

Creating the Future
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Chapter 5: Can I make a difference?

5. Can I make a difference?

If you want to be somebody else, if you're tired of losing battles with yourself, change your mind.
Sister Hazel

Nelson Mandela became the President of post-apartheid South Africa. The Berlin Wall was peacefully deconstructed. The USSR split apart. Who could have guessed just decades ago that these things would happen? Instantaneous worldwide communication. Space tourism. Cloning. Real-time translation of speech. How could science fiction so quickly become fact? Ours is an age of extraordinary change. What we imagine one day as a possibility soon becomes a part of everyday life. But do we as individuals have any influence? Can we make a difference?

Change is possible

Yes, individual humans can make a difference. What would our understanding of physics be without Einstein? How would our music sound without Mozart? What would the political map of Europe look like if there had been no Hitler? Would there be a United States without Abraham Lincoln? What would be different in the lives of Americans without Martin Luther King, Jr.?

Recorded history is filled with the names of individuals who, for better or worse, had a major impact not only in their time and in their surroundings but on generations since. Whether in terms of our understanding of the universe or the way in which we perceive ourselves and each other, these individuals changed the world. They shifted the path and made the stories of our societies different.

One thing they had in common is the belief that change is possible, that the conditions they observed could be made different. They could argue a position and lead to different decisions. They could experiment and find new relationships and understandings. They could create music and art unlike that which they heard and saw. They may not have followed a grand plan or vision, but they believed that their actions could make a difference.

But aren't they rare individuals—geniuses, great artists, and great leaders? Is there any point to comparing their actions to our own?

Individual actions have meaning, sometimes enormous effect

Have you ever heard of Cristoph Willibald Gluck? Gluck was as popular a composer in Mozart's day as Mozart. In fact, Mozart was buried in an unmarked pauper's grave, and the few people who attended his funeral did not even walk to the cemetery because it was raining. Similarly, if you said "Bach" in the late 1700s more people would likely have thought of Carl Philip Emmanuel Bach or Johann Christian Bach than their father, Johann Sebastian. So, some people's work is unheralded in their lifetime and celebrated long afterward. Others are recognized in life and soon forgotten afterward. Their names aren't prominent in history because their ideas didn't catch on, their art didn't strongly influence others, events don't appear to have been shaped as a result of their discoveries.

Think about history in general. History is written by historians, by people who examine evidence from the past, interpret events, and tell stories. What do they tell stories about? About things that led to other things. About people who influenced others. About events that seemed to cause major changes. Were those people and events known to be important at the time? Not necessarily. The future impact of their work was unclear. In other words, we know what changes history only in retrospect. Predictions are often far off the mark. For example, the Internet was expected to be a small-scale network of maybe five or six computers, and massive computer failures were anticipated as the year 2000 arrived.

So some actions, events, discoveries and inventions have great impact while others do not, and we know with certainty which is which only in the future when we look back at them. We'll return to why in a moment. First it's important to appreciate that some things do indeed have profound impact—impact well beyond what seems reasonable at the time.

This is known in chaos theory as the "butterfly effect." Theoretically, a butterfly flapping its wings on one side of the earth can change the weather on the other side. That sounds absurd, but the analogy is a good one. The more we learn about our world the more we find interconnections—everything relates to everything. Weather, for example, is the result of a huge range of dynamic factors, and a minor change in one factor can have a large impact. Let's say that water vapor is very close to changing into rain. A minor change in temperature may be all that's necessary to trigger the difference between a cloud that floats by and a rainstorm. Take this story further: the minor change in temperature was caused by a slight shift in air

current as a jet flew by. The jet flew by at this moment because the pilot made a slight course change. The pilot made a slight course change to see if she could gain a little more speed. She wanted a little more speed to make up for a short delay in boarding. The boarding delay was caused by a passenger having trouble stowing his suitcase. The passenger's suitcase was too large but the steward let it go because he was in a good mood. Did the steward's mood cause it to rain? Actually, yes! But it was one of thousands of factors involved. And it just happened to be that the system was in a state which allowed a very minor difference to trigger a large change.

