



Practicality in Complexity

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How can we use knowledge of complexity in a practical way? I am often asked this question. I am confused by it. Practical at what level? By “practical” what is meant?

Practical to offer quick but un-systemic solutions?

Or practical to offer better understanding of the complexity of the context?

Executive decisions define our lives, and evidence based research with deliverables is required to back those decisions up. In this era substantive demarcations of what makes an effort worth the time and money it costs should be provided at the outset of a program. Consequently we see, in workshops, lectures, conferences, and universities, an insatiable appetite for another pret a porter improvement program. There is always the next new step by step program ready to be sold with the promise of improvement for individuals, organizations and ministries. Usually they read something like The Five Steps to the Seven Applications... for the three main points of an innovative version of the old idea of leadership, success, problem solving, finding happiness and so on. I want to pull my hair out when I see these books and seminars touting their promises. The cost of short cuts is consequences and their echoes.

I cannot offer any such program. It would be hypocrisy for me to do so. My whole life is centered around advocating for the delicate interdependencies of life. In this sense my work is sometimes seen as ethereal, my students are frustrated because the only “fact” given in this approach is change. Life is mutual learning. Life shifts, systems are in flux, for better and for worse. The unspeakable beauty of those interdependencies is in equal proportion to the horror. Beauty in the ever forming symmetries and asymmetries that evolve into unimaginable grace, and horror in the sense that there is so much uncertainty and so little control.

I won't likely stand down from my advocacy of this messy interaction with life. It is not just a method of making decisions – it is an aesthetic. There is no hard evidence to back up the statistical efficiency of an aesthetic. But that does not mean that there is nothing practical in the material I offer.

In defense of a world that is characterized by mutual learning between variables in a given context- a world that does not stay the same, a world that won't be mechanized or modeled, in defense of that world I maintain that nothing could be more practical than to become more familiar with the patterns of movement life requires. The goal is not to crack the code, but rather to catch the rhythm.

The world is complex, and the complexity is not manageable in a predicable, strategic plan. Looking around the globe I think it is permissible to make the sweeping statement that our attempts at control, no matter how verified they have been by quantitative methods, are not working. Where does that leave us?

If you do not know what the terrain of a marathon is, you had better be prepared for anything. Most importantly, be prepared to make spontaneous decisions based on an assessment of the context at the time. Long preparations for a run across the desert will not be useful in the event of urban snowstorm conditions. In this era of complexity we do not know what is coming, and I believe it is both impractical and potentially unethical to pretend as though we do.

Why is it that a discussion of life in which these many learning, relational, moving variables are brought into the description is considered “abstract,” while the description, which isolates and fragments and objectifies the parts of a system is considered practical? Should it not be the other way around? Is it not an abstraction to pull a person, idea, or organism from the contextual relationships of family, food, culture, feelings, ecology and so on and label them? Is it not more abstract to take a piece of the living world and try to make sense of it without all of the contextual, contributing aspects of its vitality? Can we really understand anything without context?

So, the *point*, the *deliverable*, the *practicality* of my work is not to offer concrete solutions, or 8 step improvement plans. It is to offer an invitation in to a world that does not sit still, and encourage an increase in sensitivity to the complexity in all of its glory and gore. My work is premised on the idea I have given the name Symmathesy to. It is centered around mutual learning between and within living contexts. This learning does not stop. It is not always progressive, or good, sometimes learning to be in a context includes addiction, pathology, and so on. We cannot control mutual learning, we cannot solve it. But, we can become more able to take in and consider the complexity we are faced with if we approach it from this stance.

The quandary I often hear is that complexity takes too long, and it is impossible to ever understand all of the infinite interrelationships. How do we use it? As individuals and as professionals we have to make choices and take action in the moment of life, we can't sit around and contemplate these “abstractions” of swirling variables forever. It is true; it takes longer to consider complexity. It is true also that we will never understand the all of the infinite interrelationships. The question of “can we afford the time and effort to try?” is a good question. My only response is: Can we afford not to?

The unpredictable continues into the consequences of decisions made with the idea of static systems in mind. The strategy of isolating information does not extend into the system once we have chosen “action”. Whatever those plans beget becomes part of the complexity that continues from then on. The interrelations creep back in, the interdependencies overlap and overtake the clean clear simple plan that was practical.

The larger ecology of the situations always drowns the fragmented attempts at controlling it. Unfortunately it does so with unwieldy difficulty and reactions to reactions that we cannot undo. Example: Read the headlines of any paper and the iterations of reactions are there to be seen. But, this is only possible if you look with eyes that search for continuum, if you are looking for linear stories with beginnings, middles and endings, that is what you will find. In which case, you won't be able to see the ways in which these patterns are overlapping. You will not have access to the deeper alchemy.

We cannot know the systems, but we can know more. We cannot perfect the systems, but we can do better. The evolution of our own ability to understand and interact with the world around us is an increase in our ability to be sensitive to information we have previously been blind to. That is learning to learn.

At the edges of the given patterns, there are liminal zones. The boundaries. This is where interaction takes place. These are the places where the directions of potential pathways as yet uncharted live. An example of this might be the medical system in the US, which at present is so entangled, in the insurance industry that the system is in a holding pattern. What is the relationship between this bind and the development of alternative medicine in the subculture? Will those that cannot afford insurance find ways to steal from other the parts of the system so they can pay for basic medical attention? Or both? Entire industries are developing in the margins of this conundrum. Where will they go? How might the politicians in Washington DC approach their decision making process differently given a higher degree of sensitivity to the consequences and consequences of consequences within the entire social construct?

There are not answers to these questions. They are avenues where inquiry is invited. With luck the inquiry will lead to further inquiry. A good question leads to better questions. A simple question gets a simple answer, and we do not live in a simple world.



I maintain, at the risk of being called abstract, that the possibility of an increase in our ability to receive nuanced information about the interactions in a complex system exists. This is my optimism. This is where I place hope in the coming eras. We need that sensitivity to live better lives. This is the sensitivity that will allow us to understand our spouses better, to raise our children better, to grow food better, study life better, and organize our world better. It will also make us into artists. I maintain that nothing could be more practical.