

# Some remarks on historical contingency

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# Introduction: contingencies in life

Historical  
contingency

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Joe is flying to Paris to visit his grandfather.

- ▶ He misses his flight.
- ▶ And meets Sue on his way back home.
- ▶ They like each other.
- ▶ And get married.
- ▶ So: their meeting was **accidental**, or **contingent**.
- ▶ He gets on his flight.
- ▶ And meets his grandfather.
- ▶ They like each other.
- ▶ And Joe flies back home.
- ▶ So: *their* meeting was **planned**.

# Intro: contingencies in history

The same division in history.

- ▶ The Macedonian conquest
  - ▶ Macedonia is so much smaller than Persia.
  - ▶ But Philip II trained the army.
  - ▶ And Aristotle trained Alexander.
  - ▶ But no-one trained King Darius III.
- ▶ So: the conquest was **contingent**.
- ▶ The French Revolution
  - ▶ The third class resented the King and aristocracy.
  - ▶ Huge financial deficit.
  - ▶ Fruitless reforms.
  - ▶ Anti-monarchist propaganda for decades.
- ▶ So: the revolution was **necessary**.

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# Intro: two classes of events

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## Main assumption

The intuitive contrast between two classes of events is accepted as a **given**. The task is to clarify and justify it.

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# Do contingencies happen because of free will?

- ▶ Perhaps contingencies have no ordinary causes.
- ▶ Free will of the agents (say, Alexander's) is responsible.
- ▶ Great Men's acts generate contingencies.
- ▶ This can't be right.

# Free will is not the only source of contingency (if at all)

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Even supposing that there is free will, still:

- ▶ There are more contingent events than events determined by someone's free will.
- ▶ And Great Men need good fortune.
- ▶ Alexander didn't conquer Asia by exercising his will. Other contingent factors (like the good army) were in play.
- ▶ The Black Death in Europe: a clear contingency, but not owing to someone's decision.
- ▶ And so forth.

Therefore, free will is a just a **chapter** in a book of contingencies.

# First attempt: contingency as instability

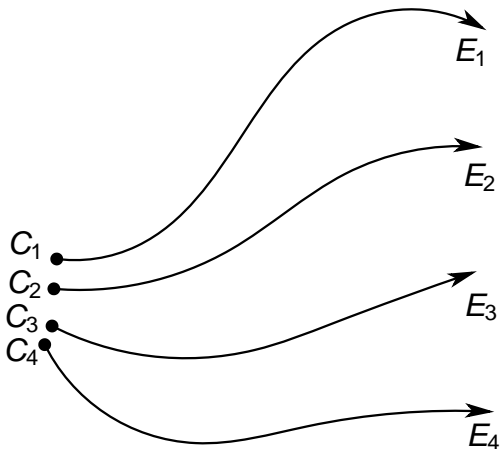
What did really happen to Joe and Sue?

- ▶ A small deviation in their itineraries led to the missed flight and to their meeting on the bus.
- ▶ Another small deviation would result again in the missed flight, this time not accompanied by any meeting.
- ▶ The configuration of events prior to the fateful meeting was **fragile**.

The same in history:

- ▶ Remove one of the factors in the Macedonian conquest, and it would never have happened.
- ▶ The opposite is true in the French Revolution. Its initial conditions were **stable**.

# Contingency as instability



Similar causes lead to different outcomes

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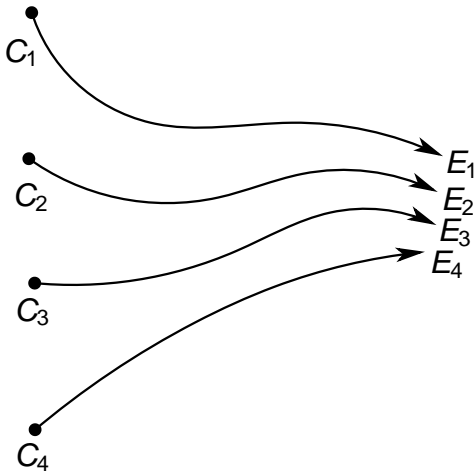
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# Necessity as stability



Different causes lead to similar outcomes

# Contingency as instability: definition

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## Definition

Let  $E$  be an event with the initial conditions  $C_1, \dots, C_n$ . Then  $E$  is **historically contingent** if the replacement of  $C_i$  by a qualitatively similar  $C_i'$  leads to  $E'$  which is qualitatively very dissimilar to  $E$ .

$E$  is **historically necessary** if the replacement of  $C_i$  by a qualitatively dissimilar  $C_i'$  leads to  $E'$  which is qualitatively similar to  $E$ .

# Problems

- ▶ No explanation of fragility of initial conditions.
- ▶ No practical rule for determining the contingency of an event. We are locked in evaluating **hypothetical** situations. (The account may fare better in natural science where repeated experiments can be conducted.)
- ▶ No verdict on whether human agency matters, and if it does not, why.
- ▶ No explication of similarity. (This leads to a paradox.)

