hard because, instinctively, we'd rather keep repeating our familiar habits—remaining stuck in a bad relationship or meaningless job or unhealthy behaviors or stupid beliefs—than to risk the unknown. So, hard as it is, change course when you need to and congratulate yourself for doing so. (Incidentally, my friend, who lives in Tennessee, is still married after 25 years and we still talk almost every week.)

The final step I'll mention, the last of only four out of 4×10^{53} of potential states, and the one I want to spend a little more time on, is; when you come to a fork in the road, consider taking the most inconvenient path. Our instinct is to embark upon the most obvious and inviting path, the one that has already been well worn and established by others with the

clearest and most alluring view of what lies ahead, and that has the fewest obstacles in our way. But I have found the most rewarding paths are those less traveled, those with difficulties to surmount and challenges to overcome, those overgrown with thickets of brambles and briars, with ticks and yucky spider webs you don't see until they're stuck to your face, upon which you don't notice the mosquitoes until it's too late, that have slippery slopes and steep uphill climbs, with no idea of how far it will continue or where you'll end up. I'm not suggesting you take on unnecessary difficulties and challenges just to prove your metal. But just as we can't go grocery shopping at the convenience store if we want to eat healthy food or stay healthy by driving through a fast-food line whenever we feel hungry, many if not most of the best choices in life are inconvenient. They take time and effort and often require us to take risks and make sacrifices.

Al Gore's Academy Award winning documentary, *An Inconvenient Truth*, for example, is aptly titled because it asks all of us to face the difficult reality and challenge of human-caused climate change so that we will change course. But doing so will be inconvenient, to say the least, which is why many, especially Republican legislators, and politicians, still deny this inconvenient truth, so that they don't have to kick the ideological and behavioral habits so many of us are addicted to. This explains why they are called conservatives; *conserve* coming from the Latin word meaning "to preserve, keep intact, guard," and "maintain." Sadly, they are working to conserve their destructive habits rather than to conserve nature and its ancient ecosystems. Conservatives aren't about conservation, not anymore. They just keep pretending they think climate change isn't happening, forcing the rest of us to go along, some of us kicking and screaming, as we all get closer to the edge of cliff at the end of their dead-end road. The primary cause of climate change today is no longer human action but human inaction.

The liberal-minded, on the other hand, are more inclined to take the risks necessary to move our lives and our societies forward. Progress doesn't just happen. It requires risk, effort, difficulties, losses, and lots of mistakes and failures during the slow and uncertain trudge forward. The word "liberal" comes from the Latin word meaning "freedom." That's why liberals, who are about conservation, are liberal, because they are driven toward progress, toward making the world better for all people, and such progress is made by liberating ourselves and others from the bad ideas and habits holding us back. This is why being liberal is inconvenient, because it requires a lot of letting go and letting be. We let go of the conveniences that make us feel comfortable and safe; and we let others be so that they are free to question those ways and to think for themselves. Through such innovative thinking we discover new truths and better ways of living and being.

"Easy" isn't on the list of concerns the free mind considers when embarking upon a new journey. The free mind, rather, holds only to a few principles that can apply to almost any circumstance. 2,300 years ago, in response to the ruin of Greek civilization after the Peloponnesian war, the Greeks longed for the of sense happiness (*eudaemonia*) and tranquility (*ataraxia/apathia*) they knew back in the good old days when Athens was

considered the greatest civilization on Earth. That's when philosophy shifted away from trying to figure out the nature of truth and reality to figuring out what it means to live a good life. This shift began with Socrates who said "know thyself" and "the unconsidered life is not worth living." While still a young man he turned his attention away from physics to ethics because of what he called the former's fruitless "quest to know reality ... a waste of energy when the far more important question of 'how one should live' goes unanswered."² With their external countryside and civilization in ruins, and the lives of many friends and family members lost, it is only natural that they would turn inward to look for happiness.

This shift soon led to the emergence of Cynicism, the belief that happiness requires us to return to a natural way of living by rejecting the many conveniences of civilization. (This, too, would be a natural thing to think after the destruction of their once great civilization.) Then, in dialectic response, came its opposite, Hedonism, the notion that the pursuit of pleasure ought to be the basis of all our decisions. These ideas are akin to those Prince Siddhartha is said of have realized along his path to becoming the Buddha. And like Buddha, the Greeks also eventually discovered a middle way, which is called Stoicism. For the stoics, the good life isn't acquired through suffering or pleasure, but by being indifferent to both. This led to the invention of virtue ethics by Zeno, stoicism's founder, who taught that living according to our virtues, which today we'd call our values or principles, ought to always be our priority no matter the consequences. Doing so may sometimes lead to our own pleasure and sometimes may cause us to suffer. For the stoics, this point is inconsequential.

Zeno considered wisdom, courage, justice, and temperance the greatest of all virtues, but the Renaissance and Enlightenment have led us to recognize others that are even more fundamental—human dignity, freedom, reason, and tolerance. These virtues, values, principles, or whatever you choose to call them, are the only essentials you must carry with you along your journey through the inconvenient path of life. They are all you need to navigate through its many ups and downs, through its pains and pleasures, its rewards and losses. Remember, *ethics* comes from the Greek word meaning "character," and character refers to those qualities about you that remain true in any circumstances. Your character is the part of you that adheres to your most cherished and guiding principles no matter what.

Having such character is what allows free minds to be free, because they know they can embark upon new directions and never get lost or leave behind anything they can't live without, because what they most need is always with them, within them. Their character is their compass. With our values as our guide forward, we need not be paralyzed by concerns of making the wrong choice, or worry the path ahead will be too difficult, or whether it will make us rich or impoverish us. We need only come to the fork in the road and take it, turn around if necessary, branch off in new directions, and cherish the inconvenient path most of all.

¹ Tipler, Frank J., *The Physics of Immortality*, Anchor Books, Doubleday, New York, NY, 1994, p. 223.

² Grayling, A.C., *The History of Philosophy*, Penguin Press, New York, NY, 2019, p. 115.