The impact of actions depends on conditions

If the water vapor in the cloud had not been very close to condensing, the jet would not have made a difference. The pilot and steward's actions might have had other consequences but would not have led to rain. What determines whether an action or event has a large impact? More than anything in the action or event itself, it is the conditions in which it occurs. In a very real way it is a system's readiness or *sensitivity* to being influenced that determines the impact of an event or action. Similarly, we may have what we think is a great idea, but if the conditions aren't right then it may go nowhere. For example, others need to recognize it as good, to perceive that it has a *goodness of fit* with their understanding of the situation.

If we accept that conditions are so important, then we have to also accept that there is a right time and place for actions to have impact. If they are taken elsewhere, or if an idea comes up in a different age, then it may not have any impact at all. Would we have ever heard the name Marco Polo if his father and uncle had not been traders who took him on their journeys to the far east? Would we know Maya Angelou's poetry if she had been born a century earlier? If Germany had not been humiliated by the conditions of the Treaty of Versailles at the end of World War I would anyone have listened to Hitler's words? If Mozart were born in 1950 would he play rock and roll? Would Martin Luther King, Jr.'s words have gained any power if he said them in 1920 rather than 1960? If Jesus or Mohammed or Buddha walked among us today would we notice?

It's a matter of context. A great idea at a time when the resources and tools to make it real are available. An event in an environment that gives it meaning. A confluence of action and conditions making something possible.

Making a difference

But if context is so important, then how can we make a difference on purpose? How can we know which action to take when, or which idea will be more powerful? We cannot know these things with certainty, but we can study conditions carefully and use this knowledge to determine which actions and ideas may have more potential. By doing this we may find the trigger or catalyst for change, or we may push the system slightly toward a condition in which another trigger will have greater power. Notice that at the time we don't know if our action will simply prepare the system for change or will prove to be the trigger. The action is the same. We know the effect only in retrospect.

Our chances of making a difference are enhanced when we appreciate the fact that *we* can do far more than *I* ever can, also. Conscious evolution is a social process, not just a matter of individual genius or leadership. We can make more of a difference by engaging with one another, by participating. When we collaborate with each other we can build off of each other's ideas. We can evaluate the potential of ideas and actions from more perspectives. We can rely on one another's knowledge of resources and tools. We can help each other take action.

Working together is important not only for what can be achieved. It is important for determining what we attempt. What we decide and what we create are a part of us. Our decisions, actions, and creations are part of who we are. They reflect what we value and believe, and what we aspire to become.

We rather than *I* isn't just a matter of size of effect. It's a matter of ethics. It is ethical to create the future *with* each other. It is not ethical for one individual or group to create a future *for* another.

So, can you make a difference? Yes, but if what you want from it is fame or credit, then you'll likely be disappointed. You'll never know the true effects of your contribution. Instead you'll know that you worked toward a worthwhile goal—in this case, the goal of sustaining the human species.

Core Ideas

5.1. Change is possible. The past does not completely determine the future.

5.2. Individual actions can make a difference. Depending on conditions, small actions can have major effects.

5.4. The same action may trigger a major change or better prepare a system for such. The person who takes the action and others can know the difference only in afterward (if ever).

5.5. History tends to tell us about the trigger, the isolated event or action, rather than the preparation, so we tend to believe deceptively simple interpretations of complex situations.

5.6. Our ability to consciously evolve is greatly enhanced by working together, by engaging with one another.

5.7. It is ethical to design *with* not *for* others.

Activities

A. Think of an important invention not mentioned in this chapter. What social, political, and economic conditions made it possible for that invention to be widely adopted.

B. Imagine that you were born in a different place at a different time. What would be better or worse? How about if you were born today in a different family, with a different gender, or a different race?

C. Ask yourself what motivates you to act in a certain way. For example, would you take action if no one would ever know what that action accomplished?

D. Ask a friend the following questions: Under what conditions is it ethical to create things *for* others rather than *with* them? Under what conditions is this not ethical?