▶ Skip the paradox

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# Contingency as instability: a paradox

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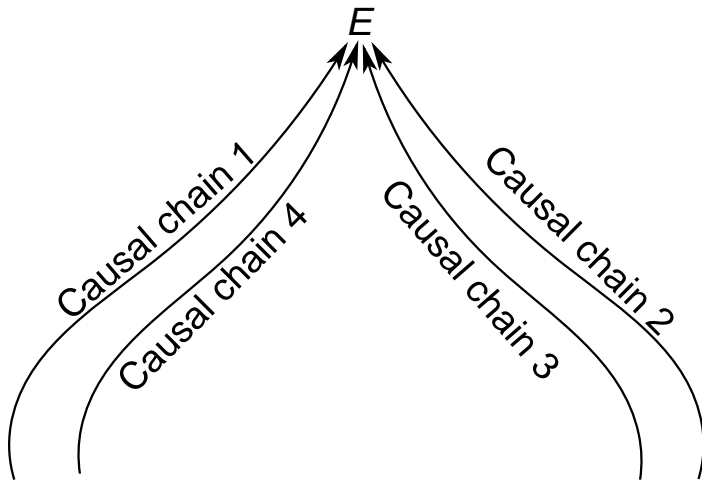
- ▶ Suppose that a man stands on the edge of the roof. The wind blows, the man loses his balance and falls to the ground. If the wind did not blow, the man would have lived. His fall, therefore, seems contingent in our sense.
- ▶ But under another description, the reverse holds: once the man put himself on the edge of that roof, it was fairly *inevitable*, or ‘highly necessary’, that he should fall.
- ▶ If he does not, the onlookers should congratulate him on the *lucky* outcome. And so the fall was necessary, but the survival was contingent.

# Second attempt: contingency as causal collision

Again, what did really happen to Joe and Sue?

- ▶ Joe got on that bus because of his grandfather, his flight, his untidiness.
- ▶ Sue got on that bus because of her job, *her* flight, *her* untidiness.
- ▶ They met through a **collision** of two causal chains.
- ▶ There were many other events in Joe's life on that day which were also products of distinct chains: talking to a particular airline clerk or wearing a particular shirt.
- ▶ But the meeting of Sue and Joe was **interesting**.

# Contingency as collision of causal chains



A contingent event at the intersection of causal chains

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# Contingency as collision: definition

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## Definition

An event  $E$  is **historically contingent** if two conditions are satisfied:

1.  $E$  is the result of a collision of two or more distinct causal chains.
2.  $E$  has interesting consequences.

# Some examples of collision

- ▶ Truman's presidency in 1945 was a merely contingent event, since it resulted from Roosevelt's death. But it did not lead to 'interesting' consequences (like a change in American war policy).
- ▶ But Stalin's rise to power may be seen as **historically** contingent: it resulted from Lenin's death and also led to 'interesting' historical consequences.

# Main problem: which events are interesting?

- ▶ We must say in what respect a contingent event  $E$  was interesting and perhaps to have a guide in evaluating the degree of its interestingness.
- ▶ Suggestion: we can align 'interesting' with 'surprising'.
- ▶ A **surprising** event  $E$  induces a shift in the beliefs we had had before  $E$  happened.
- ▶ (A rigorous treatment of surprisingness is available by using simple probability concepts.)

▶ Skip the theory of surprise

# An account of surprisingness

Suppose that a monkey types a meaningful phrase. Let us designate by  $H$  our initial hypothesis (that monkey does not understand human language) and by  $H'$  the rival hypothesis, which could be either that the monkey understands human language, or the typing device is rigged, or both. We assume that  $H$  and  $H'$  are exhaustive. Then on the one hand, from Bayes's theorem we have:

$$P(H|E) = \frac{P(H)P(E|H)}{P(E)}$$

but on the other:

$$P(E) = P(H)P(E|H) + P(H')P(E|H').$$

Putting that together, we get:

$$P(H|E) = \frac{P(H)P(E|H)}{P(H)P(E|H) + P(H')P(E|H')}.$$

# Surprisingness continued

The surprisingness effect: a significant decrease of the probability of  $H$  in light of the new evidence supplied by  $E$ :  $P(H|E) \ll P(H)$ . This is achieved when  $P(E|H)P(H) \ll P(E|H')P(H')$ —when, in other words, there is an alternative hypothesis, itself not highly implausible, which makes  $E$  highly probable.

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# Contingency as collision: immediate benefits

- ▶ Contingency is no mystery: it is to be expected that some causal chains will sometimes collide.
- ▶ Even if the historical process is fully determined, contingency does not disappear.
- ▶ We do not deal with dubious counterfactuals.
- ▶ (Free) human action is liable to generate contingencies: people set for themselves goals that are far away from the given causal chain.

# Contingency and prediction

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- ▶ The **better your hypothesis** about an event is—the **less surprised** you will be.
- ▶ Since, unlike God, we have no full picture of causal chains, we shall always be surprised at some point.
- ▶ Historical prediction is impossible. We cannot isolate external, 'distant' chains that continue to intervene.
- ▶ Such isolation is precisely the goal of a gifted natural-scientific experimenter.

# Is contingency real in history (and individual life)?

- ▶ No contingencies in a highly **regular** world  $X$ —where there are very few causal factors.
- ▶ No contingencies in a highly **irregular** world  $Y$  where you are never surprised: think of a life in a front line.
- ▶ And no contingencies in a world  $Z$  with especially **rigid** causal chains: bumping into them does not alter their course.
- ▶ Some historians apparently believe that our world is like  $Z$ .
- ▶ This is a metaphysical dogma, not a historical or generally empirical claim.

# Conclusion

So how to deal with historical contingencies?

- ▶ To aim at a very general explanation?
- ▶ A pitfall: when the explanation is too general, it is no longer historical (Hegel, Spengler, Toynbee).
- ▶ A fine balance must be found: history must be modest.
- ▶ Contingencies will always remain in historical accounts.
- ▶ Just as they were in Herodotus, Thucydides, Polybius, and Machiavelli.